

# Sinful

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*Richard Dawson*

*Sunday 11 October*

Romans 1:16-26

Romans 8:18-25

Luke 17:1-4

Psalm 14:1-3

I realise that sin is not a great topic of conversation or even particularly nice to preach about but you heard this morning's reading from the very first chapter of Romans and so you know that this passage exists and in fact sets the tone for the whole book so it's important that we address it. Most of us, I think, have a certain impression of sin. We certainly have an idea of what constitutes 'sins.' But sin in itself is not something we like to devote a lot of thought to. I mean who wants to dwell on something that's so wrong and especially if we might be implicated in it!? And the last thing we want to become either as a congregation or as people is one of those who down through history have become 'experts in sin.' You know the sort of people I mean. People who can spot a sin from 100 paces and that without glasses or perhaps even knowing the circumstances. Doesn't matter – they say – that's a sin!

The Church down through the ages has suffered much at the hands of people with such expertise and I don't intend to recommend this kind of action in any of us. Oscar Wilde once said this which I believe to be a very wise thing.

***Every saint has a past and  
every sinner has a future.***

*Oscar Wilde*

Paul helped us a few weeks ago work through the implications of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection and how that helped us deal with sin. I want us to go back to the first chapter in Romans and just work through this rather scary passage because I believe the Apostle Paul had an express and legitimate purpose for writing this and it wasn't to turn us into one of the 'sin experts.' Rather it was to help us view sin correctly – as the malignant cancer within all Creation which is ruining and has ruined the whole thing starting with us.

Really Richard? Is it really that serious. Well yes! Certainly according to the Apostle Paul – it is incredibly serious. But why? Why is sin so serious? Let's find out from Paul.

But where do you start with sin? Clearly Paul wants to start with the bad news and in many ways this is such an important place to be because the bad news about sin is a bit like going down into the bowels of a building and looking at the foundations. It doesn't really matter what the rest of the building looks like, if the foundations are not stable you can't rely on the rest of the building.

In Romans the word sin and its cognates appear 48 times. Paul is clearly greatly concerned to gain some clarity around this concept and so he writes about it in great detail outlining a very comprehensive theology of sin which theologians still debate today and with some justification I might add. After all the Bible from the word go postulates sin as the great root of all of our problems and, indeed, of all Creation's problem. Yes, our sin seems somehow to have diseased the whole of Creation and until we are sorted Creation, as Paul says, **'waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;'**

So what's the deal with sin? The Church down through the ages appears to have made two equal but opposite mistakes with 'sin.' The first is to make sin the centre of gravity for all that we are both as individuals and as a Church. So we become so over-concerned about sin that our whole identity becomes wrapped up in the very thing we're wanting to avoid. Perhaps the poster boys in this regard were the puritans – the Christian group who first colonised America. From them we get the word puritanical so you can guess how they viewed faith. But we can all become sin experts especially when it concerns the actions of others.

The second is this, to justify ourselves out of the sin problem. In other words to deal with sin on a basis other than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now if we recall our reading this morning you could be forgiven for thinking Paul was in the first camp indeed in the history of the Church this passage has perhaps inspired a rather gloomy outlook on both faith and life. However a reading of the whole book of Romans will disabuse us of that idea. Why then does Paul write so luridly about sin? Well he does so because Paul has a problem and the problem is this... Both the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome – though they came from very different world views had developed a cunning method of self-justification and so both were tending not to take the sin problem seriously.

His Jewish readers who'd found faith in Christ had minds and hearts shaped by their Jewish upbringing and culture and they found it hard to let go of the notion that the Law was the way to deal with sin and that one was able basically to be good and therefore to be righteous before God. Add to that the fact that they were from the Chosen

people of God and you have a self-righteousness which is just very hard to move.

On the other hand he was dealing with Gentile believers whose upbringing reflected a Roman culture which while it believed in evil and in bad things was incredibly immoral largely because it tended to blame fate or bad luck for the evil it saw. So sin as such becomes not so much a personal problem as an issue of fate, birth or the mysterious will of the gods. Either way **the depth** of the problem of sin is not understood.

I, frankly, have the same problem. I remember when I was going out with Fran and she'd returned from her teacher training in Chch to begin teaching at Otago girls. In her second year she flatted near the school and so I would occasionally visit her in the flat. I remember one night my parents were out and I really wanted to visit Fran. Fran was having to work pretty hard that year and my company wasn't always welcome but I wanted to see her and I was sure she wouldn't mind.

Unfortunately my car was in bits and the only car available was my mother's. Now she was out so I couldn't actually ask her for the use of the car. It was a brand new car and she was pretty protective of it. In fact I don't know that I'd ever driven it before but I wanted to see Fran and I was sure she wouldn't mind. I drove over to Fran's and I noticed the petrol was low and I realised I should probably put some petrol in the car but I had no money and mum and dad were reasonably well off and I wanted to see Fran so I was pretty sure she wouldn't mind.

