

I recently learned of a man who hired a pilot to take him antelope hunting in Canada. He asked the pilot to land in a remote place. The pilot said, "There aren't any antelope in this area." The hunter said, "Yes there are. I was here last year." So the pilot landed there, and sure enough, in a few hours the hunter returned to the plane, dragging two antelope. The pilot said, "You can't load those antelope on this plane, it can't bear the weight." The hunter said, "Well, I did it last year. Same size plane, same size antelope." The pilot finally agreed, and they took off. The plane, however, couldn't carry the load, and had to make an emergency landing, which seriously damaged the plane. The pilot got angry at the hunter and said, "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. Now we're stranded here, and no one will ever find us." The hunter said, "Don't worry, the rescue team will find us. We are just a few hundred feet from the same spot where we crashed the plane last year."

They say that a sign of insanity is making the same mistakes over and over again and expecting different results. If that's true, then most of us could be considered insane; we usually get tripped up more often by old habits than by new temptations. This is what I find most frustrating about myself—this tendency to be stuck in behavior patterns that are no longer working, and yet I expect different results. This is but one aspect of the complexity of human sin. The apostle Paul spoke for us all when he wrote, “I do the very thing I should not do, and I do not do the things I should do.” That’s our story too. Ours is a God who makes all things new, yet so often we choose to stay stuck in the same old patterns.

This doctrine of sin is not very pleasant, yet as I begin my sermon series on Challenging Scriptures I thought it important to begin with sin. It is something we all share, and an important doctrine in our Christian faith.

Now, the concept of original sin is not found anywhere in Scripture. It was an idea set forth in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries by St. Augustine. He suggested that since Adam and Eve sinned, all of their descendants inherited the same sinfulness. St. Paul later argued that Jesus was the sacrifice needed for the sin of Adam and that gave rise to the theory of the atonement. So although the concept of original sin is not Biblical, the evidence of human sin is everywhere—in both the Bible and human history.

Sin itself has been defined in a wide variety of ways by theologians over the years. Sin is an act, attitude, or course of life which betrays God’s intentions for creation. Sin is that which alienates us from God and others. Sin is being stuck, with no way out. Karl Barth defined sin as chaos, that which is uncontrollable. Soren Kierkegaard defined sin as total guilt. Paul Tillich defined sin as

estrangement from God, others and ourselves. And Reinhold Niebuhr saw sin as being deeply rooted in human anxiety, an internal state of being constantly anxious and afraid. Do you feel better? Aren't you glad you came today?

Yet another definition: "Sin is whatever you do, or fail to do, that pushes other people and God away, and widens the gap between you and them and the gaps within yourself. We all tend to be proud and selfish and childish at times—to think we are the center of the universe. But more than even hunger, poverty or disease, sin is what Jesus came to save us from." (Frederich Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*) Jesus came to save us from ourselves.

Sin is manifested when we place ourselves at the center of the universe and forget how much we need God's help, mercy and grace. And we all need God's help, mercy and grace. Until we confess how broken we are, we cannot be healed. Until we face our shortcomings, we will never be able to overcome them. Most of us are reluctant to honestly face up to our own pride, selfishness and sinfulness, and that is a big part of the problem. It is always easier to point out all of the annoying and irritating things about other people than it is to focus upon what is wrong with us. Perhaps that is why Jesus said we need to forget about the splinter in someone else's eye and worry about the huge log in our own. The doctrine of sin reminds us that the problem is not other people—the problem is **us**.

The story of the temptation in the Garden of Eden is a classic commentary on the human condition. Adam and Eve simply cannot resist tasting the fruit of the forbidden tree, and this is not entirely the woman's fault! When God discovers that Adam and Eve have eaten from the forbidden fruit, God asks Adam, "Did you eat that forbidden fruit?" and he says, "That woman you made for me, she made me do it." Then God asks Eve about the forbidden fruit and she says, "It was the snake, the snake made me do it." They might as well have said, "The devil made me do it." It's not about ME. I'm not to blame, it's not my fault, it's her fault, his fault, society's fault, my parents fault, not mine. Well, the doctrine of sin reminds us that it really is about us. We need to take responsibility for our actions and stop trying to blame others for our mistakes.

In Leo Tolstoy's classic book *War and Peace* there is a scene where one character is forced to make an assessment of his life. In facing the pain he has caused others and broken promises, at one point he cries out: "Yes, I have sinned, but I have several excellent excuses!" Don't we all. At some point we need to honestly admit what we have done and failed to do. God has given us the freedom of choice, and taking responsibility for those choices is the key to moving forward.

The Roman Catholics have identified Seven Deadly Sins which are: Pride, Greed, Envy, Sloth, Indolence, Avarice and Immorality. That pretty much covers it, but in a more general sense, those seven sins could be placed into two general categories:

- Sins of commission in which we willfully act in a sinful way.
- Sins of omission in which we fail to act at all.

