

Sunday, April 29, 2026 - The Character of God and the Problem of Sin - Pastor John Henry Raskin

The Gospel begins with God

Before we can understand the good news of salvation, we must first take seriously the bad news that makes salvation necessary. The gospel answers a problem many people no longer believe they have. Until we understand that problem, the gospel will sound unnecessary—or even offensive.

Who God Is

The Bible presents a God whose character is both beautiful and unsettling to human pride.

God Is Holy

God's holiness means He is utterly set apart and morally perfect. He is not simply better than us—He is in a category all His own. When Isaiah encountered God's holiness, he became deeply aware of his own sinfulness (Isaiah 6). True holiness exposes the depth of human corruption rather than producing casual inspiration.

God Is Just

Because God is holy, He must be just. Justice is holiness applied to moral reality. God cannot ignore sin or excuse evil without denying His own nature. A world without judgment would not be loving—it would be morally chaotic. God's justice is consistent, real, and unavoidable.

God Is Love

God is not merely loving, *God is love* (1 John 4:8). His love is steadfast, covenantal, and self-giving. It does not arise from our goodness but from His nature. God's holiness, justice, and love are not competing traits; together they create the central tension the gospel resolves.

What Sin Is

Sin is more than mistakes or moral weakness. Scripture describes sin as:

Missing the mark (falling short of God's design)

Rebellion (choosing self-rule over God's authority)

Distortion (twisting what is good)

At its core, sin is turning away from God and choosing self over Him. According to Scripture, this condition affects every human being and reaches the root of who we are—not just what we do (Romans 3).

Where Sin Came From

Genesis 3 explains the origin of sin. Humanity chose autonomy over trust—deciding to define good and evil apart from God. The result was immediate: shame, fear, broken relationships, and death. This “Fall” is not ancient myth alone; it is replayed daily in every human heart (Romans 5:12).

What Sin Does

Sin has real and serious consequences:

Separation from God

Corruption of the mind, will, desires, and affection

Condemnation under God's just judgment

Because God is just, sin carries a real moral debt. Scripture is clear: we cannot repay this debt through effort, reform, or religion (Romans 6:23). Self-redemption is not difficult—it is impossible.

Why This Matters

The gospel is good news—but only if we understand the diagnosis first. Until we grasp the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin, grace will always seem excessive and salvation unnecessary. God exposes our condition not to crush us, but to drive us toward the cure. The story does not end here. The God who is holy, just, and loving did not abandon His broken creation. He acted—at great cost—to provide a way of rescue.

Next Week: **The Person and Work of Christ**

UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL — PART ONE

The Character of God and the Problem of Sin

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This sermon is the first in a multi-part series entitled Understanding the Gospel.

The goal of this series is to walk you through the full arc of the Christian gospel.

Hopefully, this will be a fruitful journey whether you are a long-time believer or a sincere seeker who has not yet fully come to faith.

We will explore why the Gospel was necessary, what it accomplished, and what it demands of us.

Simply put, the gospel is God's plan for the redemption of mankind.

Now, before we can appreciate the glory of redemption, we must first reckon honestly with what makes redemption necessary.

That is where we will begin today.

If you have ever tried to explain the gospel to a friend, you may have discovered how quickly it runs into trouble.

Not because the gospel is complicated — it is, in one sense, the simplest message in the world.

The trouble is that the gospel arrives as an answer to a question many people have stopped asking or never cared to ask.

It announces a rescue, but the people it is speaking to are not sure they are in danger.

It offers forgiveness, but those to whom you are speaking may not feel they have done anything that requires forgiving.

There is a reason the old evangelists used to say that law must come before grace.

Before a person can truly receive the good news, they must first understand the bad news.

The bad news is not simply that we are flawed, or that the world is messy, or that we sometimes fall short of our own ideals.

The bad news, in the biblical sense, is something far more serious — and far more personal.

Over this series, we are going to walk carefully through the gospel, not rushing to the happy ending, but taking the time to understand each movement of the story.

Today, we begin at the beginning — with God Himself.

Who is God?

What is He like? And what does the character of God have to do with the problem of human sin?

I want to suggest to you this morning that you cannot truly understand sin until you understand holiness, and you cannot understand holiness until you understand the God whose holiness it is. So let's begin there.

