



Reading: Matthew 15:1-20

¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!’
³ Jesus replied, ‘And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?’ ⁴ For God said, “Honour your father and mother” and “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.” ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is “devoted to God,” ⁶ they are not to “honour their father or mother” with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:
⁸ “These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
⁹ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.”
¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.’
¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?’
¹³ He replied, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.’
¹⁵ Peter said, ‘Explain the parable to us.’
¹⁶ ‘Are you still so dull?’ Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ ‘Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?’ ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.’

RE-CAP on ‘The Year of Growth’ teaching series

You can find resources at: https://www.ccweb.org.uk/Groups/299249/Year_of_Growth.aspx

You can listen to previous talks at the 10 & the 5 here: <https://www.ccweb.org.uk/Media/AllMedia.aspx>

In our previous mini-series, Setting Yourself up to thrive (January 7, 14 & 21), we learnt a number of important truths – not least, that

- God wants us to thrive – that means he is for us, he longs for our best, he’s on our side and he wants us to have what Jesus promised – ‘life to the full’ (John 10:10)
- as a direct consequence, God’s always speaks to that end – the Shepherd’s voice is designed to help us thrive, to show that he is for us, longs for our best, is on our side, and wants us to have that abundant life

It’s vital that we embrace these two foundational truths before we look at our next topic, *Sin and Salvation* (especially the sin part!). Even when the Lord speaks to correct us, it is still and always for our thriving.

SIN – AN INTRODUCTION

My first question for this week: What is sin? You may want to pause and ‘answer’ that question to yourself or in your groups ...

Chances are that our instant list covers mainly things we have done, especially if we've grown up with some form of liturgical confession:

*Most merciful God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we confess that we have sinned
in thought, word and deed ...*

The problem is that a view of sin as largely external doesn't do justice to the real significance, power and threat of sin to the 'abundant life' Jesus came to bestow (John 10:10).

If we think of sin as 'things we do' then our solution to sin will be ever-increasing effort not to do them, which if we're not careful becomes a spiral of failure and despair – I am sure many of us can relate to that!

Throughout this Year of Growth series, we've been emphasising that the inner reality is what counts – and this then finds expression in outer reality. 'Good works' flow from the inner transformation that comes from an encounter with the Risen Lord through the ministry of his Spirit.

Likewise, the things we call 'sin' are in fact outer symptoms of an inner issue ...

Perhaps even more harmfully, it suggests that our relationship with God is predicated upon his desire continually to say, 'Stop! Don't do that ... or that ... or ...' rather than one predicated upon his desire to see us thrive.

Question – does that resonate with you?

SIN – MISSING THE MARK

The most common word for sin in the New Testament is *hamartia* ((ham-ar-tee'-ah), a term from archery meaning 'to miss the mark' or to 'fall short' (in the sense of missing a target).

... for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God ... (Romans 3:23)

The word translated 'sinned' here is *hamartia*. Interestingly, Paul emphasises its meaning by using a separate Greek word with a similar meaning, which is translated here as 'fallen short'. That word is *hustereó* (hoos-ter-eh'-o), which means to be lacking, to fall short (in the sense of arriving late and therefore missing out).

So, the question becomes, what is the mark at which we're aiming and which, when we miss it, defines sin? The bible in general and Jesus in particular, are pretty clear that it's not the achievement of some external rule keeping. To see that, we only have to look at these words from the Sermon on the Mount:

²¹ 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, "Raca," is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell.

['Raca' was an Aramaic term of contempt]

²⁷ 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Matthew 5

The Old Testament is peppered with similar teaching

But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deuteronomy 4:29)

¹⁶ *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*

¹⁷ *My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51)*

²¹ *'I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me.*

²² *Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.*

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

²³ *Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

²⁴ *But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5)*

When the crowds asked Jesus, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' he answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.' (John 6:28-29)

When asked what was the most important commandment, Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37)

Or consider this exchange between Jesus and a teacher of the law

³² *'Well said, teacher,' the man replied. 'You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.'*

³⁴ *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'* (Mark 12)

In other words, 'the mark' for which we are aiming has to do with the heart and with faith ...

So, to see sin as something 'out there' that we do, something external to us, is about as helpful as saying the sneeze is the cold. All we can do with a cold is treat the sneeze or the sore throat or whatever – but we're merely treating the symptom, not curing the illness. We may suppress the sneeze but we can't cure the cold ... how many of us experience sin like that?

That's why David can write in Psalm 51

³ *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.*

⁴ *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;*

This can sound callous – David has sinned against Bathsheba, her husband Uriah and the newborn son conceived by his adultery with her ...

But David understands that the heart of sin is essentially one of relationship with God.

Interestingly, he goes on:

*so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
5 Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.*

Note that David is conscious of both

- the reality of 'original sin' (we are born sinful)
- and yet also the 'mark' to which God calls him – not avoiding this or that external expression of sin: but rather 'faithfulness'.

