

This Is Us
Worse Than You Thought
April 7, 2019

And with *that*, I think you can tell that we're about to get even deeper into the weeds as we further investigate "why we are the way we are."

Would you pray with me as we begin?

Holy Spirit, I pray that you will open our eyes so that we would grasp – perhaps for the very first time – the catastrophic effect of that spiritual gravity known as "sin."

And I pray that as we comprehend the dreadful nature of that reality we would also be drawn to

deliverance in and through Jesus of Nazareth, in whose name I ask.

Amen.

Review

If you've been here over the past three weeks, you know that we've been talking about "us" ...

- Specifically, what makes us so special – so good, so great even ...
- And, then, what it is that keeps us from living up to that goodness and greatness; from living up to the fullness of what we are meant to be as humans.

But for those of you who missed a week

or maybe are here for the very first time, I want to take just a few minutes to do a very brief review what we've learned to this point. (And if you want to go back and get the full story, the video, audio and text of every message we do is available in the media section of our app, website and via the North Heartland podcast).

In the first week, we learned that what makes humans like you and me special is that each of us *is created in the image of God*.

And that little phrase implies many things but, at the core, it means that every person born into this world is a *ruler* – a king or a queen in the sight of God – called to use whatever power and privilege they have to maintain and

increase the goodness of His creation.

To put it another way, our fundamental task as humans (which differentiates us from other forms of life) is to contribute to what the Hebrew people called “shalom” – the full-flourishing of the world in every way. We’re to work, dream, invent, create, build, invest, learn, grow, love, rest, and even play so that everything and everyone gets better in every way.

This is God’s dream for His world and for each of us. And everywhere we look, we can see traces and reflections of shalom as well as the ways that we humans have contributed to it through the ages.

Yet everywhere we look, we also see

something else: that pretty much everything is messed up in some way.

And I'm not just talking about things being bad "out there" (wherever "there" might be). I'm talking about what's happening within our own little worlds – the discord in our families, the brokenness of our relationships, the failings we experience personally ...

- From our physical bodies which get sick and eventually die ...
- To the way our thinking gets bent and contorted resulting in anxiety and depression and worse (as we talked about in our last series *State of Mind*)
- Even our will – our ability to do

what we want to do – is messed up.

As the Apostle Paul puts it:

*I want to do what is good,
but I don't. I don't want to
do what is wrong, but I do
it anyway. Romans 7:19
(NLT)*

Anybody experience that in the past week? The past day? This morning?

And the reason it is this way ... the reason we fail to live up to the goodness and greatness God intended for us ... the reason we don't experience the fullness of what we are meant to be as humans comes down to one word: *sin*.

Now, whenever people hear that word, they tend to think of an *action*. For

instance ...

- Sin is when you break one of the 10 Commandments. Don't steal, don't take God's name in vain (whatever that means).
- Sin is when you do something that violates your conscience. "I know I shouldn't do that."
- Sin is when you don't do the good you know you should do.

Sin, to most people, is an action.

And that's true as far as it goes. But Christianity says that sin is much more than a particular set of actions or non-actions. Sin is also a *condition*.

Paul writes:

*When Adam sinned [verb],
sin [noun] entered the
world ... Because one
person disobeyed God
[action], many became
sinners [condition].*

*Romans 5:12a,15
(NLT)*

Of course, whenever you mention Adam and Eve, it almost always raises the question of whether they were real people or allegorical representatives of the human race.

And throughout history, committed followers of Jesus have come down on one side or the other of that issue and have made pretty good cases for their position.

More importantly, as we learned in the second week of this series, whether they're our literal or figurative ancestors, the point is the same: *the story of Adam and Eve is the story of us.* And because of them – and because of us – sin as a condition entered the world and sin as a condition remains in the world.

And over the past two weeks, we've talked about what that condition looks like and how it affects us ...

... the “fallout of sin” so to speak.

- Sin blinds us – we have trouble even seeing how what we're doing falls short of God's intentions for us which is why we justify, rationalize, minimize or blame.

