

# We have Sinned - The Heart of the Problem

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, everyone. I did notice that today's the day that we're talking about our sin, and yours truly has to talk about it. I reckon I may be the only person in here with a professorship in sin. And I had, I want to say this just before I start, I mean, obviously, there's a sense in which this message is severe. And I'm not giving this message because I want to upset anybody. I want just to try and teach you the truth of what Scripture says. When I was in local church ministry, I had this novel idea, which I drummed into my staff, that people should leave church on a Sunday feeling better about life than before they arrived. And when you get a message like this to preach, that can't be guaranteed. So I'm not warning you or anything like that. This is not a trigger warning. This is just simply to say that a message like this forces you, some of you, to be more honest with yourselves and with God than you've ever been.

And in doing that, you will find the kind of freedom that Liz was talking about when she prayed so powerfully just a few moments ago. So let's pray together, shall we, before I begin. Lord, we are so conscious that you are an amazingly gracious God. And Lord, in your grace and in your mercy, you can forgive our sins. Lord, that in itself is unbelievable to us. So often we find it difficult to forgive ourselves. But Lord, we can't comprehend the depth and the height and the depth of your grace.

But Lord, we know we need it because even if we follow you, we know that we're not perfect. And we constantly need to plug into that source of grace and forgiveness.

And Lord, we pray that you'd help us be better disciples, better witnesses for you. So come, Holy Spirit, and bring us under healthy conviction.

[ 2 : 42 ] And give us the courage to do something about it. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. And the people who agreed, say it together. Amen. So my text this morning is from Romans chapter 3 and verse 23.

For all have sinned, wrote St. Paul, and fall short of the glory of God. All have sinned. Many years ago in the 20th century, G.K. Chesterton wrote into the Times newspaper and the subject of the correspondence during that time was, what's wrong with the world?

G.K. Chesterton just wrote a very short letter. It said, dear sir, I am. You're sincerely G.K.

Chesterton. As you know, G.K. Chesterton was a convert to the Catholic faith.

And I think like a lot of people, when they first become Christians, feel very burdened with the kind of life they've been living.

And very grateful that God's grace is great enough to cover our sins. But first, if I may, just a very quick thumbnail print of what the Epistle to the Romans is about.

[ 4 : 04 ] Now, it's about salvation. It's about how we can be saved, what salvation is, and most importantly, how you can have assurance that you are saved.

I imagine there are a lot of people in church today, kind of, if they think about salvation, and they think about the end of their lives, which would be pretty rare in itself, but if you did do that, you'd probably be a kind of fingers crossed thing, you know, maybe I've done enough good in my life to kind of get me past the finishing post.

God doesn't want you to think like that. God wants you to know, if you trust in Christ, that you are saved. John, in his epistle, wrote this.

He said, we write these things. He's been writing about the salvation of God in Christ. We tell you these things, he said, so that you may know, you may know that you have eternal life.

Let me ask you this. Would you feel a little more inspired or less inspired if you left this church this morning and you knew that you were saved for eternity?

[ 5 : 23 ] Think about it. Basically, in Romans, we're told that the wrath of God, and some of you would say, hang on, how can such a loving God be wrathful?

Well, any of you who are parents know that loving parents can indeed be wrathful, and I would argue need to be wrathful on occasions. That the wrath of God extends to the godless, and it might be good homework for you to go away and read chapter one of Romans, because if you read it and you understand it, you'll be very clear, you should not be surprised by the way the world is going. What chapter one is about is that the godless will be the sufferers of God's wrath, and the world will go south. It will become idolatrous.

It will become narcissistic. It will become sexualized. It will become everything that healthy civilizations really don't want to be. And Paul has a kind of framework that he's working with here, and that is, Paul is trying to tell us what the diagnosis of our humanity is.

What is wrong with us? Second, he's trying to tell us what the prognosis of that diagnosis is. This is what will happen if you don't accept the diagnosis.

[ 6 : 56 ] And the third thing is, of course, Paul tells us about the cure. Amazing epistle. And, I mean, the mad thing is, you know, when we write letters, A, most of our letters aren't as long as Paul's, are they?

Let's be honest. And secondly, they're not quite as serious. You know, and Paul, I think, only once in all of his epistles write, wish you were here. You know, Paul's a serious-minded, pharisaical rabbi who's converted to Jesus Christ.

