

The 'S' Word

What is Sin?

This morning we begin a little mini-series that I think fits well with the lead up to Easter. It's a series that we're calling The "S" Word. Sin.

Sin is not a word we hear much these days. In fact, sin is a lot like the proverbial elephant in the room. Standing there for all to see, but mentioned by no one. Yet we experience the devastating effects of sin every single day. Hurt. Pain. Suffering. Addiction. Abuse. Alienation. Guilt. Shame. Broken relationships. Shattered dreams.

So during this Lenten season I want us to come to grips with the gravity of our sin. Sounds depressing doesn't it, but no it is not to make people feel bad, but so that we can more fully experience the amazing grace of God, expressed to us in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who dealt with the sin of the world!

As Declan has been leading us, this time of the year, Lent, is a time to prepare ourselves for Easter - the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. And if we're going to actually understand all that Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, we have to get a handle on the nature of sin, because we can't fully appreciate God's amazing grace until we recognise our desperate need for that grace.

But that's not easy to do, especially in our culture, where almost nothing is viewed as a sin anymore. There's a lot of confusion out there when it comes to sin and its consequences as you can see in this short video. Let's take a look.

What is Sin?? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZcSFWimRzY>

What is Sin? As I said, there's a lot of confusion out there when it comes to sin and its consequences which is why we need some clarity on this subject.

Whatever happened to Sin?

A number of years ago a respected psychiatrist named Karl Menninger wrote a book called *Whatever Became of Sin?* He said "The word "sin" has almost disappeared from our vocabulary, but the sense of guilt remains in our hearts and minds.....If, as he believes, mental health and moral health are identical, the recognition of the reality of sin offers to the suffering, struggling, anxious world a real hope, not of belated treatment but of prevention."

Another author wrote "The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christian's hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it. Some of our

grandparents agonized over their sins. But the shadow has dimmed. Nowadays, the accusation that you've sinned is often said with a grin, and with a tone that signals an inside joke."

I remember going to one of my first Easter camps, I must have been about 13 and the speaker got visibly angry over our apparent sin. He got really excited and loud with red-faced, finger-pointing, second-person accusations, 'You are all sinners - filthy, guilty, miserable sinners!' Thankfully you don't hear that much anymore. But perhaps the pendulum has swung too far

Perhaps we need to be reminded much more often about sin. For a healthy reminder of our sin and guilt allows for hope. Something can be done for this condition. Something has been done for it."

So that's what I hope and pray this series will be. I want it to be a healthy reminder of our sin and guilt that has found a remedy in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That's something to shout about if we understand our sin. If we don't, the cross has no meaning at all.

Sin and Grace

There is a lot said about sin, google sin and you come up with 1,850 million hits, 1.8 billion.

We can't appreciate the amazing grace of God without a proper understanding of our own sin. It's only against the darkness that the light shines bright. The most popular hymn ever written, sung both inside and outside the church, is *Amazing Grace*. There is something about the words of that hymn that drill down deep into our hearts and can bring tears to our eyes.

Let's watch this short clip about the song
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai5TAyvei3A>

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Grace is only amazing when it stands in sharp contrast to our wretchedness, our lostness, our blindness. Somehow it doesn't make the same impact if we sing, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a good bloke like me. I never was lost, I always could see, so what's the point of the cross!"

We don't have to have lived the wretched life of John Newton to appreciate the grace of God. He was into all kinds of unspeakable stuff.

We don't have to be that down and out. We just have to be in touch with our own sin and how it grieves a holy God.

Jesus tells a story in Luke 18 aimed at a group of people that had a hard time getting in touch with their sin. They had no trouble seeing plenty of sin in others, but very little sin in themselves, primarily because they were looking in the wrong direction. These people were called Pharisees and what's ironic is that they were the religious leaders of the day. So you would hope they would have a handle on their shortcomings and their need for God's grace, but they didn't.

So to help them Jesus tells this story in Luke 18:9-14 that in my Bible is called "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector."

Luke 18:9-14 ,

⁹Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: ¹⁰"Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! ¹²I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'

¹³"But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' ¹⁴I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus sets up this contrast between the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble tax collector. And from the outside it would appear that the Pharisee was right with God because he fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of his income to the church. He wasn't like robbers, evildoers, adulterers. He wasn't like "those people." He had it all together. We can always find people that we're better than, but that's not the right measuring stick when it comes to our sin.

But the poor tax collector, a profession that was despised in Israel because of its greed and dishonesty, couldn't even look up to heaven. And he certainly wasn't looking around at others. This guy knew he was a low life, a sinner, scum, in need of God's mercy and grace because his standard of comparison was a holy God.

