

“WHAT ARE WE TO DO ABOUT SIN?”

Sinning Like a Christian Series #1

Psalm 5, Luke 13:1-5, Galatians 5:16-26

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William Willimon starts his book, *Sinning Like a Christian* (Abingdon Press, 2005), with these two paragraphs: “Once there was One who came to us, who touched the untouchables, turned His back upon the world’s bright baubles, loved even unto death, and never turned His eyes away from God. And we hated Him for it. He came to us with wide-open hands in gracious invitation, seeking us, both patient with us and hotly pursuing us. And thereby He brought out the worst in us.

“We figured that things between us and God were not all that bad, but when He spoke to us of God, and ourselves, and rubbed our noses in the filthy rags of our presumed righteousness, well, we thought we were good until we met Him. He called upon us to attempt great moral feats, then watched as we fell flat on our faces. He invited us to join up with His Kingdom, then set that Kingdom’s demands so high that when it came time for us to stand up and show what we were made of, we fled, slithering into the darkness. He said, ‘Come to Me. Take on My yoke.’ And we with one voice cried, ‘Crucify Him!’”¹

That pretty well describes the situation of Jesus Christ coming to the world to help us to understand our desperate need for Salvation through Him. **We don’t like to be confronted with the error of our ways! We don’t like to face our true condition.** None of us likes to see ourselves as we really are, and to have someone lay bare all of the garbage in our lives, well, that’s just unbearable! So we begin to ask, “Why can’t God just accept me as I am? When will He get off my back and let me be? Why can’t we all just go to heaven without having to jump through so many spiritual hoops?”

You see, Satan has convinced us that we’re all right by ourselves, that we really don’t need God to live a productive life here on the earth. He’s even gone so far as to convince us that there is no such thing as a Devil, and therefore there is no such thing as sin or hell. Sin is too oppressive, too much of a downer for us to take seriously, so why bother with it? Just live it up!

¹ (William Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, [Nashville: Abingdon, 2005] pg. 7)

Well, so many churches in our country decide to focus on the nurturing love of Jesus, rather than on the tough love of Jesus. The people want to be entertained by the worship service to the point that they feel warm and fuzzy all over when they leave the doors of the church. Thereby they neglect any real relationship with Jesus, and so reject the Salvation that He offers us. With so little being taught about sin, Satan doesn't have to work very hard to convince us that sin really isn't that big of a deal. And we see all kinds of horrendous results happening as we give into the lie that there is no need for any discussion about sin. Rather, we talk about Jesus being all about inclusiveness, self-affirmation, and open-minded, heart-happy acceptance, rather than addressing the real truth about who we are as humans. Well, if that's all that is true about Jesus, if that's all that's needed to gain eternity, then why did Jesus get nailed to the cross? Because He told it like it really was, and people didn't like to hear it. So instead of coming to understand the need for us to change, we decided to wipe out the One who was confronting us with our truth. We eliminate any conversation or understanding of sin, and we wonder why everything has turned up-side-down.

But the truth is that **“Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like”** (Anton Chekov, *Notebooks*). We like to think of ourselves as descent, caring, loving people, but in reality, we are selfish, uncaring, loathing, angry, vengeful and oftentimes cruel people. It is astounding what people have done (and are doing) to one another, often in the name of God. So once we are convinced that there is no sin, that we don't need improvement, and that there is no devil, then we open ourselves up to do the most egregious things to one another, much to Satan's delight. And we run over the words of Psalm 5:4-6 describing God as if to flatten their meaning, *“You are not a God who is pleased with wrongdoing; You allow no evil in Your presence. You cannot stand the sight of proud men; You hate all wicked people. You destroy all liars and despise violent, deceitful men.”*

Sadly, the church has rejected this mindset, to the point that the church has become almost irrelevant in our society today. Think about this; when asked why he did not attend church any more, a recovering alcoholic said, “...after you have been to AA, and taken the cure, and had to stare your

demons in the face, and had to stand up naked in front of twenty other drunks and tell every bad thing you have done or thought, and had to ask God and them to forgive you for being you, well, church just seems like such a trivial waste of time.”²

That’s a pretty telling, but sad, truth about the church today. **If we are not addressing the sinfulness in the lives of people, what are we really here for?** Any social club, or civic organization can pump up its members with positive encouragement to try to make a difference in the lives of those people. But as encouraging as these groups might be, what good are they really doing for humanity? We still treat each other with disrespect, say unconscionable things about each other, and fail miserably to make a positive difference in the lives of others around us. We are all surrounded by sin that pervades our lives and separates us from our perfect and holy God.