And because of the way the letter is, I mean, we don't normally get letters and just focus on one paragraph as we are doing today. I tend to read it from start to finish.

So, what we're talking about today is the diagnosis. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If you ask yourself the question, what is sin?

I wonder what your answer would be. I mean, some people start kind of expressing a false security because their first thought is, go to the Ten Commandments.

[ 8 : 10 ] And most of us, at any one time, are scoring about seven out of ten in our favor. I don't know about you, but on my finals paper, I would have happily settled for 70%.

We kind of think, that's enough. And yet, St. Paul tells us that when we break the law in just one tiny bit, we break the whole of the law.

There is no security in thinking, seven out of ten of the commandments is fine by me. Basically, what sin is, is when I make the decision openly or subliminally to go my way rather than go God's way.

At its very basic level, that is what sin is. When I decide, either openly or inwardly, to go my way rather than God's way, I am, as far as God is concerned, in sin.

That's why Paul can so confidently say, all have sinned. I guarantee that if I said to you, is there anybody in church this morning who's never sinned?

[ 9 : 25 ] None of you would put your hand up, and if you did, the rest of us would be thinking, liar. All have sinned, because from our birth, we've had this inward thing to make ourselves the center of the universe.

We are, as Richard Dawkins put it, survival machines. And the interesting thing was, the analysis, the Judeo-Christian analysis of humanity, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, held sway for centuries.

People didn't quibble with it. They might not like it. They may not adhere to the ramifications of it, but they believed that human beings were basically flawed.

And then, in the 18th century, appeared this man, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His theory was the mirror opposite.

And it was this. No, that Judeo-Christian mumbo-jumbo is not right. No, we are basically good, but it is the totality of our experiential environment which spoils us.

[ 10 : 45 ] Ultimately, this is very wrong-headed thinking. But the problem with a lot of wrong-headed thinking is, it has some half-truths.

It is quite clearly true that our experiential environment, the way we're treated, the way we are, the things that we are exposed to in our lives, can impact our personality and the way we are.

What do I mean by that? Well, of course, if you've had appalling parents, you will really struggle with that at some point in your life. If you've had terrible experiences in your life, you've been bullied, or you've been abused, blah, blah, you know, the list could go on, then you will be impacted

by that.

Trust me, I have worked with so many people who were bullied when they were in school who have never got past it. Never. Never. Or if you feel you've been treated on the wrong end of inequality, you know, of equality.

There's a program on Netflix at the moment which is called The Sex Life of Adolf Hitler.

[12:06] And, you know, I'm not recommending it, but really what it is, is a kind of psychological profile of this dreadful man who did dreadful things.

And, basically, I mean, this man's parents, his mother was totally over-doting, understandably in a way, because she lost two sons before Adolf, the young Adolf, was born.

So she over-doted on him. His father was a drunken, violent bully. And out of that mix appears this horror story of a man called Adolf Hitler.

Rousseau did have a point that our experiential environment does affect us. But the idea that we're just spoiled by that environmental experience tends to suggest that there's no way back from it.

Tends to suggest that we are more sinned against than sinning. That's why you can understand why it's such a popular theory today.

[13:21] Drives a lot of politics. We're basically good, but it's the totality of our experience alone which spoils us, which ruins us.

No, says Scripture. We were objects of God's wrath by nature, said Paul in Ephesians chapter 2. I find it a really disturbing idea that we are simply the prisoners of our past.

past. If that were true, you would indeed be people without hope. If there is no way out of that other than years of psychotherapy, and I'm not saying that that's unhelpful, but if there is no way out, I'm just left on my own with the totality of my experiential environmental history, that would indeed be without hope.

Rousseau believed that the only way you could set human beings free was to get rid of all law.

Rousseau would have loved the activist line that we should be defunding the police at the moment.

That would have been right up his alley. And you've seen on your television what happens when the police stand back at a demonstration, and the next minute people are looting, people are violent.

[15:04] No, if we didn't have police, I think our society probably would be more of a pigsty than it often seems today. We were by nature objects of God's wrath, wrote St.

Paul in Ephesians chapter 2, yet we are stained. And you will never understand what the Bible teaches about the amazing nature of God, unless you understand what the Bible teaches about our humanity, about the terrifying outcomes, when a society becomes godless, self-centered, materialistic, and sexualized.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Does it matter? Well, if you think it doesn't matter, then the problem is, you're in a rather complacent situation.

