

Confession, Repentance, and True Change Part 1

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[0 : 01] Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen. Lately, I've been trying to learn a little bit more about church history, and specifically the history of the church as it relates to issues of racial justice in the West and in particular in our country.

And right now, our parish council is actually reading through the book *The Color of Compromise* by Jamar Tisby, which is all about that topic. And it's hard. It's hard in general. It's hard for me in particular because I love the church.

But it's hard going because it requires facing up to the reality that the church has gotten it wrong in history. And there are times when the church has been complicit, and that's a painful thing to have to wrestle with.

But as I've been doing this, I've also come to the conviction that our society has no hope of healing and actually being able to move past this racial trauma apart from the church.

I actually believe that the church is the key and that the church offers what we most need to be able to move forward together in our country. And that's because even though the church hasn't always gotten it right, and even though there are plenty of times where the church has gotten it wrong, the church has at its core the capacity for self-correction.

[1 : 28] And that's because the church has at its core, and Christians have at our core, the ongoing daily practice of confession and repentance. And I don't think we have any hope of moving forward as a society unless confession and repentance, as Christians understand it, unless those practices are at the very heart of our progress.

And I think this is such an important topic that we're going to spend the next two weeks talking about it, and we're going to do that by looking at Psalm 32. And so we're only going to get through part one today, and then in a week we will do part two, looking at confession and repentance and true change as we see them in Psalm 32.

So this morning we're going to look at the reality of sin, as we see it in this Psalm, and then we're going to look at two possible responses to sin. So the reality of sin, and then two ways of responding to sin.

Let's pray and then we'll get started. Lord, we thank you and praise you. As we lit this candle together this morning, it reminds us that your Spirit is with us.

And we know that your Spirit has the ability to use your Word and to bring it alive, and to enable you to speak to us through it, to tell us what we most need to hear.

[2 : 52] And so we pray, Lord, that we would hear your voice this morning, and that we would have the open-hearted humility to respond to your Word with faith and action.

And we pray this for our betterment, Lord, so that we would become more like your Son, Jesus. And we pray this for your glory. And we say all of this in your Son's name. Amen.

So first of all, we want to look at the reality of sin. Now, when I say the word sin, I realize that's a pretty archaic-sounding term. If you go on Google Ingram and look at that viewer that charts word usage in literature over history, you'll see that the word sin has basically fallen into disuse.

It's been in steady decline since the 1800s. And I think that's partly because of what the word sin means. In Psalm 32, verse 1, the word sin there, if you look at the Hebrew word for that, it's the word that most often shows up to refer to sin in the Old Testament.

And the word actually means to miss the mark. Or another way of thinking about it is to go off the path. And in other words, sin implies, the word sin implies that there is a target that our lives are meant to be aiming at.

[4 : 11] There is a path that we're meant to be walking on. There's a way of being human. So another way of saying it is, the word sin implies that there is an objective standard of right and wrong.

That there is a way of being human in the world. And that is, I think, a major part of why the word sin has fallen into disuse. Because in the West, we have mostly done away with the idea that there is a common standard of right and wrong.

Most people today, if you ask them, would say that morality is more a matter of personal preference and that that's the way it should be. And we are the first culture in history to do this.

We're the first culture in history to do away with the idea of a common notion of right and wrong. And the reason we did this was in the name of expressive individualism. We basically wanted a society where people feel free to live however they want and to be whomever they want and to feel good about themselves.

And so people desiring this said, well, you know, religion and specifically Christianity is getting in the way of that. It's getting in the way of the kind of society where expressive individualism sits at the very heart of our ethics.

[5 : 28] And so people said religion is getting in the way of that. Christianity is getting in the way of that. We don't need the church telling people how they should live their lives. We don't need the church and this faith making people feel guilty, making people feel shame.

And so the idea was if you get rid of religion, if you get rid of words like sin, then we can be free. Then we won't have to feel guilt anymore.

Then everyone can do what they want, live how they want, and feel loved and affirmed and accepted exactly as they are. And, you know, you hear that and you think, well, I can see why people jumped on board with that.

Because that sort of utopian vision of society, free from guilt and shame, that sounds like a great thing. And if it's really being caused by the church and being caused by religion, then maybe this is a good idea.

Maybe this is progress. The problem is that's not at all how things played out. Instead, instead, we've actually, as a society, become really, really confused.

[6 : 33] Christianity is fading in the West, and yet there's every bit as much guilt. There's every bit as much shame. Those things have not gone down. In fact, I think you could argue that they've actually gone up.

And what's interesting is now in our society, we're trying to have our cake and eat it too. Because on the one hand, people say that morality is a matter of personal preference and that you shouldn't tell other people how they should live their lives.