And what does Jesus applaud? The humility of the tax collector over against the arrogance of the Pharisee.

¹⁴I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

James, Jesus' brother, puts it this way in James 4:6, *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*

So what is sin anyway? The apostle Paul writes in Romans 3:23, *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

There are a lot of different ways to look at sin.

- Sin is a like a disease that affects all of us.
- It's a condition that we find ourselves in.
- Paul refers to the sin nature that is part of our humanity.

We often like to say, "Nobody's perfect!" And that's true. We are all imperfect, broken people. We sin because we're sinners. We all fall short of the glory of God.

The most common Hebrew word for sin means "**to miss the mark.**" It was used of an archer shooting an arrow and falling short of his target. Archery is not so common these days, so today, we might say that sin is like a three point Basketball shot that falls way short of the basket. An air ball! That's all we're capable of shooting! We all fall short of God's moral standard.

We sin because we're sinners, but we're also sinners because we sin.

I grew up with the definition that **sin is anything we think, do, or say that displeases a holy God.** And that's still not a bad definition. Now as a teenager there was much debate over whether this action or whatever was displeasing God or my parents, or the church leaders! That debate aside, Sin violates the law of God and the character of God.

This can be an interesting one, and cause all sorts of tensions - **Sin is anything that violates our own conscience** which may be different for you than it is for me. For some people gambling, or smoking, or drinking alcohol, or certain four (or more) letter words is a sin, not necessarily because of the Bible, but because of their own conscience, and for others it's not. This can be tricky because we seem to have the ability to rationalise anything and our conscience seems to get bunter and blunter.

Paul makes this point about conscience in Romans 14:23 where he says in the context of some people that can eat certain food and others that can't eat certain food because it violates their conscience that, *Everything that does not come from faith is sin.*

The most common sin mentioned in the Old Testament is idolatry. Idolatry is not simply about bowing down to stone idols. If that were the case it wouldn't be much of a temptation to any of us. Instead, **idolatry is when we prioritize anything above God.** Idolatry is when we push God off the throne of our lives and put something else on it instead, even good things like family and friends can become idols. And that's a temptation we face every day.

The early Christians developed a list of what they called "**The Seven Deadly Sins**" to help protect them against the evils of the world. Pride. Envy. Anger. Sloth. Greed. Gluttony. Lust. They felt that these were the chief sins, the trunk of the tree so to speak from which all other sin blossomed. Murder comes from anger. Theft comes from greed. Adultery comes from lust and so on.

Sins of Commission and Omission

Just when you think you are getting your act together on what you can and cannot do, James with his strong emphasis on justice and caring for the poor and the oppressed says in James 4:17, *So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don't do it, you sin.*

James is saying sin is not just the bad things we do. It's the good things we fail to do. The things we know we should do and don't.

So there are sins that we do, sins of **commission**, the things that we think, do, or say that displease God and there are sins of **omission**, the things that we don't think, or do, or say that displease God.

And then, just when we think we have this sin stuff all nailed down, along come Jesus and he takes sin to another whole level when he talks about our motives and our inner most thoughts, not just our actions and behaviour. He says things like this in Matthew 5:27-28, *You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Have we included all of you yet? And then to top it all off Jesus says this in Matthew 5:48, *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* But nobody's perfect. Exactly! That's what Jesus is trying to get us to see. We all fall short of the glory of God.

So if we measure ourselves by other people, like the Pharisee in Jesus' story, we can always find those that we're better than and we'll stay alienated from God, but if we measure ourselves against the perfection of a holy God we all fall miserably short. And when we understand that, we take a huge step to finding peace with God.

And we do it through believing in the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And that's what we're getting ready for during this Lenten season.

Communion

This morning I want to close with communion and giving you a chance to 'come clean' with God in the privacy of your own space. Maybe you want to just utter the words of the tax collector, "*God be merciful to me a sinner,*" so that you can leave this place rightly related to God.

Or maybe you want to pray this prayer with King David, who was certainly not sin free, yet was called a man after God's own heart because he knew how to confess and repent of his sin.

In Psalm 19:12-14 he writes these words,

Psalm 19:12-14

¹²How can I know all the sins lurking in my heart?

Cleanse me from these hidden faults.

¹³Keep your servant from deliberate sins!

Don't let them control me.

Then I will be free of guilt

and innocent of great sin.

¹⁴May the words of my mouth

and the meditation of my heart

be pleasing to you,

O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Leave this up on the screen during communion