Let's take a deep dive here into the character of God.

Our grasp of sin will only be as deep as our grasp of God's holiness and love.

1. God Is Holy

The word 'holy' appears more times in the Bible than almost any other divine attribute.

It saturates the Psalms, thunders through the prophets, and fills the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel and John in Revelation.

It is the word the seraphim cry out in Isaiah 6 — not 'loving, loving, loving' or 'powerful, powerful, powerful,' but they cry out 'holy, holy, holy.'

Isaiah 6:3

**“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is filled with His glory.”**

The Hebrew word for Holy is pronounced Kadosh. It means to be set apart and without equal.

This whole phrase in Hebrew is Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Adonai tzeva-ot: melo kol ha-aretz kevodo.

The threefold repetition of a word in Hebrew makes it a superlative, meaning ultimate, absolute, beyond comparison.

In Hebrew, the repetition of a word multiplies its essence. So, simply put, the three times repetition of Kadosh implies that God is INFINITELY Holy.

But what does holiness mean?

At its core, it means two things simultaneously.

First, it means separateness — God is utterly unlike anything in His creation.

God is not merely a bigger or better version of us. He is of an entirely different order of being.

There is no moral equivalent to him, no rival, no comparison.

He is the uncreated Creator, the self-existent eternal grounding of all existence, the One before whom everything else is contingent and derivative.

Second, holiness means moral purity — an absolute and unwavering commitment to what is right, true, and good.

God does not simply follow a moral code. He is the source of moral order.

He is the standard by which goodness itself is defined. When we say something is truly good, we are — whether we know it or not — measuring it against His Goodness.

Isaiah's reaction when he encountered this holiness is instructive. He did not feel uplifted. He did not feel inspired. He felt undone.

Isaiah 6:5

“Woe is me, for I am undone!

Because I am a man of unclean lips,

And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;

For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts.”

This is what happens when genuine holiness meets acknowledged sinfulness.

Not a polite sense of inadequacy — but a terrifying awareness of one's own corruption.

Isaiah was not a wicked man by his culture's standards. He was a prophet. And yet in the presence of perfect holiness, all he could see was his own uncleanness. Such is the character of God's holiness.

2. God Is Just

Because God is holy, he is also perfectly just. Justice is not a separate attribute from holiness — it is holiness applied to moral actions.

A just God cannot overlook evil. He cannot pretend that wrong is right or wave a hand and decide that sin does not matter. To do so would be to contradict his own nature.

We sometimes think of justice and mercy as opposites — as if God must choose between them.

But the biblical picture is more profound than that. God's justice is not at odds with his character; it is an expression of it.

When God judges sin, he is not being harsh. He is being true to Himself. He is maintaining the moral order of a universe built on truth AND righteousness.

Think about it from a human perspective. If a judge lets a guilty man go free simply because he does not feel like punishing him, we do not call that judge merciful. We call him corrupt.

Justice that never judges is not justice at all — it is moral chaos dressed up in tolerant language.

God is not that kind of judge. His justice is real, consistent, and ultimately unavoidable.

3. God Is Love

Here is the other side of God's character — and it is just as real, just as absolute. God is love. Not merely loving. Not affectionate toward us in a conditional or seasonal way.

John says it plainly in His Gospel when He says God is love."

In context what John says is even more profound in that it speaks to hypocritical religiosity in sinful people as well...

1 John 4:8

He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

This is not a soft, sentimental love.

It is a fierce, self-giving, covenant love — what the Hebrew Bible calls **hesed**: steadfast love, patient love, unfailing faithfulness.

God's love is not a response to our goodness or lack thereof; it is the overflow of His own nature. He does not love us because we are lovable. He loves us because He is love.

This is the tension at the heart of the gospel, and it is not resolved cheaply.

God is holy — he cannot simply tolerate sin.

God is just — he cannot simply ignore evil.

And God is love — he will not simply abandon those He made in His image to their sinful nature.

How can these three qualities of God be reconciled?

That is the question that the gospel answers.

But before we get to the answer, we need to understand more clearly what the problem is.

The Problem of Sin.

As your pastor I cannot lead you down a primrose path and minimize sin.