The Church, then, is the place where we are to really look at ourselves, to see the terrible condition that we are in as humans, and then by God’s grace, start doing something about it. But unless we begin to address the issues of sin, if we “pooh-pooh” it as just something that naturally happens to us and through us, then we will never have any hope for salvation because we will have jettisoned everything that Jesus came here to the earth to do to make us right with God again. Jesus tells us plainly in Luke 13:4-5 that we are all in a similar situation, and that we all need to be careful. He says, *“Do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all others...No, indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did.”* Jesus didn’t come here to be a cheerleader for us to do better on our own. That doesn’t work. Even the best person struggles with sin in their life, and Jesus is the only way to resolve the problem.

But you have to remember this; “Church is about more than sin, but, by the grace of God, it ought not to be less than this...**For Christians, sin is not so much inherent in the human condition, though it is that; rather, sin is the problem we have between us and God.** It is rebellion against our true Sovereign, an offense against the way the Creator has created us to be. The Gospel account that we

² (Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, pg. 9)

are forgiven-being-redeemed sinners, is the means whereby we are able to be honest about the reality, complexity, and perversity of our sin.”³ But unless we actually face our sinfulness, we only deceive ourselves into thinking that we can live life here well enough to gain heaven all by ourselves.

Now, the understanding that the world has about sin is quite different than how Christians view sin. **The world sees sin as “missing the mark” or not quite living up to human potential**, or faltering and making mistakes, or being a round or two off of the bullseye. The world sees sin as a universal condition that everyone is a part of that keeps us from living the way we should live.

But **“Christian sin is derived of and dependent upon what Christians know about God as revealed in Jesus Christ.”**⁴ The Apostle Paul states it correctly, *“God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all: everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence. But by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with Him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered Him, so that by His sacrificial death He should become the means by which peoples sins are forgiven through their faith in Him”* (Romans 3:22-25).

So we can really only talk about sin from the standpoint of acknowledging redemption through Jesus Christ. Our conversation about sin has to start with Christ Jesus, who has come to seek and save the lost (those separated from God by sin – Luke 19:10). **The understanding of sin from a Christian perspective always has to be in relationship with Jesus**, since He is the One who has made it all possible for us to become free from the penalty of sin. To not have Jesus in the middle of our talking about sin is dangerous in that we become too fascinated with evil and to put too much emphasis on its commonness here in the world. When we start comparing our sinfulness between us and other human beings, we tend to rank those with little sin in their life as best, and those with lots of sin in their life as worst. But in reality, we are all sinners, separated from God Almighty because of our sin, great or small. And that was Jesus’ point at exposing all our sins as being contemptable to God. All it took was for

³ (Willimon, Ibid)

⁴ (Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, pg. 10)

Adam and Eve to sin once, and they were cast out of God's presence in the Garden of Eden. So what do our sins bring between us and God? It's the same punishment – death caused by separation from God.

Jesus is the solution to our problem with sin, so we have to keep Him in the middle of our consideration of sin. If we fail to look at the consequence of sin without Jesus, we then lose the significance of His sacrifice to free us from sins penalty - eternal death - and we tend to believe that we can deal with sin all on our own. It is important for us to continually evaluate ourselves to make sure that we have no sin in us, and that only happens when Jesus becomes our Savior.

In the history of the Church, seven deadly sins were identified as being the root of all of the actions we see taking place in our world. These are seven categories of emotions that seem to drive us toward sin. In themselves, they don't seem to be so deadly, but they are the emotions that get us thinking about doing something toward another person, and those thoughts are the driving forces behind our actions. These seven have been a way of naming the nature of sin from the Christian perspective for the last fifteen hundred years. They are pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lechery.

These seven deadly sins affect us every day, and just as Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, so when we try to separate ourselves from the rest of the world, we seem to be attacked all the more, being alone and yet striving to live in communion with God. All those who strive to keep the world from affecting them find that these Seven are alive and well within us.

It doesn't take us too long to see these seven deadly sins alive and well in our society today. Spend 15 minutes watching the TV and every one of them will boldly present themselves as attractive, even enjoyable, to those who are watching. But they don't look to be so deadly and dangerous until you begin to see the end results. While sloth, greed, gluttony, anger, lust, envy and pride don't seem to be blatantly egregious to us, their prevalence in our world today shows up diabolically in what we could consider more deadly sins that don't make the list, such as political tyranny, ethnic hatred, religious persecution, racial violence, adultery, drunkenness, murder or even smoking.

In fact our world today seems to lift up the Seven Deadly Sins as so common as to make them comical as we consider their seriousness. The media deals with these Seven with great humor, with sarcasm, and urbane wittiness in an effort to minimize their influence upon us and to make anyone who considers them anything else as overtly faultfinding.