- Sin stains us – there isn’t any aspect of us which isn’t tainted in some way by evil. Nothing we do is ever totally pure.
- Sin disorders us – our natural human desires for things like food and security and companionship and sex are bent and twisted which means that we often try to fulfill them in ways that are self-destructive and contrary to the way we are made.
- Sin deceives and enslaves us – we think freedom is found in doing *whatever* we want with *whomever* we want *whenever* we want “as long as nobody gets hurt” regardless of what God says ... only to find that

somebody always gets hurt
(including ourselves) and that all
we've done is trade the God who
loves us for one who doesn't.

That list could go on and on if we had
time but, bottom line, there is a force
working against us keeping us from
being who we were meant to be as kings
and queens created in God's image to
rule over His creation.

And it's not only "out there" it's also "in
here." It's not just what I *do*, it's part of
who I *am*.

**I sin [action] because I am a sinner [condition]. I
sin [verb] because sin [noun] is within me.**

It's part of my nature and part of your
nature as a human being. Our sin [our
condition] produces our sinning [our

actions].

And now you're all caught up on what we've been talking about to this point in our series.

Sounds pretty hopeless, doesn't it?

The Big Deal

Of course, at this point, one response might be “well, yes, but what's the big deal?”

- Can't we just tell God we're sorry whenever we sin?
- Can't we just commit to do better going forward?
- Promise to learn from our

mistakes?

- Make up for our poor decisions?”

“Furthermore, this all seems a bit unfair. Why should I have to suffer with this ‘condition’ because of what someone else did?”

Let’s start with that one. And let’s use a recent occurrence with which we’re all familiar – at least those of us who are football fans.

Remember this?

I’m sorry to bring it up but do you remember what happened next?

An interception that would have

virtually ended the game and sent the Chiefs to the Superbowl instead of the Patriots; a turnover that was called back because Dee Ford was lined up in the neutral zone.

A mere two inches out of place by one guy cost the entire team and, in many ways, this entire city a victory. We all lost because of what one man did. One man's "sin" (in football terms) spread and brought "death" (again, in football terms) to the rest of the team and to all of Chiefs Kingdom.

And no one wondered if that was "fair" ... because "thems the rules." That's just how it works. And not just in football. That's just how it works in many areas of life.

Point being, the thing about Adam and original sin and its effect on all of us isn't as strange as it might seem. That's just how it works.

Now, as to why this "sin condition" is such a big deal ... two thoughts.

First from a practical side, I think my life would be better without it (and so would yours).

- I think my life would be better if I wasn't inherently blind to my failures.
- I think my life would be better if there was more purity in my actions and motives.
- I think my life would be better if my need for food wasn't so easily twisted into gluttony; if my

occasional desire to *do* good wasn't also accompanied by the desire to make myself *look* good.

- I think my life would be better if I wasn't regularly deceived into thinking it was OK to ignore what God says about things only to find myself trapped and enslaved when I disobey Him.

I mean, doesn't this make sense? Who wouldn't want to be rid of the condition of sin and its fallout?

The fact that I am by nature a sinner is a big deal because life would be better without it. And if that isn't possible, life would be better if there was at least another source of power that would help me to overcome it.

The second reason that this is such a big deal is that ...

The ultimate result of sin's curse is far worse than most of us would ever imagine.

In addition to blinding us, staining us, disordering us, deceiving and enslaving us, being a sinner by nature means ... well, let's let Paul explain it.

Remember that he said ...

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world.

We already read that part.

But look at what Paul writes in the very next sentence.

Adam's sin brought death,

so death spread to
everyone, for everyone
sinned. Romans 5:12
(NLT)

In addition to everything else sin does, Paul says, it also brings death. I'd say that's a pretty big deal.

And it's an even bigger deal than it sounds like. When Paul says that death spread to everyone, he means it in a *literal* sense. Physical death is a part of this world because of sin's curse. You and I and everyone we love is going to die someday because of it.

There's also a *metaphorical* sense to what Paul is saying here.

If you have a really bad habit or you have an addiction, you have seen the

death that follows your sin. You killed the relationship, you killed your finances, you killed a career, you killed the connection with your parents or your kids.ⁱ

Spiritual Death & Condemnation

And there's another sense of death to which Paul is pointing; something even worse than physical or metaphorical death.

