

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Romans 7: 15-20

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If a researcher were to study all of the sermons that Beau and I preach in any given year, and list the words we say most often, my guess is that the list would include, “love, compassion, justice, community, kindness, grace, forgiveness, ministry, mission.” One word we **don’t** mention often is the word, “sin.”

I don’t often preach about sin because it’s a word with heavy, bulky baggage attached to it and it’s hard to unpack all of that in 15 or 20 minutes. But I’m going to try this morning!

One of my core theological beliefs is that each one of us is created by the God whose love for us is unconditional. We are beloved, created for lives of joy, meaning and purpose. One of my goals in preaching is to help spread that message. Too many people have been given other messages, harmful and dangerous messages. Too many people believe they’re fundamentally **not** okay, and so they spend their lives trying to prove themselves. That striving leads to workaholism, egotism, and addictive behaviors. It’s the root cause of many societal problems.

I have avoided preaching too often about sin, but there **IS** a place for the word “sin” in our vocabulary of faith. Today I hope to brush it off, dust it and polish it and see what it may have to say to us that will lead us **NOT** towards feeling badly about ourselves but towards actually accepting ourselves and one another as flawed but beautiful human creatures.

Beau, Scott and I met a few days ago to begin planning worship for Lent and Easter. Scott made a comment that I've been thinking about ever since - in music theory, one of the basic concepts is contrast. Music moves from quiet to loud and back again - it's the quiet that helps you appreciate the more exuberant passages, and vice versa. So we were talking, in our meeting, about how the somber mood of Lent creates a contrast with the joyous mood of Easter Sunday.

And I was thinking, in the back of my mind, about today's sermon and wondering, "Can we truly appreciate the gift of God's grace and forgiveness without bringing our awareness first to our need for that gift?" It is the contrast between our NEED for forgiveness and the gift itself which makes it so meaningful. If we never talk about sin, our talk about forgiveness has less impact.

In our passage for today, Paul describes plainly what sin feels like for him. He says, 'It's like knowing what I want to do, knowing what's right for me, making that wise and healthy decision, but then acting in the exact opposite way.' Is there anyone here who cannot relate to this? You drive home at the end of the day and say to yourself, "There's a good hour of sunlight left. I'm going to take a walk before dinner" but instead you plop into your most comfortable chair. Or you realize you've made a mistake at work and you know the right thing to do is to own up to it, but when the blame goes to someone else at the staff meeting you keep your mouth shut. Paul says, "I can will it, but I can't do it. I don't have what it takes. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it. I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway." I don't know about you, but I've been there.

What is sin? The best definition I've ever heard is simple: "Sin is separation." Sin isn't so much bad things we've done, or good things we've failed to do, but the fact that we have walked away from God. We've separated ourselves from God's will for us to live healthy whole lives. It's the separation that leads to the actions or the missed opportunities.

The earliest notions of sin in Judaism drew on the metaphor of a stain. It is something that marked us and awaited cleansing. A different metaphor eventually dominated among early writers of the Jewish Bible: sin as a weight. Whenever a person or a people broke God's laws, sin was the weight that was lowered onto the people's shoulders.

By the time Jesus appears on the scene in first-century Palestine, people understood sin as a debt that is owed to a lender. So in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, "Forgive us our debts." And when he wants to describe what the Kingdom of God is like, he talks about a servant who owes a colossal monetary debt to a king.

This new definition of sin allowed the biblical authors to add a feature to their understanding of the concept. If your sin is like making a debit or withdrawal out of some otherworldly account, then you can make deposits too. The New Testament speaks of "treasures in heaven" that are stored up by those who perform good deeds.

Early Jesus followers carry this notion of sin forward as they develop Christian theology. In some regards, it served them well. Giving to the poor, for example, became a central tenet of the well-lived Christian life. But this framework also had its drawbacks. In the Middle Ages, Christian theologians attached price tags to certain sins. Soon the church was selling indulgences so people could settle their sin accounts.

Faith itself was understood in transactional terms, something that was attained by good works or by giving money to the church, rather than divine grace.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation hit the Reset button on the vocabulary of faith, and now our understanding of sin has dozens of different meanings and metaphors.

Some talk about sin primarily as a “problem”, others speak of sin as a “sickness,” others speak of sin as “lawlessness” or a breaking of rules.

One writer proposes this image. She says that life itself is the only framework comprehensive enough to explain sin. Since Jesus described himself as the One who came to give abundant life to all creation, we might think of sin as anything that robs us of the fullness of life - or something we’ve done that robs others of the fullness of life.

Sin as a thief.

Some people use the word “flourishing” to describe the abundant life, so they describe sin as anything that does not promote flourishing. And the Jewish scriptures use the word “shalom” - a state of total peace and harmony in life - to get at this idea. Shalom is, as some have said, “the way things are supposed to be.” All things reconciled. Sin is whatever contributes to life being less than God intends.

Sin is a sickness, a problem, and a failure to live by ethical rules that promote life. It’s like a stain, a weight, and in some way, a debt. It is brokenness and messiness and mistakes. It is a thief.

This broad definition brings us full circle. God hates sin. Not because God is an angry rule-maker, but because God loves us without constraint. God wants each of us

to live the abundant life. God wants shalom for us. God wants us to flourish and support others' flourishing.

When we speak the word, "sin," we acknowledge that sin exists. We affirm our common human condition, and we recommit to work for the flourishing of all. By speaking it out loud, we admit that life is not always as it should be. We remind ourselves that forgiveness is always available, to everyone. That's the purpose of the prayer of confession. We prayed one this morning, and I followed it up with the assurance of pardon. The word of grace, which always accompanies confession.

When we confess our sins together, it's a way for us to admit our common humanity, our failings and weaknesses. It's like walking into a twelve step meeting and saying, "My name is Kelly, and I am a sinner. My name is Kelly and I've made mistakes. My name is Kelly and I've failed."

Rob Bell tells a story about a time early in his ministry - he was 25 years old, and he had just preached at an evening worship service. A man named George walked up to him and told Rob that he needed to go to an AA meeting. Rob says, "I was totally caught off guard and muttered something about how I wasn't aware that I was an alcoholic. He said that it didn't matter, that everything I needed to know about being a pastor I would learn when I went, and that when it came to my turn to share in the meeting I would simply say, 'Hi, I'm Rob, and I pass.'" So I went, and it changed my life.

As the people went around the room and told their stories, I realized that their brutal honesty was opening them up for healing. They each admitted their powerlessness, their humanness, their need for help, their need for God. These people were done with playing games, done with caring what others think of them."

Rob Bell concludes by saying, “As I left that meeting that night, I realized just how much time, energy and effort most of us expend trying to prove ourselves - trying to make sure that everyone knows how strong, smart, competent, capable, together and good we are.” We don’t know how much posturing we do, and what a toll it takes on us until we’re in a room with people who aren’t doing any of it. Our need to control how others see us is like a god we’ve been bowing down to for so long. In an AA meeting no one has energy left for that sort of thing.

When I look in the mirror, really looking closely, I can become aware of the ways in which I have kept myself and others from flourishing. I acknowledge the kindnesses I’ve failed to offer. Times when I’ve noticed others’ faults and ignored my own. I know what Paul means. There’s a gap between the life I want to lead and the life I actually lead. I need the help of those around me and I need God’s grace and forgiveness. Most of all, I need the assurance that God will give me a new chance every single time I make a mistake. A new beginning every morning. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Acknowledgements:

I quote heavily from Jonathan Merritt’s book, Learning to Speak God from Scratch.

The Rob Bell story is from his book, What Do We Talk About When We Talk About God.