And yet, on the other hand, when it comes to certain issues, we enforce a kind of lockstep moral conformity. And there's no exceptions. And it seems as though we've not actually become less judgmental.

I think you could argue that we've actually become highly puritanical in our society. And the great irony is this. Even as our secular society rejects religion, it is becoming more and more a religion in and of itself.

Our secular society is becoming more and more and more its own religion. It's becoming a dogmatic, even fundamentalist religion of secular humanist values.

[7 : 43] And people who transgress are shamed and they're stigmatized and they're even excommunicated, what we call being canceled today.

So what we see is that we are actually more judgmental. We are more closed-minded. There's more guilt and shame, not less. Now, when we see something like that happening, we really need to ask why.

Why has this happened? Why has this happened? What's the reason behind this shift? And the answer, the answer is that even though we don't use the word sin nearly as much, sin is every bit as present.

And sin is every bit as real as it ever was. And I think that on some deep level, we all know that there is real evil in the world. We know that there is a whole lot of evil in the world.

And I think that deep down, we are all terrified that some of that evil is in us. And I think that fear haunts us. And with Christianity, Christianity offers a very coherent way of recognizing sin and dealing with sin.

[8 : 55] And it's a way that's been refined over thousands of years, confession and repentance and forgiveness and new life. But without this, we have no way of dealing with sin.

We've done away even with the language that allows us to name sin for what it is. And so we have a problem without the language to address it. And so instead, we have this kind of incoherent, quasi-religious secularism that simply isn't up to the task of handling sin.

But wait, there's more. When you see people being judgmental, and when you see people being closed-minded, and when you see people weaponizing shame, these are symptoms.

They're symptoms. And regardless of whether you see this happening in a church or a religious community or in secular society, when you see these things, they're symptoms.

When you see these things, they show us that the problem is not that we have too much religion. The problem is that we don't have enough of the gospel. We don't have enough of the gospel.

[10 : 06] Among all the religions and philosophies of the world, only the gospel has the ability to deal with sin once and for all. Only the gospel can set people free.

Only the gospel can release people from sin, can release societies from sin, and create the possibility of building something new. And without the gospel, this is not possible.

And so what you see is this increase in anxiety over sin, and an increase in the kind of judgmentalism and stigma and shame that often accompany unaddressed sin.

And that's, I think, what we're seeing right now in our society. And what this psalm shows us is there are really only two ways of responding to sin.

And I want to look at each of those, and hopefully that will make what I've just said a little more clear. But the first option that we have for dealing with sin is the option that is the most common option.

[11 : 06] And that's what we see in verse 5, which makes reference to us covering our iniquity. The psalmist talks about us covering our iniquity. So the first response to sin is simply to cover it up.

In the book of Genesis, when the first human beings sinned for the first time, when they decided to disobey God and rebel against God for the very first time, something happens immediately.

And that is shame enters the picture. The first thing that happens to them is that they feel shame. They realize that they're naked, and they feel ashamed. And so what do they do?

They cover themselves. They cover themselves. And I want to point out, this is before the word sin had been invented yet. This is before religion existed.

This is before the church existed. This is before any of that exists. And so what this shows us is something that is very important. That guilt and shame don't exist because of the church.

[12 : 08] The church exists because of guilt and shame, in part. Guilt and shame came first because they're the fruit of sin. So we've been dealing with sin and guilt and shame since the very earliest days of our forefathers.

And what that means is we all have this kind of voice in us, and that voice is always whispering to us, you're not enough. I hear this voice in me that says, I'm not enough.

There's something wrong with me. I'm bad. Ultimately, I don't matter. I don't have what it takes.

Sooner or later, people are going to figure out that I'm a fraud. I'm going to be found out. And we all have this voice in us that is whispering that to us. That's the voice of guilt and shame and accusation.

And when human beings feel this, when Adam and Eve first heard that voice in their hearts after their sin, they did the only thing they could think to do, and that is they hid. They covered themselves with leaves, and then they covered themselves by concealing themselves behind bushes.

[13 : 28] Then they began to cover themselves by lying and by blame shifting and by finger pointing. And what we see is that covering iniquity is anything that we do to hide or to compensate for our sin.

It's anything that we do to hide or to compensate for our sin. So, you know, there's a reason why in the ancient world you have religions all over the globe that all involve some kind of ritual sacrifice.

Most religions, if not all of the religions in the ancient world, involve some form of ritual sacrifice. And often in the ancient world, this took the form of human sacrifice. And you say, well, how could anybody possibly think that that was okay?

Well, humans have always known, across all cultures, on some deep down instinctive level, we've always known that one of the best ways to deal with sin in a community is to transfer the sin, to transfer the guilt onto a representative, be it an animal or a person.

