

Understanding Sin

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] So I looked at the title for today's message, Understanding Sin. I've got to be honest with you, I really, really, really struggled in putting the message together.

One is because I know I'm a sinner. Two, because the title is perhaps a complex one, because the word sin itself doesn't carry a lot of credibility with most of the people in the world today. It's a word that's just not taken very seriously at all. So I thought maybe I'll give it another title, which I'll come to in a moment. But this whole thing about the word sin, it's not a fashionable word, and when it is used, it's generally used in a way that doesn't really take what it's meant to convey that seriously.

Just this week, as I was in the car and I was mulling over, thinking, what on earth am I going to say on Sunday? I was listening to the radio, and so it was a phone-in thing, and there was some guy who was talking, and he said to the presenter, he said that he committed the very worst sin. He said that his wife came in and she'd had her hair cut, and he didn't notice. Now, whilst I couldn't help thinking that probably there are quite a lot of husbands in the UK listening to that and can connect with what he was trying to say, the point is, is that's the level of seriousness that is attached to the word sin.

[1 : 36] It's used light-heartedly. It's used casually. It's kind of used as a joke. But biblically, it's used to describe something that's really, really vital to understand about our human condition.

Namely, that there's something deep inside of us as humans. All of us. All of us. It's just not right. Why is it that we have this idea of what human perfection should be like?

We crave for a world that is full of perfection, and yet none of us, none of us can say that we have it. Why? Why that contradiction within human beings that we grasp for what perfection is?

We may strive to live for perfection, and yet the harder we try, the more we are reminded of the reality of our brokenness and our failure. And the Bible presents this concept, and it's something there is no way we can exhaust in just a few minutes, but this concept of sin that describes that fundamental brokenness in human beings, that imperfection, that bias to do the wrong thing even though we strive to do the right thing.

That deep-seated sense that there's something just not right. And so to just dismiss it by the word sin and just in a light-hearted way simply won't do. Because to dismiss the reality of our human brokenness in a light-hearted way simply won't do.

[3 : 06] Imagine one of the following scenarios. Imagine that you had a real pain in your leg, and you limped your way to the doctor. You know, you've got an appointment with your GP, and you go and you say, I've got this pain in my leg.

And without even examining you, they just say, oh yeah, leg pain. Most people have got pain of some sort. You'll be all right. They don't even ask you any more questions. They say, just get on with it. You'll be fine. Or imagine you have a wobbly tooth, and you go and see your dentist. And you get down in the chair, and they say, what's wrong? And they say, well, I've got a wobbly tooth. They don't even ask you to open your mouth. And they just say, well, it's a wobbly tooth. Live with it. You'll be fine.

Probably okay. Well, imagine you're in your car, and you're driving along, and there's smoke coming out of the back, and it's making a horrible noise. It feels like something really, really bad is going to happen to that vehicle. You don't feel safe.

You drive to the nearest garage. You explain to them the issue. They don't even put it up on the ramp, and they just say, oh, it'll be all right. Just carry on driving. Most cars make some kind of noise. You'll be fine. In any one of those situations, you will come away from it feeling profoundly dissatisfied.

[4 : 11] Why? Because you knew that there was something that was not quite right, and yet it was just dismissed. So why is it that the term that represents something so fundamental to what it is to be a human being, namely that there is something spiritually not quite right, how come that is just dismissed, that term, sin?

So let's just spend a few minutes unpacking, with the help of this story of Jesus and his experience in his humanity and in his divinity in the desert, to ask ourselves what sin or how sin might be understood.

Now, I told you, I was really struggling this week over trying to think of something fresh, something original to say about a word that is either underused or overused, but frequently misunderstood, and often because it's dismissed.

I think, how can I say something that's original? So I asked the theologian who I respect probably more than any other, my daughter Eleanor.

As I do in the car, I've got to do this talk on Sunday about sin. What do you reckon? What do you think sin is? And she quoted a book by Rachel Gardner, wasn't it? And Rachel Gardner said this, sin can be understood as trying to put a sign up that says, God, keep out.

[5 : 43] That's pretty good. Thank you, Rachel Gardner. And thank you, Eleanor. So I thought, let's switch things around a little bit, and let's roll in thinking over the next few minutes with that fundamental guiding question, understanding sin, let's put it this way.