Isn't it true that we so often say to ourselves, when we hear about somebody who's done something terrible to another person, oh, they're only human.

Well, of course, there's a truth in there. When we say to ourselves, a little bit of this and a little bit of that never did anybody any harm. Everything in moderation, and yet, how often does moderation lead to addiction?

[16:40] I never met an addict yet who set out when they took their first drag of a spliff or their first glass of alcohol, or the first time they slept with somebody, thought to themselves, you know what a great end game would be if I got addicted to this stuff.

I never met anybody who wanted to be like that. Online gambling at the moment. Nobody places their first bet for a tenner on something thinking, it'd be great one day, I'll be so addicted to this, I'll be owing millions.

No, we need to be careful with sin, not to be complacent. And of course, the big deal is that the scripture tells us in the book of the prophet Isaiah that what our sin does is it separates us from God.

Separates us. You ever have the feeling, God seems a little remote to me? When I was in local church ministry, I had people come and see me, and they say stuff like, you know what, I'm feeling a little distant from my wife at the moment.

Oh, why would that be? Well, you know, things, I'm working hard to work. I said, can I just ask you a question?

[18:09] Is the fact that you're feeling remote from your wife a cause or a symptom? What do you mean? Tell me what your relationship with God is like at the moment.

Oh, well. You know, things are not great. What do you mean? There's a secretary at work. You know, she's young and she's very interested in my life and we've had a couple of lunches together. I'm like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. He said, what, do you have any advice for me? I said, where do you meet this woman?

He said, we travel together on the commuter train every morning. Do you have any advice? I said, yeah, change trains. change trains and he did and his marriages survived.

Does sin matter? Of course it does because it separates us from God. Is there a soul in church this morning who doesn't know that to be true for themselves?

[19:20] When we do stuff that we know is wrong, even when we do stuff that we're not sure whether it's wrong, our relationship with God suffers. And this, my friends, is the season of Lent.

Forty days of fasting and repenting. I know we don't do it for forty days, but that's the idea of it, that we're supposed to turn inward on ourselves for forty days and examine our relationship with God. in the early church part of Lent was that if you committed a sin and it was publicly known about, right? I mean, you'd be thanking God you were not part of that early church.

I'll tell you why. Because if they committed a serious sin, they had to come up to the front of the church and tell the rest of the church about it. Then the priest would pray a prayer of absolution on them and then he would give them penances.

Go and recite the Hail Mary a few times or give the church a bit more money. Only ministers are in favour of that. And that's what Lent was.

[20:36] During the forty days of Lent, repentant sinners were excommunicated, not allowed to receive communion for those forty days, and then on Easter Sunday, the day of resurrection, they'd be allowed back in.

Imagine that. Imagine the joy of a repentant sinner being allowed back into the faith community. What we don't have in our church today is any sense that when we sin as individuals, we're letting the side down.

This is your family. This should hurt you like when your kids misbehave, etc., etc. And now, friends, to end, a spoiler alert.

Because I'm not talking about sin. Next week, you're going to get a better exposition of the cure, the cross. Paul wrote this in Ephesians chapter 1, in him, in Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of his grace.

Those Jews of old had a very simple idea. You remember in the Old Testament how you read about sacrifice. As if you're a rich person, you take a full-grown bull without blemish and have it slaughtered on the altar.

[22:10] If you didn't have so much money, you could take a couple of pigeons. And the idea behind that sacrificial system was a life for a life.

I know that you animal rights activists won't like that system whatsoever. But that's what they thought. That's why when Paul is writing in Ephesians 1, he uses that rather strange language.

In Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, through his death on the cross of Calvary.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place, condemned he stood. You know, St.

Paul described himself, this man who we put in stained glass windows and venerate over the centuries. St. Paul described himself as the chief of sinners.

[23:13] I have only one quibble with that and I might be able to challenge him on that point. Friends, it's Lent. Take your relationship with God a notch further.

Think about what you've heard this morning. Not my ideas, the ideas of this book, inspired by the Holy Spirit, for our edification, for our rebuke, and for our sanctification, to make us more like Jesus Christ.

All, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. I wonder if you have any sense of personal conviction this morning.

I wonder if this Lent could be a moment when you stand up for Jesus and stand in front of him, metaphorically speaking, naked, leave your clothes on, and you just, in the silence of your own heart, tell him the truth.

Tell him what it is you would love to be saved from, and know the power, the power of his redeeming blood in your life.