**What is Sin?**

**Text: Romans 7:15, 18**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**July 16, 2017**

So I’m driving down the street in Hamilton, Ontario – and please forgive me if I’ve told you this story – I’m driving down the street and it’s a nice day so I have the windows down and I see this rough looking guy walking toward me. He’s talking to himself and waving his arms and I’m thinking, “Boy, they have a problem with homelessness and mental health in this town too.” As I drive past him I hear him say, “You’re going the wrong way!” I was driving the wrong way on a one way street.

We humans tend to think, “I’ve got *my* act together, but everyone else is messed-up.” That’s a form of sin. It’s called the sin of pride, one of the 7 deadly sins, and the one that Paul was especially prone to; both before and after his encounter with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road, but especially *before* that life changing encounter.

What is sin? It’s pride and so much more than pride. What is sin? That’s the question that we’re asking today as the first part of a 3 part sermon series on the Christian Life: What Is Sin?, What is Salvation?, and What Is Hope? We’re going to be looking at Paul’s letter to the Romans especially as we engage these themes because I know of no other piece of literature that more skillfully and profoundly addresses the issues of who we are, where we’re headed, and how we’re going to get there.

Who are we? We’re sinners. As individuals and as members of the whole human family, we’re trapped in sin. Even Paul – whose life has already been transformed by the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – even Paul confesses to still being in some sense a slave to sin. He says, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate…I can will what is right, but I cannot do it” (Romans 7:15, 18).

“I am…sold into slavery under sin,” he says. I – Paul – *present* tense. Of course, he doesn’t mean *just* himself, he means the whole human race. And he addresses a problem that afflicts even the saints. Because, you see, we’re *all* sinners. Paul says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). He says, “There is no one who is righteous, not even *one*” (Romans 3:10).

But what does Paul mean by this? What is this sin that afflicts each and every member of the human race? Sin is the human tendency to turn away from God. It’s the tendency to push God away and focus on ourselves instead. It’s the tendency to focus on *my* needs, *my* virtue, *my* feelings, *my* desires. Sin imagines that life is all about *me*.

And when we focus on ourselves, we separate ourselves from God. Which is why theologian Paul Tillich defines the human condition as being estrangement from God, separation from God, moving away from the grace of God, the joy of God, the abundance of God; and feeling like, “I’m on my own.”

Life gets awfully lonely when you feel like you’re on your own. Life is incredibly scary when you think that you have only your own resources to rely upon when faced with the challenges of human existence. Life feels very empty when we’re not being filled by the joy and the abundance of God’s grace.

So we start to fill that void with stuff. We use money and material possessions to try to fulfill our lives and thus we commit the sin of greed. Or we’re afraid in the face of all the problems that we see and in our desire to overcome that fear we jump to a conclusion: we think, “I alone can fix the mess around me, only I have the virtue and the skill and the wisdom to fix it;” and so we commit the sin of pride. Or we get lonely and we desire human contact and we’re tempted to seek that contact in inappropriate ways, and so we commit the sin of lust. Or we just give-up in the face of the complexities of life, and we fall into despair and get depressed and lethargic, and so we commit the sin of sloth.

Greed, pride, lust and sloth, along with envy, anger and gluttony: these are the 7 deadly sins. They’re all consequences of that primary sin of turning toward ourselves and separating ourselves from God. And when we try to overcome the pain of that separation, we commit specific sins of greed and lust and envy and anger and just make it worse; we make ourselves even *more s*eparated from God. It’s a vicious cycle, an endless cycle, a deadly cycle: from which only God can save us.

Pastor Paul heard a call to start a new church. So he got set-up with his denomination’s *New Church Initiative* and started to plant a congregation in a growing suburb. He was a gifted pastor with a good heart and he’d served well in his previous churches, but starting a new church can be a lonely and scary proposition. Well, the new church started to grow. And folks started to praise Pastor Paul for the good work that he was doing. And he started to feel pretty good about himself. He started to fancy himself as an outstanding preacher. He began to carry himself in a very self-confident way. Of course, the suburb in which the church had been planted was growing rapidly and the church members were inviting their new neighbors to church and that greatly facilitated the growth of the congregation, but in Pastor Paul’s mind the growth was alldue to *his* good leadership, to *his* exceptional pastoral skills. He began to covet guest preaching gigs. He bought himself a big, luxury, SUV. And he began to imagine that a gifted pastor such as he deserved a bigger salary than the young congregation was able to provide; so he found creative ways to transfer church funds into his own account. As he started to make quite a name for himself as one of the denomination’s outstanding young pastors and preachers, it all came crashing down on him. Pastor Paul lost his church, his reputation, everything.