How might you keep God out of your life? Now, I like to keep things practical, and I like to keep things down to earth, so what I'm going to do is, over these next few minutes, I'm going to share with you five practical suggestions, tried and tested hints and tips of how to keep God out of your life.

Okay? And I say this with authority, because I've tried and tested every single one of these methods, and I can tell you, they work. So what we're going to do is, we're going to unpack the passage that David just read to us, Jesus in the wilderness, and ask ourselves the question, how does that story of Jesus entering the wilderness and facing Satan?

How do they help us to understand more about sin, or let's be more practical, how do they help us to understand five ways in which we might be able to try and keep God out of our lives?

The first one is this. It says that a passage begins by saying that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

[7 : 15] He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Let's be clear here what the wilderness means. If you're tempted to think, well, that means being in a nice open space where you can be at one with nature, and you're away from the strains and worries of everyday life, get a different image in your head right now.

The wilderness is terrifying. I can remember being in Israel in the year 2000 and being on the safety of a bus and driving through just the edge of a wilderness during the day and thinking to be there day and night on your own would be terrifying.

It was a place where there were wild beasts, a place where you could easily get mobbed, ambushed, killed. And Jesus was there for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness.

So, suggestion one, okay, because the wilderness was a place that was not a place of safety. It was a place of vulnerability, a place where you're exposed to danger.

So, advice number one. If you want to keep God out of your life, stay away from places where you feel uncomfortable.

[8 : 33] Don't go there. Don't go into situations or places where you're going to feel out of your depth or surrounded by danger or the unfamiliar. There's a reason why there's a statistic and I can't give you the exact statistic but it's reckoned that the majority of accidents on the road happen within a mile of where you live.

In other words, yourself. You know, the roads with which you're most familiar. Probably your own street. The most likely place you are likely going to have a crash is on a road that you know very well. Why?

Because you're relaxed. The guard's down. In those environments, when we are most familiar, we feel safe. Nothing inherently wrong with that. But spiritually, if we try to protect ourselves by never stepping out into those situations where we take risks, where we are exposed to new things and we step out of the comfort zones, if you just keep yourself in a safe place, then that's the kind of place where you can safely say you're unlikely to grow as a Christian.

If you keep everything safe and never take any risks, that's the sort of place where it's less likely that you're going to encounter the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit.

And I know that when I step into those places that are new, that I find scary, where I'm out of my depth, that's where, generally speaking, I tend to find that I grow as a Christian.

[10:03] I know that when I keep it safe, when I stay in those places where I don't face new things, where I just play it safe, that's where I'm so much more vulnerable to mess up.

And I do. And I have. So, advice number one. If you want to keep God out of your life, play it safe. Don't step out into dangerous places or encounter something new or unfamiliar.

Second one. It's a story. It says that the devil came to Jesus and Satan said, if you are the son of God, tell these stones to become bread.

If you are the son of God. Well, Satan asks the son of God a question that kind of challenges who he is and challenges God's own authority.

If you are the son of God. Now, it takes us back to Eden. First time we encounter Satan is when he challenges the authority of God's word.

[11:14] As God creates a perfect world and says to Adam and Eve, you can eat the fruit of any tree except this particular tree that will give you knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of that tree, you'll die the same day.

Satan comes onto the scene and says, did God really say not to eat of any tree in the garden? You see, even in the question, he twists the truth.

Eve actually latches onto that and says, well, actually, no, God didn't say you can't eat the fruit of any tree, but not of this one. You see, we see how Satan works by causing us to challenge the authority of God.

If you want to keep God out of your life, then challenge the authority of God's word. Challenge it. Don't accept its truth. Now, let's be really clear.

There's two different types of questions here. I'm not referring here to the type of questioning that actually can lead us into a closer relationship with God. There are some questions, a lot of questions, actually, that some people might say, oh, well, that's challenging God's authority.

[12:23] In Africa, it's the opposite. I find that when I drill deeper into questions of life, such as, well, why does God allow situations of suffering to happen?

Or, why did Jesus die on the cross for me? Or, how can I believe the Bible? And those kind of questions that are genuinely searching questions, those are the kind of questions that I find lead me into a closer relationship with God.

