

The Crucifixion: The Weight of Sin
1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Psalm 51
Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on April 2, 2023

Nondum considerasti quanti ponderis peccatum sit. – Anselm of Canterbury¹

The “Sindex”

Almost 40 years ago, *People* magazine decided to undertake a survey of its readership on the subject of sin.² It was part serious, part tongue-in-cheek in its approach and its results were published as a “Sindex,” an index with each sin rated by a coefficient. The results were enlightening and instructive for the church. Murder, rape, incest, child abuse, and spying against one’s country were rated the worst sins, in ascending order. Smoking and cussing were further down the list, as they were much more prevalent in the lives of the readers.

Unqualified parking in a handicap spot was surprisingly high, higher than living together outside of marriage or sex outside of marriage. Cutting in line was deemed worse than divorce or capital punishment. All of these individual sins were listed with several more. *People’s* readers claimed to commit an average of 4.64 sins a month.³ Predictably, corporate sin was not mentioned at all. However, if the ancient Hebrew prophets had their own “sindex,” positioned securely at the top of that list would be “the sin of the people” and “the sin of the nations.”

This reveals our misunderstanding of what sin is. Most people, inside and outside of the church, view sins as specific, bad actions. This is deeply ingrained in our understanding. We see it early in our church learning, as the word we translate sin from the Greek is *hamartia*, which is an archery term meaning “missing the mark.” But it is more than that. Sin isn’t just a bunch of bad actions. Sin is the basic human condition.

Douglas John Hall writes about the gravity of sin, and he quotes the prophet Isaiah, who says that even our righteous deeds – not to mention our unrighteous ones – are “like a polluted garment.” (Isa. 64:6).⁴

¹ From Anselm’s masterpiece on sacrificial atonement, *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became a Man)*. Translated into English it means “You have not yet considered the weight of sin.”

² *People*, February 10, 1986.

³ I wonder what .64 of a sin would be. Taking 13 items into the ten items or less line? Jaywalking?

⁴ Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 78

In other words, even our greatest achievements in human history, humanity's great successes, what you and I might consider our best and most honorable deeds, all of that is associated with sin. 12th century monk Anselm of Canterbury shares communication with another abbot named Boso. Boso, like many current Christians, was unable to get beyond the idea that sins are bad deeds. Boso proposed that all God needed to do was declare forgiveness for the bad actions and that would be adequate. No reason for a crucifixion. Anselm replied to Boso with what is arguably the most penetrating insight ever stated concerning the doctrine of sin. That reply is still applicable to us today: "You have not yet considered the weight of sin."

Let's begin with reading two texts this morning – one from David in the Old Testament in Psalm 51 and another from Paul in the New Testament with 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. (Read text)

Talking About Sin

It is not easy to talk about sin today without losing one's audience. However, there is a strong possibility that sin has always been misunderstood by many within the church. We see it in the early church as sin (singular) becomes sins (plural). In the 2nd and 3rd century, the process of sin's reduction began. It takes over ten centuries for those scholars we refer to as the Reformers to reclaim a radical sense of sin. Sin is no longer reduced to "bad actions" but these Reformers saw that sin meant disobedience, rebellion, refusal, and humanity turning away from God. The earlier church saw sin as being a transactional term – things we do. The Reformers viewed sin as a relational term.

Our most significant relationships have been broken by sin. First, our relationship with God. Second, our relationship with other people. The Reformers even questioned referring to sin in its plural form. It is important to understand the bad actions are the *consequences* of what is wrong, not the *cause*.

The Bible clearly deals with sin – not just in the plural but in the capital S singular: Sin. When we consider this from the Apostle Paul's perspective, "Sin" and "Death" are capitalized as Powers. Sin is not so much a collection of individual wrong choices as it is an active, malevolent power or agency focused on destroying, imprisonment, and death. Sin is the complete and utter undoing of God's purposes.