That’s one example of how sin operates. In our fear and our loneliness we turn inward, we think it’s all about me. It can happen to even the saints and the near saints among us.

Of course, it’s not just these dramatic examples. *All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And if, like me, you found yourself feeling a little self-righteous and judgmental as you heard the details of Pastor Paul’s story, than we all need to remember Jesus’ advice in Matthew 7:5 to attend to the log in our own eye before we get concerned about the speck or the log or even the entire tree that might be in the eye of someone else. Reinhold Niebuhr said, “It’s easy to repent for someone else’s sin.” But what are the sins for which we ourselves must repent?

Sin is turning away from God. It is going the wrong way. It is missing the mark. And we do this in a multitude of ways.

Sin is thinking that I’m okay, but everyone else is a jerk.

Sin is thinking that everyone else is okay, but I’m a jerk.

Sin is coveting your neighbor’s gifts, and not celebrating your own.

Sin is reveling in your own gifts, and downgrading those who are differently gifted.

Sin is indulging in your own pain, and nurturing your anger.

Sin is the failure to accept responsibility for your own sinful actions.

Sin is abusing your body with alcohol and drugs.

Sin is an economic system that drives people toward such abuse.

Sin is a billionaire looking for another billion when people are suffering from unemployment and lack of health care.

Sin is building a wall to keep others out, when scripture tells us to *welcome* the stranger.

Sin is cutting taxes over and over and over again, and then wondering why public schools are failing and infrastructure is crumbling.

So let’s be clear that sin is not simply about *individual* acts of commission or omission. The most deadly sins are committed when greed and pride and anger become imbedded in corporations and nations who use their collective power to oppress others: by paying starvation wages, and crushing dissent and waging war upon innocent victims. Which is why someone – perhaps Gandhi – noted the 7 deadly *social* sins, which include: wealth without work, commerce without morality, politics without principle and rights without responsibility.

The whole world is enslaved by sin. And we can’t help ourselves. On some level, we all know that these things are wrong. Even when we ourselves are benefitting from this mess – perhaps *especially* when we’re benefitting from it – we sometimes sit back and reflect on our lives and realize how often we hurt others, how often we benefit at the expense of others, or how often we indulge ourselves in the luxury of self-pity. In moments of honesty we can say, “Oh my goodness, this is wrong; I need to make some changes here.” But then we get caught in all of the fear and desires of our daily lives and we’re back at it. Or we get caught in the unjust social structures from which we are benefiting and we lose our passion to change the world. Again, St. Paul: “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it…Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” And then he answers his own question: “Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

You see, the more we try to save ourselves, the more ensnared we become in the shackles of sin. The one who seeks to save himself or his nation through energetic, virtuous acts becomes ever more proud of his own virtue. The one who seeks to escape pride and greed through humbling herself to a life of poverty becomes self-righteous in her own humility. The one who seeks to escape poverty through hard work may well succeed in escaping poverty, only to be trapped in the desire for more and more wealth. The nation that has virtue imbedded in its laws imagines that it can bring that virtue to others through military might and just makes a mess of things, like the British Empire in Africa, or the U.S. in Vietnam and Iraq.

Now don’t get me wrong: hard work is a virtue; striving for lofty goals is important. But the power that we exert to better ourselves and our world must draw upon a *Higher* Power. The strength to save ourselves and our world must flow from the One who has already acted to save the whole inhabited earth. That One, of course, is the God who has created us all; and the power to save has been bestowed upon us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is Jesus Christ who has overcome the sinful separation between God and humanity. It is Jesus Christ who comes from where God is and meets us where we are. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,” Paul tells the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:19). Jesus loves us and embraces us, just as we are and wherever we are, and carries us back to where he came from; carries us back to the bosom of God the Creator. We try to separate ourselves from God, but ultimately nothing in all Creation can separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The amazing thing is this: all we have to do is to relax into that love, letting go of all of our fear and anxiety and emptiness. All we have to do is relax and be upheld by the everlasting arms of God’s grace. All *you* have to do is relax and accept the fact that you are accepted, just the way you are.

Will Campbell was an amazing teacher, preacher and writer. In his autobiography, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, he tells the story of an argument with his alcoholic brother, who wants nothing to do with this Christian faith to which Will the preacher has dedicated his life. The brother says something like, “Okay, Will, tell me what the Gospel is all about, in 10 words.”

And Will Campbell says, “We’re all bastards; God loves us anyway.”

God loves you, God loves me, God loves the whole inhabited earth; and there’s nothing that we can do about it.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found.

Was blind but now I see.

Thanks be to God.