To understand what that is, we have to look at something else he wrote about death and sin, this time in a letter to the first-century followers of Jesus at Ephesus.

He told them ...

*You were dead because of
your disobedience and your
many sins.*

Ephesians 2:1 (NLT)

Now, obviously, Paul can't be talking about death in the physical sense because these folks – like you and me – were still walking around. They were still breathing. They were still alive in the body.

And, as we'll see in a bit, he wasn't talking about death in a metaphorical sense.

Instead, what he's getting at here is *something much more serious*. Paul is describing the state of being dead *spiritually*; dead *with respect to God*.

In essence, Paul was saying “remember

that before you came to believe in Jesus,
your biggest problem in life wasn't that
...

- “You just needed a little help.”
- “You had a bad childhood; you were taken advantage of.”
- “You just needed to be taught how to live.”

“No,” Paul said. “You were dead *spiritually*. You were separated from God and had no power to do anything about it.”

And, this is so critical to understand because a lot of people think “I’m not THAT big of a sinner. I’ve not committed a murder. I’ve not cheated on my spouse or my taxes. I’m way better than a lot of other people I know.”

And that may be true. But the issue isn't how much sin we've committed or how bad it is. The issue is how dead we are because of the sin nature we inherited from Adam. And there is no degree of dead. Dead is dead.

And that's a big problem but it's not the worst problem.

In addition to bringing physical, metaphorical and spiritual death to many and causing it to rule over many ...ⁱⁱ

Paul adds that ...

*Adam's sin led to
condemnation ... Yes,
Adam's one sin brings
condemnation for*

everyone. Romans
5:16,18 (NLT)

And this, friends, is the truly catastrophic and dreadful result of the sin that all of us inherit from Adam.

See, people aren't condemned because one day they do something so terrible that they cross some undefined "point of no return" where God is justified in casting them out into the kingdom of darkness – "Hell" Jesus called it – where they will spend eternity.

And people aren't condemned because they do so many bad things that they one day exceed some arbitrary limit.

Instead, people are *born* condemned because they are "in Adam" so to speak.

By our very nature as his sons and daughters (whether literally or figuratively) as Paul puts it to the Ephesian believers, we are subject to the righteous anger of God.

Oh, and by the way, lest you think Paul was “out there” in his thinking on this issue ...

Jesus once said something similar.

*“You are from below; I am from above. You belong to this world; I do not. That is why I said that you will die in your sins.” John
8:23-24 (NLT)*

Being from below ... belonging to this world ... means spiritual death and condemnation.

That doesn't happen because of our sinn-ing (action). It happens because we are sinn-ers (condition).

God's Solution

Point being ... this is why being a sinner is a big deal. It's why saying we're sorry to God every time we sin isn't the answer. "Sorry" doesn't change our fundamental nature as humans.

The only hope we have is ... well, let me tell you a story. It's found in the third chapter of John's Gospel but before we look at it, I need to say that, for some of you, *what you are about to hear is the single most important spiritual truth you've ever heard in your life.*

- Some of you are brand new to this

“church thing” and you came in thinking the whole deal is trying to make yourself better; trying hard to please God by doing this or not doing that ... and what we just talked about means that is a dead end.

- And some of you have been around for a while – maybe you’ve gone to church your whole life – and you’ve believed that because you’ve been committed to being religious and spiritual in some way, that was good enough. And what we just talked about means that’s not the answer.
- And some of you are a lot like me in that what you’re going to hear in the next few minutes is something

you learned a long, long time ago. And your first thought is probably going to be “oh *that*.” If so, I encourage you not to tune out but to pray for those who are hearing and understanding for the very first time.

So here we go.

John writes that ...

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. John 3:1 (NLT)

From other scriptures we know that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin which meant that, if this had

happened in our day and time, Nicodemus would have been like a combination of a Roman Catholic Cardinal and a United States Senator all rolled into one – he had both spiritual and political authority. He was a man who commanded respect and who was probably used to being respected.ⁱⁱⁱ

And he comes to Jesus by night ... which leads some commentators to suggest he's afraid of being seen with Jesus. But, given his power and position – and the current popularity of Jesus – that doesn't make a lot of sense.