Having done Alpha and various different versions of any questions, courses, and gatherings over many years now, I find that time and time and time again, when people ask those kind of genuine searching questions, those are the times when people are led into the presence of God and a relationship with Jesus.

That's not the type of questioning I'm talking about. If you want to keep God out of your life, then stay away from those deep searching questions that seek after God, and instead, latch yourself on to those superficial questions that dismiss the authority of God's word.

If you want to keep God out of your life, then just dismiss what the church has taught over many, many issues, through its commitment to Scripture, over thousands of years.

[13:35] Did God really say that? Does the Bible really teach this? Does the Bible really teach that? You know, the Bible exists for a reason.

The Judeo-Christian faith is a revelatory faith, which has at its heart the conviction that God speaks to us in every age, and that he gives us Scripture that we might grow in a relationship with him.

So if you don't want a relationship with God, if you want to keep God out of your life, then dismiss the credibility of Scripture. And side with many others, including church leaders today, that will say, well, the Bible doesn't really teach this.

And dismiss what the Bible has taught for hundreds and hundreds of years. If you want to keep God out of your life, ditch the Bible.

Or if you must read the Bible, read those verses that only make you feel comfortable. Don't read anything that challenges your lifestyle or your decisions. And if you want to really keep God out of your life, if you must read anything, then please, please don't engage any serious biblical scholarship that will lead you into a deeper and richer and fuller understanding of the Bible.

[14 : 52] Instead, listen to public opinion. Go all over the internet and read these little, you know, sort of ten-second nuggets of quotes that grab your attention, that dismiss the authority of Scripture.

If you want to keep God out of your life, then stick with that question, did God really say this? Probably not. Third one.

Jesus, sorry, the devil comes to Jesus and says that if you're the son of God, tell these stones to become bread. Now, if Jesus had actually used his divine power to turn what was not bread into something that would meet his hunger at that point, he would have been exploiting and using for his own personal advantage, his divine power.

And that's not what he came to do. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. So, if you want another, a third way of keeping God out of your life, it's this.

Focus on being in control and using everything you have to keep you in control of everything. Eliminate every form of discomfort or the need to rely on God or the power of God.

[16 : 29] Eliminate faith in anything that has to do with him. And just trust in what you can see and hear and touch in front of you.

If you want to get rid of God's presence in your life, seize control of everything you possibly can.

The fourth, I said there were five, the fourth, moving through the list, the fourth way of putting up a sign that says, God, keep out.

We read here that it says that the devil led Jesus to the highest point. They had him stand on the highest point.

It says to him, if you are the son of God, there it goes again, throw yourself down. If you're the son of God, if you are, throw yourself over the edge.

For it is written, he will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. If you want to keep God out of your life, then live a version of Christianity that relies on testing God rather than trusting God.

[17 : 50] How tragic it can be when we lose our faith in God because God hasn't answered a particular prayer or a demand that we've made of him. Now, I don't say this lightly. There are times when we will pray to God to help us in a certain situation, and it's right that we do so.

That's the kind of relationship that God wants of us, to reach out to him in every, everything. But there's a difference between that and setting out a test and saying, God, if you don't do this, then I'm not going to follow you anymore.

Faith is far more profound, Christian discipleship is far more profound and complex and deeper than standing or falling on a particular answer to a particular prayer request.

You see, God wants disciples that don't stand on the edge of a dangerous place and say, all right, I'm going to throw myself off. Now catch me, Lord, and prove your reality.

But rather, God wants us to be able to stand on those places where it feels dangerous and it feels like we're about to fall, but to trust that he will keep us safe without putting him to the test.

[18 : 58] How often do we almost play that sort of spiritual roulette with God? Lord, if you do this, then I'll trust in you.

There's that old story, isn't there, about the guy who's desperate for a parking space and he's driving along in the multi-story car park and saying, Lord, I really, really need a space. Please give me one right now. Lord, if you make this parking space happen for me, I will do anything for you.

I will double what I give to the church. I will give all of my time every weekend to serve you and every evening I'm free. I'll do whatever you want me to do.

I'll go to the places you want me to go. I'll do whatever you want me to do. But Lord, please just give me a parking space right now. At which point somebody begins to reverse out and the space becomes available.