Our bad actions and misdeeds are signs of that power or agency at work. The bad actions are not “the Thing” itself. The Thing itself is our cosmic Enemy. The New Testament repeatedly uses a formula to explain Christ’s death. It has become so common, so familiar to churchgoers, that we don’t consider what it really means: Christ died *for sin*.

Paul provides both the earliest and best attested of such a statement in 1 Cor. 15. It is in a chapter dealing with resurrection. “For I passed onto you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (1 Cor. 15:3-4)

Paul has staked out absolute, unbreakable territory “according to the Scriptures.” For two thousand years, people, Christians, have been mistaken in seeking to ignore, disparage, minimize, or even dismiss the clearest statement of truth in the New Testament. ***Jesus Christ died for sin***. The connection between the crucifixion and Sin is permanently and emphatically secured here in the biblical text.

For centuries, people have downgraded Sin to sins. They have also diminished their identification as “sinners.” In 1979, the Episcopal Church removed the phrase “miserable offenders” from their *Book of Common Prayer* when referring to themselves because they found it to be off-putting. However, there is not really a better phrase to describe what we are in Sin. We are miserable offenders.

You’ve probably sung the song *Amazing Grace* a bazillion times. Society knows and loves that song. Countless performers have recorded it. Presidents have led singalongs with it at funerals. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / that saved a wretch like me.” What are people thinking when they sing that? Do you stop and consider how wretched you were, how wretched you are? The man who wrote the song was a slave trader who came to see the wickedness of his activities and in a poem, wrote about how horrible that life was. He was a miserable offender, a “wretch.”

Listen to today’s most popular preachers and there is a massive, gaping chasm of incomprehension between what the spiritual self-improvement crowd thinks when they sing that and what that slave trader intended when he wrote about being redeemed by Christ in spite of his sinful, wretched self.

The old slave trader writes with a sense of joy that is specifically bound to the idea of being released from the burden of Sin.

Joy in Victory

There is no rejoicing in claiming to be a miserable offender and a wretched sinner, certainly no reason to sing about it, unless we are *already claimed* by the light of the gospel. The only way I know to help people understand the knowledge of sin is to offer the news of God's grace in overcoming sin through the cross of Christ. The light of Christ reveals sin by the brightness of an act of redemption that has already been accomplished.

Jesus Christ died for sin. Are you a sinner? Yes. Are you a miserable offender of that terribly condition known as Sin that separated us from God? Yes. Are you a wretch whose good acts are still considered Sin? Yes. But you rejoice because all of that reality is illuminated by the cross. Jesus died for Sin. Your redemption was completed in that action. When Jesus was crucified, everything that needed to happen to deliver you from sin was accomplished. That amazing grace happened before you or I ever admitted that we were sinners, before we ever confessed our sin, repented from our sin, before the forsaking of our sin. "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Jesus Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8)

Christ was crucified for our sins according to Scripture. He was buried and raised from the dead on the third day, according to Scripture. What we need to do is participate in this act of salvation. We do that by abandoning our pretenses that minimize our identification as sinners. We must openly admit to being sinners in bondage to Sin, and in that same moment, realizing with a rush of joy that victory is already ours in Christ! Our victory was won by him who died to save us. We recognize at the same time both our participation in sin's bondage and the unconditional love of Christ, which provides perfect freedom from that bondage.

Before Guilt, Grace

The church has been tempted to recast salvation as a Christian being able to overcome individual fault and guilt simply by the decision to repent. This undermines the heart of the gospel. Read the Old Testament prophets and you realize that human repentance alone is not enough to deliver humanity from its wrongdoing and bad actions. Human repentance alone is not powerful enough, it is not dependable enough, and it is not thorough enough to deliver us.