I think a better explanation is that Nicodemus is a devout Pharisee and devout Pharisees would often set the nighttime aside for study and for pondering the Law of Moses.

And on this particular night, the subject of his study and reflection is Jesus of Nazareth.^{iv}

“Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

John 3:2 (NLT)

Obviously, Nicodemus is very aware of what’s been going on in the city of Jerusalem and throughout the province of Judea.

And, even though he’s probably experienced at least some tension over Jesus clearing out the Temple (which

had happened just days before), he is impressed with Jesus – as most everyone was – because of the miraculous things Jesus has been doing.

He also calls Jesus “rabbi” which is what he himself would have been called, indicating that he thought of Jesus as a peer. And he pays him what seems to be a high compliment. “God truly is with you.”

But if Nicodemus has come to Jesus at night to learn, Jesus is going to see to it that no ordinary learning takes place. His goal will not be to help Nicodemus “know” but to reduce him to unknowing. Nicodemus is part of a constituency that *knows* things—the Law, the oral traditions, the customs, the prophets, the prophecies.

“Rabbi, we know,” he says to Jesus. “We know who you are, we know what you do.”

But Jesus doesn’t care about what Nicodemus knows. He cares about Nicodemus’ life. He wants to save it.

And to do that, he first has to undermine it^v – sort of like I’ve tried to do in this message.

So, in response to Nicodemus compliment ...

Jesus replied, “Well, Nick, I sure do appreciate you stopping by for a few minutes to shoot the breeze with me.”

No, that's not what Jesus says:

He says ...

“I tell you the truth, unless you are born anōthen [which is the actual word in the Greek – and we’ll talk more about that in a minute] ... unless you are born anōthen, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

John 3:3 (NLT)

Now, if you're a bystander watching this scene between these two men, you would be scratching your head at this point and thinking, “am I missing something here?”

Here's this really important highly-respected spiritual leader who has probably been praying and meditating

on God as he does every evening. And then he senses a prompting to go meet up with this amazing teacher and miracle worker and maybe talk about the glories of God and His Word and just share some fellowship.

And when he pays him what is probably one of the highest compliments he's ever given to another human being, Jesus completely ignores it and instead, starts talking about Nicodemus' greatest spiritual problem.

“Know this Nick: unless you are born an~~o~~then you cannot see the Kingdom of God. *That's the requirement.* Unless you meet it, you will remain on the outside.”

Wow! Even though Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a master teacher;

even though he is moved to believe by Jesus' miracles; even though he has humbled himself to come and seek instruction ... Jesus is telling him that's not enough. There is another requirement to "get in."

And that's important to note, I think, because the attitude and perspective of Nicodemus towards Jesus mirrors the attitude and perspective that many of us also have. We think of Jesus as a master teacher. We're impressed by His miracles. We come to church. We read the Bible. We pray. We give.

But that's not enough, Jesus says. There is another requirement ... being "born anothén" ... a concept which on the surface seems as unimaginable to us as it did to Nicodemus.

“What do you mean?”
exclaimed Nicodemus.
“How can an old man go
back into his mother’s
womb and be born
an^othen?”

John 3:4 (NLT)

Now, at this point, it’s worth noting that the Greek word *an^othen* can have two meanings. Sometimes it means “again” and sometimes it means “from above.”

And when Jesus says to Nicodemus “you must be born *an^othen*,” Nicodemus hears it as “again” and, because of his respect for Jesus as a teacher, he takes it literally.

“Seriously Jesus? Do you really expect me to go back in to my mother’s womb a

second time and come out again? I know it's only the first century but we know enough biology to know that isn't possible."

But that's not what Jesus means ...

... as He further explains to Nicodemus:

Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life ...

... but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born another.' John 3:5-7 (NLT)

When Jesus uses the word “anothen” he doesn’t mean “again” in a physical sense. He means “from above” in a spiritual sense. But he doesn’t mean that metaphorically. He means literally.

Being born from above is something *God* has to bring about in our lives – though it’s impossible to explain exactly *how* it happens.