When I got to Fran's flat she was tired and I was tired and we talked for quite a while even though she had a lot of work to do and would need to do that once I left but I wanted to talk to Fran and I was sure she

wouldn't mind. Finally I left. I got into mum's car which was angle parked and I briefly looked back because the cars on the other side of the road were also angle parked but they were a reasonably long way off so I didn't mind them so much. And so I accelerated out of the car park because I was concerned to get the car home before mum got home even though I thought she wouldn't mind me having it. The car was a bit more responsive than I was used to and leapt backwards hitting a car parked on the other side. I jumped out and discovered that this car was a huge American car which poked out at least a metre further than all the other cars in the street. I was mortified because it had hit mum's car right in the middle of the boot which was now completely caved in and as I looked at it I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that **mum would mind!**

And mum did mind very much let me tell you. And as I reflected on that incident afterwards I realised that at many points throughout the night I could've acted very differently at so many places in that story but I intentionally made each decision point into something smaller so that I could view it as insignificant. And so often that's how we view sin. We make it something small – I mean, it was only an apple God! I mean can you make another one? How can God get so upset about an apple?

Of course it's not about the apple is it? It's about relationship. It's about trust. If I've been asked to do something I need to take that seriously. I didn't have my mother's permission to use the car and I assumed something I shouldn't have. Fran didn't need me to come over and didn't need another late night. I did need to honour my parents with some attempt to cover petrol costs and if I couldn't do that I shouldn't have taken the car.

For me this illustrates one of the features of sin that is so hard to come to terms with and that is what might be called the **pervasiveness** of it. The fact that it is everywhere and while we don't like to think of life in these terms this is very much how Paul will go on to describe it later in Romans. Remember this in Romans 7.

**<sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (Roms 7)**

Until we come to terms with this notion we will always struggle to see just how disastrous sin really is. Paul does not want that for his Roman congregation. So he is at pains to steer another path with this notion of sin but to do so he must emphasise both the depth of its hold on every human being and the breadth of its influence throughout all Creation. And this is the second major theme in this passage. Sin has touched not just the human species but, indeed, all species and all of Creation. That is, **our sin**.

Have we ever considered the ubiquitousness of sin? Have we ever considered just how much our sin affects others? I think this is another excuse we give ourselves. I'm only hurting myself. It's about my private life and therefore it's OK. Two things must always give us cause to hesitate whenever this crosses our mind. The first is we can never possibly know the downstream effect of what we're doing. We used to think dumping our sewage into the endless oceans was OK. We now know it was disastrous. We used to think that our smoking affected only ourselves. We now know that as many people probably die from passive smoking as active smoking. We used to think that drive our little old car didn't make a hoot of difference to the world. We now know that burning petrol and other carbon based sources of energy has changed the whole world's climate.

The second is whether indeed private sin is OK in the first place. Possibly your sin may affect no one but does that in any way make it OK? What if our sin only influences us and our relationship with God? What if then we fail to become the person God intended we should be? What if then some vital task is not achieved because we 'privately sinned' and because of this many people didn't get what we could have offered? And soon we're back to the very same objection we made in the first place. We have no idea who our sin will effect. We cannot predict the outcome.

You know the very worst aspect of sin for me is the fact that I'm never quite sure where the line is and that I really really like to know where the line is. I like to know my boundaries so that I can fly as close to the ground as possible

So what's your reaction to the notion of sin? How do you cope with the idea that you're a sinner? Frankly I suspect you may be much like me. I have one trick when it comes to sin and this only works if I'm not caught red handed as it were. Let me illustrate...

A few years ago I had another experience with a car, this time of traveling together with Fran into the city. We were, as usual, slightly late and so I was somewhat anxious to make progress but I want to you know that I wasn't speeding... much. Perhaps just a tiny bit – nothing to get worried about – perhaps just a few kilometres per hour over the recommended limit.

Anyway, we made reasonable progress and I could finally see our goal in sight when all of a sudden in the rear view mirror those harbingers of doom shone forth – the dreaded blue and red flashing lights. Now I don't know what you think when you see those lights but I always think

‘O goody, those kind people who care about our roads and who are so helpful in getting people to drive safely!’ (Not!) No my thoughts went something like this... ‘Stuff it! I was only doing maybe 8ks over the limit. Can’t you be a little human!? Can’t you see that we’re actually doing the Lord’s work here!? Why me God?!

My mood became more depressed the closer the lights came and they came right up behind me. In anticipation I put my left blinker on and waited for there to be a proper space into which I could legally park. Just as a parking space appeared the nice man in the police car suddenly moved out beside me giving me a terrible fright. I mean – couldn’t he see I was being a very good driver and waiting for a legal space to become available. Then he had the temerity to put his siren on. And isn’t the one thing worse than being pulled over by a police car – being pulled over by a police with its siren on!! And then, suddenly, he took off and high speed and shot way down the road and I was left very carefully moving with great skill into an empty parking space which was, as I’ve said, very legal!

And what was my reaction? I had one thought and one thought only... **‘It’s not me!!’** It’s someone else who’s in trouble. I’m OK! I’m a good person again. **I’m a very good driver! I’m righteous!!!**

You know I should have been pulled over that night. It was me and I’d have had no one else to blame. And this is precisely what Paul is trying to combat in this first part of Romans – it’s the ‘Not me’ syndrome when it comes to sin.

Is that our first port of call. Are we realistic about our sinfulness? Are we open to hear the Spirit of God convict us or are we constantly looking to say to God ‘Not me God’

The truth is it is me and this is precisely what Paul was trying to help the Roman congregation come to terms with. The horror of sin and its pervasiveness. But let me finish with this.

Despite the fact that the centre of our belief does not revolve around sin but around faith and grace we must learn to take sin and the fact that we are sinners seriously.