We needed an invasion of God's grace to help us from this sinful self-destruction. An outside source had to intervene. The intervention of Christ culminated with the crucifixion and resurrection. He died for our sin. Once we accept that salvation by grace through faith, not from our works, can we then have a clearer picture of who we were as sinners and how wretched we were in our very nature. Karl Barth once wrote that "not the man who is lost, but the man who is saved can understand that he is a sinner."⁵

We need to understand that not only are we in bondage to Sin, but we have also become active, conscripted agents of Sin. Sin lords over every person, making each individual its representative. Sin has a lot of tools and cranks out there, moving the machinery of it along. Paul doesn't characterize the guilt of Sin in terms of ignorance – we didn't know what we were doing – he uses terms of "revolt" and "rebellion against the known Lord." Our human condition isn't just one of captivity, but of active complicity. And yet, Christ died for sin, freeing us from that bondage through salvation.

Once you understand that after receiving salvation, the danger has already past you, you should experience profound and sincere repentance and peace. It is an interesting understanding. Salvation is an individual choice we must make, each one of us, for ourselves. However, Sin is certainly more than an individual problem. It is a problem for humanity. And while the Bible is full of stories highlighting the individual sins (all of the patriarchs and matriarchs are shown in a bad light at one time or another), it even more contains sweeping indictments of entire societies, nations, peoples. We just finished a sermon series on Joel and that is a call for entire peoples and kingdoms and nations to repent. Not a door-to-door evangelistic explosion.

All for Sin Could Not Aton

Earlier we sang the well-known hymn "Rock of Ages." There are some lines of significance. "Should my tears for ever flow / Should my zeal no languor know / All for sin could not atone / Thou must save, and Thou alone / Be of sin the *double cure*; / Save me from its *guilt and power*."⁶

Here are two critical affirmations:

1. "All for sin could not atone." Only God can supply the remedy for Sin. No amount of effort or work on our part can effect a single change.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Deliverance to Captives*, first paperback ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 38.

⁶ Augustus Toplady, 1773.

Deliverance and atonement must come from outside our power and influence. We are powerless to save ourselves from Sin's power.

2. "Be of sin the double cure; save me from its guilt and power." Sin has two components of equal weight. Sin is both a guilt and a power.

Sin is a **responsible guilt** for which atonement must be made. The crucifixion is a sacrifice for the atonement of that guilt.

Sin is an **alien power** that must be driven from the field of battle. All human beings are enslaved by and in bondage to this power (Rom. 3:9; John 8:34) and must be liberated, freed, by a greater power than Sin. The crucifixion is therefore understood to be Christ's victory over the Powers of Sin and Death.

And we cannot come to this understanding of sin on our own – we need the Scriptures to help. The Psalms are crucial in this regard. We can turn to Psalm 51. David has been forced to face his sinfulness. "Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion." David's plea for grace and mercy is based on his knowledge of God. "Faithful love" and "abundant compassion" are not just wishful thinking. They are key components of God's revelation to Israel throughout history. That is what God told His people He was!

And while David's heart is being crushed by his wretched sinfulness, he has a stronger confidence in God. Specifically, David is confident in two truths. God is *able* to cleanse from sin. God *provides for* the washing away of sin. That is why David can petition God in both great distress and also unmistakable confidence: "Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin."

He continues, "Against you – you alone – I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge." David reveals how sin can be understood only from a perspective provided by God. It is a startling verse because surely sin harms other human beings. Yet, David asserts that his sin is *only* against God.

The problem here is not a specific wrongdoing or bad action – although he has a few here that preceded this psalm. No, the problem is soul-wrenching disruption between his relationship with God. Despite the individual or corporate nature of our sin, sin is always *against God*. Always.

Sin is not a bothersome deficiency in our sense of righteousness. Sin is enmity and rebellion, disobedience and alienation from God. Psalm 51 is a powerful acknowledgement of the relationship between understanding sin and knowing God.

Because David understands sin and knows God, he is able to experience thoughts of joy with his confession of sin. “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.” For the wretch, confession is the doorway to rejoicing. To joy. David sees both the gift of condemnation and redemption here. God has brought a “crushing” sense of conviction. And that will lead David to experience redemption through confession and repentance. This is a penitent psalm, a repentant psalm, and the note of joy is present. “Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit.”

