

What is Sin?

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Readings: Romans 1¹⁹⁻³² / Matt 23²³⁻²⁷ /

Some of you may recognise this guy (refers to picture on power point). His name is Joe DiMaggio a hero of the Baseball game in the States. Joe played his entire 13-year baseball career for the New York Yankees. He was voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1955. He is perhaps best known for his 56-game hitting streak (May 15–July 16, 1941), a record that still stands. A 1969 poll conducted to coincide with the centennial of professional baseball voted him the sport's greatest living player.

In the summer of 1945 World War II had ended and former soldiers, including baseball stars, streamed back into America and American life. Joe DiMaggio wanted to take his little four year old to a baseball game so he was trying to avoid the crowds for once and simply be a Yankee fan by sneaking into a mezzanine seat before rejoining his team. A fan noticed him, then another. Soon throughout the stadium people were chanting, "Joe, Joe, Joe DiMaggio!" DiMaggio, moved, gazed down to see if his son had noticed the tribute. He had. "See, Daddy," said the little DiMaggio, "everybody knows me!"

The junior Joe DiMaggio made the innocent child's mistake of assuming all the glory at the Yankee Stadium that summer afternoon in 1945 belonged to him and not to his father. Human beings, however, make a far less innocent mistake when we live as if our lives were all about us and our glory, rather than about our Heavenly Father and his glory. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:21 that the fundamental sin of the human heart involves a purposeful failure to honour God as God or to give thanks to him, that is, to give the Lord glory in the form of worship that he alone is due.

What is sin? That sounds like a simple question but as one begins to delve into the answers which have been given down through the years one discovers that it is really not that simple. The Old Testament in typical Hebrew fashion does not offer a consistent or abstract definition of sin. Four main pictures of sin arise there although many other metaphors used in the OT. They are negligence, rebellion, guilt and error. And sin is most definitely all of these **at some point**. However these alone cannot stand as a definitive word on sin since it seems clear that Jesus was accused of at least three of these and we know that He was without sin. So, what is the essence/nature of sin? This will be, for us as a community, a vital question of only because it has so often in the past been the Christian use of the word sin which has confused and frightened those outside the Church. So for the sake of our witness alone we need to come to a much better understanding of this little word. It's also important, of course, for **us**. At least a part of avoiding sin or of working against it is to **'know thy enemy'** and this applies well to sin. Even though we don't like to focus on this little word and what it means for the sake of our own walk with Christ – we should.

We make two mistakes when identifying sin. One is to mistake sin for its subject – the 'doer' of sin. We speak of and even the Bible speaks of 'sinners' which, of course, means 'people who sin.' But what that word has come to imply is that there are a certain group within humanity who are sin committers – people who can be, as it were, defined by their particular sins. Now granted there are sinners and even

the Bible uses the term. The question isn't so much whether there are people who sin – we all know the answer to that – but whether sinners are people!

You see what tends to happen is that people become categorised according to their crime. How useful is it for us, indeed, how right is it for us to lump people into such categories? Oh... he's a thief, she's a bigot, he's a rapist, she's a gossip... I want to say that, in fact, it is not at all useful for two simple reasons. Firstly, it depersonalises people turning them from a he or a she into an 'it.' And turning people into objects never helps us to see the person behind the sin and therefore to truly understand the person. Secondly, it turns an incredibly complex being into a one dimensional person so diminishing their humanity that it might as well not exist. Again, I am not trying to deny sin but I suspect that Jesus didn't view people this way; **He didn't define people by their sin**. As he says, 'Do unto others as you would have the do unto yourself' and with a little license we can also say 'View others as you would have them view yourself!' So do we? DO we view others with the kind and generous eye we would like others to view us? Or do we view with a condemning or critical eye that magnifies every blemish so that it becomes the thing by which we characterise that person?

There is, however, a second and even worse consequence of this approach to sin. You see when we choose to characterise people according to their sin we imply, of course, that there is a group of people **who are not sinners** – namely, us! Now whether you think this consciously or not we can hardly help it when we indulge in any kind of finger pointing. It is just too easy to forget that we too are sinners. This is the greater problem with this approach to sin. Not so much that we identify that there are sinners but that we begin down the road of **not identifying with them** and this, friends, is the true beginning of a sect. A sect, at its heart, is a group of people who refuse to believe that they stand on the same ground as everyone else before God. And there is only one ground on which we may all stand before God and this is **as sinners** before a righteous and loving God and that is the ground won by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no other ground and, what is more, **there are no other people other than sinners** who stand on this ground.

The moment we begin to categorise others we tend to be telling ourselves that we are either apart from or even above them. Once we do this we've lost the sharpest part of our witness to God's love which is the simple notion that we all stand on level ground before the Cross of Christ. No one is a greater or lesser sinner before Christ.

A third mistake we make with sin is to limit sin to the action by which it has been recognised as if the thief's only mistake was to actually pinch something or the rapist's only mistake was to actually violate the woman or the murderer's only mistake was to actually kill the person. **The truth is sin goes much deeper than the actions by which it is known**. Sin, as Jesus reminds us, begins in the heart – it begins with the heart attitudes and ignorances which we have either cultivated or refused to truly examine and root out. And this, of course, is one of the main problems with sin – it **cannot** easily be identified with an action. It may be recognised **in the action** but it cannot be identified **with** the action. If I have stolen something I may have sinned but sin is not simply stealing; nor is it simply killing and neither is it simply slandering. Sin goes much much deeper than these actions. Which is why Jesus, in our readings today, is so critical of the Pharisees. They, indeed, made sure of their outward righteousness – their whole approach to faith was predicated on a spotless appearance. And so it seemed to those around them but this did not fool Jesus. He knew that what really mattered was what was within and it was here that these religion-teachers were flawed.

²⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. (Matt 23)

And this, of course, is where we will find the ultimate struggle. Not so much on the outside but on the inside where thoughts and attitudes are formed and nurtured; where hate is held on to, lust is treasured and envy given room to grow. Here on the inside is where the battle is always most intense.

So what is sin? To be defined sin needs an object. Sin does not exist in a vacuum. It is not something abstract. Sin in the Old Testament and according to the original Jewish writers is always personal – that is, it involves persons in relationship. [story about John at soccer – ‘make it personal!'] That object cannot be humankind for we were made and are made ‘in the image of God’ and no matter how distorted that image **we** are still not sin. Nor is that object God and neither, interestingly enough, is it Satan for even he was made to serve God and to glorify Him. So what is the **object of sin?** I want to suggest this morning that sin’s object is evil defined as anything and everything opposed to the fullest display of the glory of God and sin is that which serves this evil in any way. It is at once a state and an action, a thought and a deed, a desire and a fulfilment of desire – –and yet, none of these are, in and of themselves – sin! What makes them such is what they serve and if they serve the diminution of God’s Glory they are sin. Sin is that which is ‘**anti-God.**’

Now I realise that this may not be very satisfying because it doesn’t tie sin down to this or that attitude or to this or that act. It’s not a particularly concrete definition of sin. Herein, however, lies the problem. Sin, because it finds its existence in the defying of God can be many things including some very good things. We can all recognise sin in murder or rape or theft. But one of the most significant sins of the Old Testament was idolatry – worshipping the created rather than the Creator. Of course none of us would imagine that we could be idolators since we don’t usually have idols lying around the house. But idols can take almost any form. Some men idolize women and a very few women do the same with men! Men can idolize anything from cars to chainsaws; women anything from a dress to a kitchen. We can worship at the altar of our career, our family, our sports team or even, God forbid, our minister! And in this very materialistic age we find it so easy to make an idol out of things which are nothing more than possessions. And the hardest thing to comprehend about all this is that these things are not bad in themselves.

A son or a daughter, a father or a mother, a wife or a husband – these are good gifts from God. But they become a trap and snare for us if we slip from love to worship of them. The same is true of the various other things I’ve mentioned. All can be made idols if and when they begin to compete for the loyalty and attention we owe God. And no matter how lovely we look on the outside, if God is not on the inside, sin begins to make a mess...

²⁷“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. ²⁸So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matt 23)

We are all sinners. That is perhaps one of the primary statements of the Bible though it is not the final statement. The final statement may be best summed up in those amazing words of Jesus as He hung

on a Cross dying both because of sin and in order to defeat sin... **'Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do...'** You and I may, if we want, be included in that forgiveness. We can, if we want, join those who do not want sin to be the final word but in this life, even though we walk with Christ, we cannot be free of the tide sin creates in human affairs. It is a tide away from God and towards oblivion, towards darkness. The very best we can do is hold the hand of the one who forever stands against that tide and provides shelter for those who know they need it.

What is sin? Nancy Ortberg, wife of John Ortberg and writer and preacher in her own right writes that sin is like motherhood...

"A transformation occurred in me with the birth of my children. I traded in that professional look for sweatpants. I found myself at the park with my children, looking at working women and thinking, *I'd like to be doing that.*

But the transformation went deeper than trading my business suit for a pair of sweatpants. There was something else going on when I had children. I knew my life had been invaded by God in a way in which I would never be the same. With the birth of each of my children, there emerged from within me this person I had never met, a person whom I liked very much—this loving, caring, nurturing woman. And I watched her, amazed.

There was another transformation that occurred. Another person emerged who was not as attractive, who was frazzled and angry and impatient. And I was in amazement as I watched her. It was a sort of Jekyll and Hyde split—a creature that came out of me who was wonderful, and a creature that I didn't know.

In Robert Louis Stevenson's book, *Jekyll and Hyde*, he starts his story with a quote: "I stood already committed to the profound duplicity of life, that humankind is not truly one but two. And that these polar twins should be continuously struggling. One of these polar twins, who was the Mr. Hyde character, bore the stamp of the lower elements in my soul."

I found that there was a polarity in motherhood. In the transformation a struggle emerged."

In her book *Ourselves as Mothers*, Sheila Kissinger, a social anthropologist, writes:

"Becoming a mother is a biological process, but it is also a social transformation, and one of the most dramatic that a woman may experience. The home is supposed to be a haven of love and good feelings. Thus it comes as a great disappointment to many women when it proves not to be so for them. For home is also a place where the ugliest and most destructive emotions are experienced, where there is disturbing interpersonal conflict, and inside four walls these raw feelings are concentrated and mixed together as if in a pressure cooker. She hates what she has become. Happy as a woman may be to have a baby, and although she may enjoy being a mother, she must now pay the price of motherhood: the total and virtual annihilation of self."

Lest you think you are alone in this struggle, the apostle Paul describes this internal struggle of the good and the evil in us:

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good."