He says, it's all right, Lord, I've got it. Putting God to the test. And building a faith that is constructed purely on our own terms and the tests that we devise is a sure way of keeping God out.

[20 : 07] Remember even those that met Jesus in person, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the teachers of the law, who tried to catch Jesus out time and time again. They saw the miracles of Jesus and that wasn't enough for them.

They had to come up with their own tests that they put his way. You know, no matter what happens by the power of God in our lives, it's always possible to come up with a reason to rebut it and to ask for something else or something more.

If we're serious about growing in our walk with Jesus, it's not about testing God. It's about trusting him. So if you want to keep God out of your life, construct a faith that is based not on trust, but on tests.

I said there were five and the fifth one is this. Satan says to Jesus, All this I will give you if you bow down and worship me.

So he shows him all the splendour of the world. You know, this is possibly the best advice you can have for keeping God out. Focus entirely on material things.

[21 : 27] Make it your focus of meditation. Make it the thing that you just pursue and that you are preoccupied by. Meditate upon it. Contemplate on it.

Make it your goal and your measurement of success to accumulate wealth and financial success. Make that your goal and forget about everything else. And you'll be sure to keep God out.

Now, I've been thinking about sin as that act of keeping God out of our lives. One other piece of advice. If you do find it hard to keep God out, don't worry.

Just choose one section of your life to keep God out of. One compartment of your life. Whether that's home life, whether that's work life, whatever it is, but just choose one bit of your life and just try and keep God out of that one compartment.

Because over a course of time, you'll find that actually, if you try to keep God out of one compartment of your life, he'll gradually slip out of every compartment of your life.

[22 : 40] Because reality is, I might be wrong, but I'm guessing most of us in this room don't want to keep God out of our lives.

And in listening to this, we're all too aware of the way in which we have done and continue to. And a tragedy is that often people have this idea that God's the one who wants to keep us out.

Time and time again, you will meet somebody who has this preconception that the message of Christian faith is a message that says, keep out, you can't come here. You're not worthy.

There's something about you that's not right. Well, it's a half-truth in the sense that there is something about us that's not right. But you know, the message of the cross is not one of keep out. The cross is God's message that says, come on in. You're welcome. You're broken. Yes, there's this thing called sin.

[23 : 57] But you're welcome to come on in. So what I'm going to do now is I'm going to invite us to spend a few moments as we look at the cross to reflect on our own lives and on those attempts that we might make to keep God out, to push him out.

And then after a few moments of stillness and reflection, the words are going to come onto the screen and I'm going to invite us to join together in saying the words of Psalm 51. Psalm 51 was written by David after he had not only committed adultery but actually organised the murder of the husband of the woman that he slept with.

It's a multi-layered story, a story which tells us of how David, who is held up as a hero of faith, failed in pretty well every single way imaginable.

If there's hope for David, there's hope for every single one of us. So let's pause, let's take a few moments of stillness before we join together in saying Psalm 51.

Psalm 51. Lord, as we reflect on our lives now and we reflect on the ways in which we try to keep you out, thank you that you know our lives even better than we do.

[25 : 33] thank you that as we confess our sin, we don't need to go through anybody other than you and that you are the God who says to us, not keep out, but come on in to my kingdom.

So Lord, in the stillness now, we confess our sin to you. Lord, as we confess to you those areas of our lives where we have sought to keep you out, we ask you to come on in and fill us afresh with the power of your Holy Spirit, with your presence, with your peace, with that renewed conviction that we are forgiven and can walk tall and can walk confident knowing that we are held securely in Christ.

So let's join together as we say the words on the screen, the words of Psalm 51. Have mercy on us, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out our transgressions, wash away all our iniquity and cleanse us from our sin.

For we know our transgressions and our sin is always before us. Against you, you only, have we sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

So you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely we were sinful at birth, sinful from the time we were conceived.

[27 : 32] Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb. You taught us wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse us and we will be clean.

Wash us and we will be whiter than snow. Let us hear joy and gladness. Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from our sins and blot out our iniquity.

Create in us pure hearts, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within us. Do not cast us from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from us.

Restore to us the joy of your salvation and grant us a willing spirit to sustain us. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.