And if a community can transfer the guilt and the sin onto a representative, then that animal or that person, that representative, can bear the sins of the community and then die in place of the community, and the sin dies with them.

[14 : 45] And so that's one of the major reasons you see this across the globe in the ancient world. But then we also have a lot of people who believe that if we simply do enough good deeds, we can do enough good that it will bury the sin.

It will bury the bad deeds. We can conceal the bad deeds by burying them with good deeds. And so Islam teaches a version of this. The Eastern religions also teach a version of this through karma.

That's a big part of the teaching that accompanies the practice of yoga, is the accumulation of good karma. And, of course, we have a lot of non-religious ways of dealing with this as well, a lot of non-religious ways that we cover sin and shame.

Freud and his daughter Anna Freud, they were made famous through their development of the ego defense mechanisms. And so you see things like denial and repression and compartmentalization and rationalization.

This is part of our vernacular in the modern world, ways that we deal with sin and guilt and shame. We also have the rise of things like the self-esteem movement.

[15 : 53] We have therapists and gurus. And more and more and more, guilt is treated almost like a mental illness, like anxiety or depression that needs to be dealt with through therapy. All of these are basically different ways that human beings try to cover our sin.

They're ways that human beings try to hide, try to cover ourselves with leaves, try to hide in the bushes. And right now, I actually think that this is exactly what we're seeing in our culture.

I think that this conversation around systemic racism in America is an incredibly important one. It is a crucial conversation that needs to happen.

We need to look back and reckon with the history of oppression in our country. And until we're able and willing to do that in an honest way, I don't think that we're going to be able to move forward together as a society.

I think that it's going to break us apart. But here's the problem. Doing that is inducing moral panic. It's inducing moral panic in people. And that's what I think we see playing out right now.

[17 : 01] People have been thrown into a state of moral panic and they have no idea what to do because we live in a society that says people are basically good and we only get better. We live in a society that says everybody should live and do as they please.

And yet at the same time, we have this crushing reality of sin that we all play a part in. And I think that people have no idea how to handle it. And so people are desperate to cover their sin.

They are desperate to prove their purity, to prove their sinlessness. And you have individuals and businesses who are terrified of being called out and shamed because of their sin.

And so I think that if you look at our society right now in America, we are all scrambling like Adam and Eve in the garden. We're scrambling to cover ourselves with fig leaves. We're scrambling to hide in the bushes.

We're scrambling to point the finger and say, I didn't sin, they sinned. He sinned. She sinned. And so we have people who are virtue signaling and blame shifting.

[18 : 00] And we're all trying to shake off that guilt and that shame because it's unbearably painful. And I think what we see is that our modern secular culture simply cannot bear the weight of the sins of our past and present when it comes to race.

We cannot bear the weight of that sin. And it is cracking our society at the very foundation. Covering sin doesn't work.

It doesn't work no matter how well we think we've covered it. It doesn't work. Verse 3 says, When I kept silent, my bones wasted away.

No matter how much we try to compensate for our sin, no matter how much we try to cover it up, no matter how much we try to shift the blame, no matter how much we try to eradicate it through therapy or medication, sin remains.

And our bones waste away. I think what that means is it eats away at us, down deep, maybe below the level of our conscious awareness. It eats away at us.

[19 : 02] It rots and festers. We know under the service there is something rotten. And it needs to be dealt with. And so we never really know if we've done enough good.

We never really know if we're good enough. We never really know when all is said and done, how's it going to come out? Have we done enough good to counterbalance the bad?

And we always worry that if we're found out, and if there's ever anybody who actually sees the truth about us, that they'll see the truth that we're a fraud. That we're frauds.

And there's only one other option for dealing with sin. But it's an option that is only possible. It's only open to people who believe the gospel and who have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The other option for dealing with sin is to give up, give up trying to cover it and conceal it, and to simply come out, to come out of hiding, and to confess it.

[20 : 05] Psalm 32 verse 5 says, I acknowledged my sin to you. I did not cover my iniquity. I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.

And confession simply means coming out of hiding. It means you stop covering up. It means you stop trying to compensate with all of your good deeds and all of your good intentions.

It means that you stop blame shifting. Confession means acknowledging that there is a target in life. That there is something that our lives should be aiming at.

But we've missed the mark. Confession means acknowledging that there is a path that we should be walking. There is a way of being human in this world that reflects the heart of the God who made us.

But we've gone off the path. That we've gone off the path because we've rejected God and His way in our hearts. And we've said, I want to live my way.

[21 : 03] And I want to live my way in the world that God made. In the body that God made. What confession means is that we bear the full weight of responsibility for all of that on ourselves.