Sins of commission are similar to those listed in the 10 commandments, when you willfully do something you know you should not do—lie, cheat, steal, gossip and so on. Sins of omission are much harder to measure. These are the things we know we ought to do, but do not. And this is more serious than not getting 5 servings of fruit and vegetables every day. A powerful illustration of sins of omission comes from German Pastor Martin Neimoller, who was sent to Dachau Concentration Camp in 1938. Of that experience he wrote, “When the Nazis came for the Jews I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. When they came for the Catholics I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Catholic. When they came for the homosexuals I did not speak up because I was not homosexual. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak up for me.”

Falling into those broad categories of sins of commission and omission are sins such as hypocrisy, saying one thing and doing another. We are all guilty of that, particularly religious professionals who do not practice what they preach. There are sins of superiority, like the man who prayed: “Thank you God for not making me a poor wretch, like that person!” Wrote CS Lewis: “Sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. The worst are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting, the pleasures of power, of hatred. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig, who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it’s better to be neither.”

Then there are the sins of false modesty, self-doubt, even self-hatred, and constantly comparing ourselves to others. God does not want us to minimize our gifts and our resources by constantly feeling inadequate. Like the young man who proposed to his girlfriend by saying: “Honey, I admit that I am not as handsome as Jerome, I am not as wealthy as Jerome, I do not have a country estate or a yacht or private plane like Jerome. But I do love you very much. Will you marry me?” She replied, “I love you too, darling, but tell me more about Jerome.” It is a sin to minimize our own gifts or compare ourselves to others, and that leads to more sins like envy or covetousness.

While there are many individual sins, there are also collective sins, the kind of sins that flourish in community. Corporate greed is one example; another is the sin of racism, which still thrives in this country. Tomorrow we will celebrate what would have been the 80th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, and Tuesday we will inaugurate our first African American President. And while this is a cause for great pride for America, it has also brought out the very worst in some people. Barak Obama's election has unleashed a backlash of hatred and there have been hundreds of racist web sites and hate crimes springing up all over. In his very gracious concession speech on election night, Senator John McCain said: "A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage in many quarters. American today is a world away from the cruel and frightful bigotry of that time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African-American to the Presidency of the United States." But we still have a long, long way to go.

So, is there any hope for us with all of this sin around us and within us, individual sin and collective sin, sins of commission and omission? The Good News is, as I said last week, that we are beloved children of God, and our potential for goodness exceeds our potential for evil. God wants us to grow into the likeness of Christ that is why he sent Jesus to us in the first place. Human sin is intimately linked to salvation. There is a way out. We have to honestly admit our brokenness, and then seek God's forgiveness, guidance, and grace. Our sinfulness is not the end of the story. The saving grace of God found in Christ is the end of the story.

Of course, Jesus understood human sin, which is why he had such a soft spot for the worst sort of sinners. While he had very little patience for the self-righteous who loved to judge and condemn, he had infinite patience and compassion for sinners who knew they were sinners. Luke's 15<sup>th</sup> chapter might be sub-titled "Jesus and the sinners" for it tells us that Jesus was teaching a bunch of sinners. The Pharisees started grumbling, "This man is friendly with sinners, why he even eats with them!" Jesus proceeds to tell 3 parables, the parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son.

He says that he came to seek and save the lost, not to confirm the righteous in their righteousness. He cares most about the lost...the broken...the sinner.

That is the sort of God we have, one who is most present in our brokenness and always willing to help us overcome our worst inclinations. That is exactly why the church of Jesus Christ is not a museum for saints; it's a hospital for sinners. It's not a country club for the comfortable, but a rehab center for the broken. It's a place to confess our need for help. And then to receive the help that

only God can give, and offer it to others in much the same way. This church is here to help you lead a better life and to do those things you know you should do, like give to the poor and remember the lost. We are here to help you be the best person you can possibly be, since that is what God wants for us all.

Laurie Clark learned the importance of overcoming sin, but only after she faced the total wreckage of her life could she receive the healing power of God's forgiving love. She is now Public Relations Manager for a large company, which is a flat out miracle considering how messed up her life once was. She stole, lied, cheated, and worked as a prostitute during a full blown addiction to heroin. She would have killed her own parents for a fix, and she stole from them regularly. One year when they celebrated a special wedding anniversary, she managed to pull herself together enough to buy them a plant. A small, straggly thing. That was the only nice thing she did for them during those years.

But when she went to her parent's home, she noticed that this plant always seemed to exactly mirror her own life. When she was in a life threatening phase of her substance abuse, the plant almost died. But her parents never gave up on it, just like they never gave up on her. When she finally hit rock bottom and admitted what a mess her life and become and earnestly sought help, the plant began to turn around, as well. It became a barometer of her life and her parents watched in amazement as she flourished and claimed a new life for herself.

It's been 20 years now. And that pathetic plant she gave her folks has been planted outside of their home in Southern California. It is lush and green and beautiful. But then, so is she. All because she was willing to look within and admit her brokenness, face her sin, and seek help. The road back from that sort of thing is not easy, but it is a road none of us ever has to travel alone.

So the bad news is that we are all sinners, every last one of us. But the Good News is that our sin is not the end of the story. With God's help, there is hope and even salvation for sinners like us. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Help us gracious God, to live up to your highest ideals for us. Keep us from all those things which seek to enslave and entrap us, and give us the true joy that comes from living good and holy lives. In the name of Jesus, we pray.