However, in order to help you see that you need a savior, I need to help you feel the weight of sin in your life.

So let's define our terms...

1. What Sin Is — and What It Is Not

The word 'sin' has largely vanished from public discourse. When it does appear, it tends to be used lightly — a 'guilty pleasure,' a 'sinfully delicious' dessert.

The word has been domesticated, stripped of its weight, turned into a wink.

That is part of our problem. When we lose the language to describe our condition, we lose the desire to seek its remedy.

The Bible uses several different words for sin, each capturing a different dimension of it.

The most common Hebrew word, **chata**, means to miss the mark — to fall short of the target. The Greek word **hamartia** carries the same idea. Sin, at one level, is a failure to be what we were made to be.

But the biblical account goes further. There is also the Hebrew word **pesha** — rebellion, a deliberate turning away from God's authority. And **avon** — iniquity, a twisting or distortion of what is straight.

Sin is not just an accident. It is, in its deepest nature, a turning away from God — a choice of self over Him, of our own will over His.

When the Apostle Paul summarizes the human condition in Romans, he reaches back to Psalm 14 to say:

Romans 3:10–12

10 As it is written:

“There is none righteous, no, not one;

11 There is none who understands;

There is none who seeks after God.

12 They have all turned aside;

They have together become unprofitable;

There is none who does good, no, not one.”

This is a comprehensive indictment.

This is the assessment of a person separated from God.

It covers the whole of humanity — wise and unwise, educated and uneducated, religious and secular.

The problem is not a surface-level behavioral issue. It goes down to the roots of our human nature.

But how did we all become separated from God in the first place?

2. The Origin of Sin — Genesis 3

To understand sin, we need to go back to the beginning. The third chapter of Genesis is one of the most important chapters in the entire Bible, because it explains the world as we experience it.

In the original creation story the creation of mankind was declared 'very good' by God.

It was humanity in right relationship with God, with one another, and with the created order.

What happens in the garden is more than a story about a piece of fruit. It is the story of a fundamental rupture in that relationship.

The serpent's temptation is telling: 'You will be like God, he said.

The offer is autonomy — the right to define good and evil for yourself, to be the authors of your own moral universe. And Adam and Eve took it.

The consequences were immediate and devastating.

Shame, where there had been none.

Hiding from God, where there had been open communion.

Blame-shifting, where there had been partnership.

Estrangement from the creation itself. And ultimately, the sentence of death.

This is what theologians call the Fall — and the ripples of that moment extend to every corner of human history and if we are honest, human experience.

We sometimes want to minimize this, to say that the Fall is a myth or a metaphor that doesn't really mean very much in our current lives.

But notice what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 5:

Romans 5:12 -Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.

The story of Adam is the story of humanity. Each of us replicates his choice. We are not sinners because Adam sinned — we sin because we are, in our very nature, bent in the same direction he was bent.

We want to be God of our own lives.

The Fall is not just a myth. It is our history and we relive it every day.

3. The Consequences of Sin

The consequences of sin operate on multiple levels — and it is important to understand them all if we are to understand what the gospel is rescuing us from.

First, there is separation. Sin breaks the relationship between the creature and the Creator.

Isaiah 59:2

But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.

This is the most fundamental consequence. We were made for communion with God — to know him, to walk with him, to reflect His image in the world.

Sin damages that relationship at its foundation. It introduces not merely distance but enmity.

Paul says in Romans 8 that the sinful mind is 'hostile to God.'

This is not merely ignorance or indifference. It is active opposition.

Second, there is corruption.

Sin does not merely add a layer of guilt to an otherwise intact person.

It corrupts the person — the mind, the will, the desires, the affections.

The theologians call this 'total depravity' — not meaning that every person is as wicked as they could possibly be, but that every part of the person is affected by sin.

Our thinking is distorted. Our desires are disordered. Even our moral striving is tainted by self-interest. There is no part of us that remains untouched.

Finally, there is condemnation. Because God is just, sin incurs a real moral debt.

Paul says plainly in Romans 6:23:

"The wages of sin is death."

Death here is not merely biological. It is relational — the final, complete separation from God.

It is what Revelation calls the second death.