When we understand what Sin is, when we realize that Jesus bought our deliverance from Sin through the crucifixion, even during the most soul-crushing seasons of guilt and shame, there is joy to be found. Because at the very heart of the crucifixion is this simple truth. When Jesus Christ was crucified, He overcame sin – including both of our biblical conceptions of it.

Sin is a verb, something that people perform or engage in (Rom. 3:23). Sin is a dominion under which humanity exists (Rom. 3:9). Jesus died to free us from both the guilt of the actions and the dominion of the power of Sin.

We will live under one dominion or another – Sin or Christ. Which one do you choose? Let God’s amazing grace invade your life and change your life through redemption and release from Sin. Jesus was crucified for our Sin. Receive salvation today.

FURTHER THOUGHTS

In a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon from Dec. 23, 1990, Calvin and his stuffed tiger Hobbes have the following exchange about Santa while they are sledding:

Calvin. I'm getting nervous about Christmas.

Hobbes. You're worried you haven't been good?

Calvin. That's just the question. It's all relative. What's Santa's definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven't killed anybody. That's good, right? I haven't committed any felonies. I didn't start any wars...Wouldn't you say that's pretty good? Wouldn't you say I should get lots of presents?

Hobbes. But maybe good is more than the absence of bad.

Calvin. See, that's what worries me.

This raises some humorous questions. (1) What's Santa's definition of good and bad? (What's God's definition?) (2) How good do you have to be to qualify as "good?" (And who makes that determination?) (3) Maybe good is more than the absence of bad (which raises the issue of evil as the absence of good). And finally (4) such conundrums understood *philosophically* lead to worry. Only a *theological* answer delivers from ultimate anxiety.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement; he is a rebel who must lay down his arms." (*Mere Christianity*) Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

How did the Pharisees measure "good" and "bad?" Can one define sin by comparing themselves favorably to others? (Luke 18:11)

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Maundy Thursday Service and Lunch: April 6th, 11AM. Sign up today to reserve your spot for lunch and the Maundy Thursday service.

Good Friday Worship: April 7th 7PM. Come worship in the shadow of the cross and participate in the Lord's Supper.

Easter Sunrise Service: April 9th, 6:30AM at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Be in your place as we worship during daybreak, in remembrance of the dawning of the good news of the Resurrection of our living Lord Jesus. Mt Zion is located on Short Rd.

Easter Worship Services, April 9th at 9AM and 11AM. Invite friends and come to worship the Risen King!

Silver Wings Update: Silver Wings Ministry was going to see "Hello Dolly" on Wednesday July 19th but that showing is sold out. However, they were able to secure 20 seats for the performance on Friday July 21st at 2:30PM. The cost is \$38 for seniors. Interested? Contact Cindy Everhart for more information.

Silver Wings Picnic and Egg Hunt: April 19th, 12PM Bring a brown bag lunch!

1st Quarter Reports Due April 10th: The business meeting is scheduled for Monday April 24th at 6PM. Reports for the book of reports are due by April 10th.

The Constitution and Bylaws Committee has proposed a new constitution and bylaws to replace the current edition being utilized by the church. The church family is invited to read, prayerfully reflect on changes recommended, and vote on at the next business meeting. There will be a Church Town Hall style meeting with Pastor Craig and representatives of the Constitution and Bylaws committee on Sunday April 16th at 4PM at the church if you have any questions about changes being proposed. If you have a smartphone, you can find the new constitution on the church's app.

Thank You to Betty Robinson for over 34 years of service as the church's financial secretary. Betty is stepping down after the first quarter of 2023 and we are grateful for her long tenure of service to the church. She has served the Lord and the congregation of First Baptist Church well and we are grateful to her for over three decades of faithful work. We encourage the church family to drop Betty a note of gratitude and appreciation for all she has done over these past three decades plus. We are praying God's best for her as she transitions into a new season of retirement in her life.