Another analogy – it wasn't the tip of the iceberg which sank the Titanic: rather, it was the bulk hidden beneath the surface. Our 'evident' sins are the tip of an iceberg which scripture traces back to the roots hidden in our hearts.

Question – have you been focusing on the tip of the iceberg rather than its hidden bulk which is what does the damage?

SIN – A MATTER OF CONNECTION

Psychologists and theologians have varying understandings about what constitute human being, but one of the most classically expressed biblical views is that human beings comprise 3 essential elements

- Body – fairly obvious
- Soul – the essence of each individual
- Spirit – that which is designed for and enables connection with God

[The soul is the seat of 'heart' and 'mind']

NB – in Gnostic or Platonic thought (Buddhism the most obvious example in a major contemporary religion), the goal of life is to liberate the soul from the prison of the body. In Judaeo-Christian thought, the body is not evil but good, and so is to be 'redeemed' along with the soul: 'resurrection' is of the whole being. That's in part why it's so important that Jesus was raised physically, literally. Our hope is of a physical resurrection:

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Philippians 3)

When Paul spells out to the Ephesians (chapter 2:1) the reality of their pre-conversion state

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins ...

He is talking about sin's deepest reality – it deadens our spirit, that which is designed for and enables connection with God

In other words, sin is essentially about connection – or rather disconnection in our relationship with God.

Original sin means that every human being is born with a deadened spirit – might be more helpful to say a disconnected spirit. Our spirit is a reality – it's why humans have such a yearning, a longing, an emptiness, which can only truly be met and filled by God himself.

But it's as though the Spirit is switched off, faulty.

An interesting question is the place and role of conscience – it's clear that you don't have to be Christian, or even religious, to have a conscience, to have an innate sense of right and wrong. My own view is that Conscience operates on the borders of spirit and soul: it's as if our spirit flickers or sparks from time to time ...

... however, without our spirit being awakened or quickened, we cannot respond to God with faith. That's why Paul can write to the Ephesians that faith is a gift of God

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8)

Question – is the idea of sin's damage set within the context of connection helpful?

SALVATION – THE SOLUTION OF THE CROSS & THE DISCONNECTION OF GOD

Please don't hear me saying that what we so often consider sin (the things we do) doesn't matter – it cost the Son of God his life, which brings us to the Cross.

I've uploaded to our Resources section on the website a paper on the NT theology of the Cross, detailing the 8 key metaphors (word pictures) its writers use to explain the power of the Cross. That paper also details the gruesome suffering of Jesus (or any victim of crucifixion). It wasn't just the physical agony in his case of course. The very heart of the Cross comes in that moment of utter desolation when Jesus cries out

And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') (Mark 15:34)

Nothing had prepared Jesus for this moment, the moment that his Father (with whom he'd always enjoyed the most perfect and intimate of relationships) withdraws, unable to remain in the presence of sin.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This heart of the Cross once again emphasises that sin cannot be understood merely as the things we do that we shouldn't do – but as relationship and faith ...

Pause – to give praise and thanks to Jesus for his willingness to suffer not just physical torment but this spiritual disconnection that we might be reconnected with the Father

SIN – THE REALITY BEYOND SALVATION

So what effect does sin have upon the Christian?

Please don't hear me saying that Christians can be sinless – although Jesus does encourage travel in that direction

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

But the NT also urges reality

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1)

Sin does not cost us our salvation ... that's really important to grasp: the key focus is not the depth of the sin but the power of the Cross.

But sin does damage our connection with God

Again, David expresses this beautifully in Psalm 51

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Note that he doesn't ask God to restore his salvation – but rather, the *joy* of his salvation.

Question – does this need to be your prayer too?

SINNERS OR SAINTS?

Before conversion, the NT's designation for a human being is 'sinner' (mostly singular)

After conversion, the NT's designation for a human being born again is 'saint' (always plural)

Yes, we are saints (hagios – holy ones) who sin. But we're no longer defined by our sin.

So many Christians just don't understand the significance and power of this. We're like an accused man brought before the court only to have all charges dropped and the Judge acquit and declare to be innocent. Imagine returning to the courthouse every day to ask the Judge whether he's sure ... what a life that would be rather than enjoying the freedom you've been given.

Question – are you clear that your faith in Jesus effected a category shift; from darkness to light, from death to life, from being defined as a sinner to being defined as a saint?

Confession / Repentance

Far from being the torture that many of us imagine, confession is a gift – it's the place where reconnection is established. When we become conscious of sin, we can be grateful that the Lord has brought it to our attention, that on the cross he's already dealt with its deadly power and now invites us back into intimate relationship with himself.

Confession is beautifully described in Acts 3

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord ... (Acts 3:19)

Question – how might this verse change your approach to repentance / confession?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Rather than doing our very, very, very best to move away from the things we do that we recognise as sinful (a human effort which will always, sooner or later, fail), we should seek to move as close as we can to Jesus.

A final question: do I spend time with Jesus because I must or because I may?

Paul Langham, January 2018