This is the judicial reality: sin in a world governed by a just and holy God carries a penalty.

That penalty is not arbitrary or vindictive.

It is the natural and necessary consequence of rebellion against the source of all life and goodness.

And here is the crucial point: we cannot pay that debt ourselves.

There is no amount of reform, no accumulation of good deeds, no religious observance that bridges this gap.

If our best righteousness is, as Isaiah says, like filthy rags in God's sight, then self-redemption is not merely difficult — it is just impossible.

Now let's discuss why all this talk about sin matters... why we cannot simply skip this part of the story and jump straight to 'God loves you

and has a wonderful plan for your life.' (although He does and He does).

The Gospel is the good news. But good news only makes sense against the backdrop of bad news.

A doctor who tells you that you are seriously ill and that there is a cure is giving you good news — but only because you first understood the diagnosis.

If you dismiss the diagnosis, the cure seems unnecessary, even offensive. 'Why would I need surgery? I feel fine.'

This is precisely the situation of many people who hear the gospel and shrug.

They are not villains. They are not cruel people.

They have just not reckoned honestly with the reality of their own condition — with the holiness of the God they were made to glorify, and with the reality and seriousness of their departure from Him.

The gospel appears to them as an unnecessary solution to a problem they do not believe they have.

But when a person grasps — really grasps — that they are standing before a holy and just and righteous God,

that there is a real moral account to be settled, and that no amount of well-meaning effort or religious performance can close that gap...

...that is when the gospel becomes the most beautiful message they have ever heard.

Here is the full scripture from the Apostle Paul...

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul says later in his letter to the Roman Church, **'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'**

Those words can only strike you as glorious if you first understood what the condemnation was.

There is also something else we need to say here — and it is important, because the doctrine of sin is sometimes preached in a way that merely produces shame or despair.

The point of giving people an understanding of sin is not to crush them.

The point is to make them desperate — genuinely, hopefully desperate. Like a drowning person who finally stops trying to save themselves and reaches for the lifeboat.

God did not design the diagnosis to destroy you. He designed it to drive you to the cure.

Because we truly do have free will and God will not make us choose to love him or for that matter each other, it is crucially important to understand that in Christ the love of God becomes a real Hand of Grace that is out to you.

Let me try to draw together what we have seen this morning.

We began with God — and what we found was a God of radical holiness, unflinching justice, and unstoppable love.

These are not three separate compartments of His personality. They are all of one piece.

The same God who is too holy to look upon sin is the same God who is too loving to abandon those He made in His image.

That is the tension at the heart of everything.

We then looked at the human condition — and what we found was serious. Not just flawed. Not just misguided. But genuinely and deeply broken at the root.

Separated from God. Corrupted in every dimension. Under condemnation that we cannot lift by ourselves.

The biblical diagnosis of sin is not flattering. But it is honest. And honest diagnoses are the only ones worth having.

And then we asked: why does this matter? Because the gospel — if it is true — is the most important news in the world.

But it can only be received as good news by people who have understood the bad news first. You cannot be saved from a danger you do not believe in.

I want to close with two things. First, if you are a believer this morning, I want to ask you: when did you last feel the weight of what you have been rescued from?

There is a kind of Christianity that takes grace for granted — that is so familiar with the language of forgiveness that the words have lost their force.

Let the holiness of God press on you again this week.

Let the reality of sin be real to you. Not to condemn you — but so that your gratitude might overflow.

And if you are here this morning and you are not sure where you stand... if you have heard the language of Christianity your whole life but something has always kept you at arm's length — I want to say this to you:

I think that what has kept you away may actually be an intuition that it would cost you something to come close to God. And you are right.

But I want to tell you over the coming weeks that what it costs you is worth giving up, and what you receive in exchange is far beyond anything you can imagine.

Because this is where we are headed in this series:

the God who is holy and just and loving did not look at the wreckage of sin in His rebellious creation and simply walk away.

He acted. In the most extraordinary, costly, and unexpected way imaginable.

That is the story we are going to trace in the weeks ahead.

The character of God made a way. The problem of sin has an answer.

Next week we are going to explore The Person and Work of Christ — who Jesus is, and what He came to do.

I hope you will join us... and bring a friend.

Let's Pray...