And we bring it to the Lord. And we simply say to God, I have sinned against you. I've sinned. Not I sinned, but He made me do it.

Not I sinned, but my sin was not nearly as bad as their sin. Not I sinned, but it was my upbringing. It was my parents' fault. Not I sinned, but it's really society's fault.

It's I sinned. And the fault is mine. And mine alone. That's what it means to confess. And when we're confessing, we're confessing ultimately to the Lord.

We're confessing to the Lord. Because all sin that we commit, even sins that we commit against other people, all sin is ultimately sin that we commit against God.

[22 : 04] Because we live in the world that God made. And we are people who only exist because God made us. And so any sin against anyone or anything in this world is ultimately a sin against the one who made it all.

Who is God. So then the question arises, how can we possibly do this? How can we possibly have the courage and the boldness to stand before the God who made us and to confess sin like this, knowing full well that when we do this, we deserve nothing but God's wrath?

How can we possibly do this? The first verse of the psalm says, blessed, or actually a better translation would be happy. Happy is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

And you say, well, I thought you just said we shouldn't be covering our sin. But notice in verse 1, we're not the ones covering our sin. Verse 1 is talking about God covering our sin. What's fascinating is that in Romans chapter 4, Paul quotes this psalm.

He says, blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. And then Paul asks in Romans chapter 4, how is this possible? How could God possibly cover the sins of his people?

[23 : 19] And then he gives the answer in Romans chapter 5, verses 8 and 9. He says, God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Therefore, we have now been justified by his blood. How does God cover sin? With the blood of Jesus Christ. Ancient societies knew on some deep, instinctual level that the best way to deal with sin is to have someone from the community who can represent the community, have someone who can bear the sins of the community, and who can die on behalf of the community and put those sins to death as well.

Societies knew that on some deep level. And I think even though we don't practice human sacrifice literally anymore, I think that we are still longing for that in some way, even in secular culture.

I think every time we identify somebody in the public who we expose in terms of calling out their sin, every time we vilify somebody publicly, I think part of why we do that and why people relish the opportunity to do that is because when we do that, we feel a bit of vicarious relief.

We feel for a moment the burden of our own sin lift, but only for a moment, and it's only ever temporary. And all of the sacrifices performed in all of the various religions around the world, both ancient and modern, all of those sacrifices are only ever temporary because there's never been a sacrifice that can bear the weight of all the sin.

[25 : 01] There's never been a sacrifice that could be an innocent representative on behalf of a community, not until Jesus Christ. And that's what makes Jesus Christ and the gospel utterly different.

Only Jesus Christ, because he is God, only Jesus Christ, because he is blameless, only Jesus Christ can take all of the sin of the world on himself once and for all.

Only Jesus Christ, as it says in the book of Hebrews, can become the one true sacrifice to end all sacrifices, to make all other sacrifices unnecessary.

Only Jesus Christ can do that. And through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God offers complete forgiveness for sins past, present, and future.

So anyone who comes to God and confesses their sin in the way that we've just talked about and puts their faith in the cross of Christ, anyone who comes to God on those terms immediately receives forgiveness and pardon for all sin in their life.

[26 : 09] And God's forgiveness is absolute. The sin is dealt with. The burden is lifted. And as Paul says later in Romans 8, verse 1, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Now we're going to have to continue with this next week, with part two of this series, as we look at what follows confession and what true change looks like in the Christian life.

But I just want to draw everything that we've just said together right now. Now, the reality of sin is something that we cannot escape. We can stop talking about it.

We can ignore it. But it's never going to go away. And on our own, the best that we can do to deal with the reality of sin is to cover it up, which doesn't ultimately work.

And we're seeing one example of how that doesn't work as our society tries to wrestle with the individual and the corporate sin that we bear around issues of racial justice.

[27 : 16] We simply cannot cover this up. We cannot compensate. There's no amount of atonement. There's no amount of... There's no way that we can ever pay back or make up for these sins that have been committed.

And so as our secular culture tries to wrestle with this, it's cracking under the weight of that sin. So the invitation this morning is this.

Jesus Christ loves you so much that while you are still a sinner, while you were still in active rebellion against him, he became the sacrificial representative for human sin.

And he gave his life for you. And so the invitation is this. Come to Jesus Christ, confess your sin, and find freedom for your soul.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the cross. And we pray that as we begin to look at what a lifestyle of confession and repentance and true change look like, Lord, we pray that you would not just make this an intellectual exercise, but this would be a deep heart-level work that you're doing in us in the power of your Holy Spirit.

[28 : 30] And Lord, we pray this because we do desire to be healed and to be set free, and we desire that for our society as well, Lord. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.