However, what makes them so deadly is their ability to generate many more flagrant and outrageous offspring. They seem to be the instigators that perpetuate the contemptible and loathsome behaviors in so many people today, each one developing devoted followers among them that perpetuate even more unashamed sin. Each one twists our humanity away from the original design that God creates in us, to the point that we are not fit to even stand before God. While these Seven look fairly harmless in the lives of adolescents, they become quite repulsive and ugly when they continue in the lives of those who are middle aged. **If left uncontrolled, these Seven Deadly Sins take the individual on a fatal path away from the presence of God.**

Listen to how the Apostle Paul lays out the difference between the end result of the influence of these Seven Deadly Sins on us, and God's design for humanity. Paul contrasts the ways of human nature with the ways of the Holy Spirit. See if you can identify each of the Seven Deadly Sins, and then take note of the ways that God desires for us. This is Galatians 5:16-26. (READ Galatians 5:16-26)

The danger of these Seven Deadly Sins “is that they can all be so seductively attractive,” as Will Willimon describes it. He says, “When gluttony dresses up and indulges in a six-course meal in a nice restaurant, and the cost of the meal is considered as much as the quantity consumed, then it is a fit subject for praise on the Food Channel, rather than condemnation in a sermon. Many call my much-lamented ‘pride’ merely healthy-minded ‘self-esteem.’ There is a fine line between that Sabbath rest that is the grace of doing nothing, the sort of languor of youth that characterizes the masses in the Duke [University] Gardens on a Saturday afternoon, and the slothful inability to get out of bed and worship God on a Sunday morning. Anger can be red-blooded, prophetic, righteous indignation against injustice or white-hot prelude to violence. We thank God that Martin Luther King [Jr.] had the moral sensitivity

to get mad at racial injustice. **The line between virtue and vice is subtle and its subtlety is an aspect of its deadliness.**⁵

And that leads us to think that the Seven Deadly Sins are only virtues that have gone to excess. We think, if only we could keep the virtues under control so that they do not turn into vices, we might have a better society. However, **moderation is not what controls these sins.** Imagine Jesus teaching His disciples, “A little lust, in the service of the noble pursuit of love, can be a good thing?” Not on your life! Jesus teaches that if ANY “lust of the eye” is found in the life of a person, only radical surgery can bring about a cure for it. He says, *“I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Now if your right eye is causing you to sin, tear it out and throw it away from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell”* (Matthew 5:28-29).

Jesus equates the thinking about these sins as the equal to actually doing them. If we harbor anger in our minds, it will eventually explode into bitter and uncontrollable rage. So even thinking angrily about your neighbor, or spouse, or child, is as much as actually railing out at them (which it usually ends up happening, anyway). So Jesus warns us about controlling our minds, and that will lead us to a more peaceful and healthy life. Get rid of anger and you will get rid of strife.

The particularly difficult thing to consider about the Seven Deadly Sins, however, is that they are not often found to be acting in isolation. **The Seven usually combine with one another driving the person to even greater tragedy.** Any person that is actively practicing greed is typically a whole-hearted practitioner of lust and gluttony as well. Envy tends to feed anger, and pride supports sloth. They each work together in very treacherous ways to impact the degradation of the one practicing them.

So “here we come closer to an understanding of what makes sin, sin for Christians. **For those of us who are trying to take Jesus seriously, sin is not a foible, a slipup; it is offense against and rebellion against our Creator.** Sin is that which separates us from a holy and righteous God. Jesus

⁵ (William Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, pg. 25)

makes the rather astounding claim that, when it comes to sin, it's the thought that counts. Sin not only hurts the neighbor who is sinned against but also reflexively bites the sinner too. Sin carries within itself its own punishment. It erodes the soul. It severs an intended relationship between Creator and creature. These sins are called sins because of the nature of God in Jesus Christ, not from some view of human nature."⁶

Sinfulness is so ingrained within us that there is no way that we can think our way out of it. There is no way that we can clench our fists and strap up our boots and determine that we are going to overcome it on our own. **We cannot overcome sin by our own willpower or our own resources.** But we can overcome sin as we seek the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. As we humble ourselves before Him, as we admit our failures and seek the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus, we are made brand new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), and we are able to begin again, following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

So over the next several weeks, I will be leading us through the discovery of these Seven Deadly Sins in our lives, explaining their dangers and offering ways that we can reject them through our Lord Jesus Christ. It will be a chance for us to identify each one in us, AND the opportunity for us to confess them, and find freedom from them. Let's pray...

Father God, You created us to be pure and holy in Your presence. Yet we choose instead to follow our own ways and ignore Your call to be pure and holy like You. Give us the eyes to see ourselves as we really are, in need of a heart transplant from You. Give us the courage to face those sins in our lives and to boldly seek Your forgiveness. We can't fix ourselves, and to follow the ways of the world is suicide. We need Your great love in Jesus Christ to wash us clean. He poured out His own blood so that we might be transformed from sinners to saints. He gave up His own life in payment for all of our sins so that we might be able to become free from the shackles of sin and death, and find life in You. Help us not to be weak in facing our sinfulness, but to open up our lives to Your scrutiny so that You can make us whole again. Create in us a new heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within us. This we pray in Jesus' Name. AMEN.

⁶ (Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, pg. 28)