“The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

John 3:8 (NLT)

“You can’t explain it, Nick. But it’s a

requirement. It's not optional. You must be born again not physically but from above."

And at this point, it's pretty clear that Jesus has just blown Nicodemus' mind.

"How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked.

Obviously, this is a completely new idea to him which seems to frustrate Jesus.

Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things?"

John 3:9-10 (NLT)

"You know so much, Nick. How do you not know *this*?"

Now, that seems pretty harsh. But Jesus clearly expected him to know what He was talking about.

I think he was expecting Nicodemus to understand that God's ultimate plan was not for people to try hard to improve themselves by changing and cleaning up their act.

Instead, God's plan was clearly spelled in a great prophecy that would have been well known to someone in Nicodemus' role as "the teacher of Israel."

It's from Ezekiel 36 where God is recorded as saying:

"I will sprinkle clean water

on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you.”

*Ezekiel 36:25-26
(NLT)*

*“I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” Ezekiel
36:27 (NLT)*

Notice the similarity between that and what Jesus said about being born from above?

“You must be born of water and the

Spirit” he told Nicodemus ... which was the same thing God had said through Ezekiel. “I will wash you and make you clean by forgiving and removing the stain of all your sins. And I will create something new inside of you. My Spirit will live in you.”

Long before Jesus came on the scene, it had been foretold that entering the Kingdom of God would require a dramatic cleansing of the old and creation of the new.

And Jesus expected Nicodemus to be aware of that. “You must be born an~~o~~then – again, from above.”

So, obviously, the question is ... how does that happen?

Jesus is about to explain it to Nick so let's listen in.

He says ...

“No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven.

And in this statement, Jesus is revealing that He himself is that person. He is not merely human. He is also divine.

Then he says ...

And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”

John 3:13-15

(NLT)

That sounds weird to us but Nick would have known what Jesus was talking about.

The Israelites were wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt. They were tired and grouchy and complaining that God had led them there only to die. So God sent a plague of poisonous serpents, which led the people to cry out to Moses for help.

God then told Moses to create a bronze serpent and stick it up on top of a pole and tell the people “whoever looks at it will be saved.”

And that’s what happened. People believed what Moses said and then

looked at the pole. And they recovered from the snakebite. It was a miracle.

And what Jesus was doing here was preparing Nicodemus – and us – for what was about to happen; that He (Jesus) was also going to be lifted up on top of a pole – a Roman cross.

And he was telling Nick – and us – that just as those people in the desert had to focus their attention on a symbol of their sin in order to be restored from death to life, in order for *us* to be restored from death to life – in order for *us to be born again from above* – we must also turn and focus our attention on Jesus as our savior.

As John put it:

To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

John 1:12-13 (NLT)

And that's the answer to the greatest problem you and I have; that we are born "in Adam"; that we are born spiritually dead in sin and we need a resurrection. We need a second birth that comes from God.

And that comes, John says, when we believe in Jesus – who he was and what he did – but also when we turn to Him and accept Him.

See, being born again isn't just about

getting to know a little bit about Jesus, trying to do some of what He says. It's turning to him and saying "I am dead in sin and there is no other hope that what you have done for me."

Closing

And next week we'll talk more about *exactly what it is that Jesus has done* but, for now, let's close with this.

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned ...

But [Paul continues] there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam,

brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ.

And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins.

For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many.

Our problem is way worse than we ever thought.

But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

*Romans 5:12,15-17
(NLT)*

So, as we close ...

- I want to help you receive that gift
– be born from above
- I want to remind you that you have received it.

Let's pray.

1. Our sin and separation from God leaves us wondering if we truly are loved and so we look for that in all the wrong places. That's part of what it means to be human, too, and we'll talk about it next Sunday.

2 Pet. 3:18 - (May you) grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Andy Stanley, message series Free, message *It's Worse Than You Thought*

ⁱⁱ Romans 5:15, 17

ⁱⁱⁱ

http://reformedperspectives.org/articles/rus_smith/NT.Smith.John.3.1-21.pdf

^{iv} <http://sicutlocutusest.com/2014/03/13/now-you-can-begin/>

^v Ibid