

If My People - 20

The Problem of Sin (2)

2 Chronicles 7:14 *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

In my last sermon, we began to explore the implications of sin and the clear inference in this verse that God hearing, forgiving, and healing the land was conditional upon His people turning from their sin. This led us to look at the problem of sin for us today, living this side of the cross.

I suggested that sin is a problem firstly because sin is sin and it's as destructive and evil as it ever was, and we need to deal with it firmly in our own lives and in the Church. We'll look at that later in this sermon. However, the other reason sin is a problem for us today is that as New Covenant believers born this side of the cross, we can sometimes struggle with the place and effect of sin in terms of our relationship with God.

If our understanding of the New Covenant and our salvation in Christ is not clear, then we can have an incorrect view of sin and its effects on our relationship with God. This can then lead us to make wrong judgements about ourselves, others and God. Those wrong judgements consequently have a profound impact on all that we think, say, do and pray.

As I said in the last sermon the Bible is a priceless collection of ancient writings, inspired by the Holy Spirit, which we submit to as the final, objective authority in this human realm for all matters of faith and practice. And yet this book requires mental and spiritual energy to interpret it and understand it.

We affirm that the Holy Spirit was at work in the writing, preparation, compilation and preservation of this wonderful collection of documents we call the Bible, but we need to also accept and affirm that we require the ministry and oversight of the Holy Spirit just as much now in reading, interpreting, understanding and applying the truths contained in the Bible.

One of the ways the Holy Spirit wants to teach us through the Bible is to show us how to read the Scriptures properly, in context, and understand how dozens of documents, written by different human authors, over several thousand years, from totally different cultural perspectives, in different original languages, could actually come together in one compilation like this and not only make sense but provide a vehicle for the life-changing Word of God to touch billions of people all over the world.

We need to learn how to interpret the Bible and discern the life-changing eternal Word of God within it. The Bible is not a textbook with a detailed index of clearly laid out doctrinal teaching in topical order. You cannot look up a chapter marked 'Salvation' and read ten points which cover the issue completely. You cannot turn to a chapter on 'sin' and read everything God has to say about sin in that one section. This book requires some careful and prayerful handling if we are to allow God to breathe life and power into its pages. The Bible, in its original form, is regarded as the final, objective authority in every situation for the Christian Church.

However, translations of the Bible are not inspired, and we have dozens of them. Commentaries about the Bible are certainly not inspired, and we have thousands of them. Sermons based on the Bible, preached every week all over the world, are not inspired in the same way and we have millions of them! Added to that is the fact that we are reading this book in the English language which is radically different to the original languages in which these documents were written. There are some words, for example, in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek for which we simply do not have an equivalent word in English. So, we have to use the next best word or words and sometimes that changes the meaning from the original intent.

Like it or not, we are influenced a great deal by the language chosen, the translation we use, the study notes and interpretation of scholars, theologians and Bible teachers, and because there's a lot of fallible humanity in that whole process, we can find ourselves struggling to understand what God is really saying. Having said that, let me give you some reassuring good news. God knows that. God knew this long before the Bible was written. He knows how easy it is for us to get it wrong and twist things around so that they mean something different. He never intended to leave us with a complicated collection of writings spanning thousands of years in the hope that we might work out on our own what it all means.

We were never meant to read the Bible alone. We are not supposed to even try and interpret the Bible without the Holy Spirit's guiding, teaching and illuminating presence. That's why what appears to be a very difficult and problematic task: that is, understanding and interpreting the Bible in today's world, is not that hard at all - if we allow the spirit of God to teach us - and one of the very first things He wants to teach us is HOW to read and interpret the Bible. I said some things in the last sermon about the Bible and our need to interpret it which I believe were of vital importance to us all and I would really encourage you to connect with that sermon again and read through what I said a few more times.

So, we need to realise that our understanding of sin is one of the many areas in which we have seen controversy, conflict and confusion. I believe this is entirely avoidable if we read the Bible properly and learn to interpret Scripture through Scripture before we interpret Scripture through our personal experience. Let's step back now and look at the big picture.

Sin separates us from our experience of God. A holy God cannot look upon sin without judging it. His wrath burns against all unrighteousness. Verses like 2 Chronicles 7:14 and the others I quoted from the Old Testament in the last sermon, indicate clearly that God and sin can never occupy the same environment unless that sin has been atoned for in some way.

That is why the whole sacrificial system was in place under the Old Covenant. That involved the work of Priests in the Temple and the sacrifice of animals. When that process was carried out, some of the effects of sin were dealt with ... for a while. However, it had to happen over and over and over again because the blood of bulls and goats could never permanently remove the curse of sin and fully reconcile us to God. That is why we could still not draw near to God. Only the High Priest could enter the 'Holy of Holies' behind the temple veil where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The Ark symbolised the presence of God and only one man, once a year, could be in the presence of God.

So, before Jesus came, it was pretty tough trying to relate to God personally. Most people didn't even think that was possible, even though God had given many prophecies and spoken through the ages about His desire to be in close communion with all His people, all the time - not just with a High Priest, now and then. Although the sacrificial system dealt with the problem of sin for many years, at best it was only ever partial and temporary.

Then Jesus came and ushered in a new day - a new chapter for mankind - a New Covenant - a New Testament - a whole new and radical reality for us all. It was not new to God, He had planned it all along and He had spoken through the prophets for years about this new era, but for we mortals it was an entirely different world for those who embraced this radical New Covenant in its fullness.

Last week we looked at Hebrews 10:11-23. I would encourage you to read that passage again. The writer is speaking about Old Testament times and what was required to atone for sin and how now, all sin has been atoned for in Christ. This is the wonder, the glory and the mystery of this incredible salvation which is ours in Christ! The penalty, the power and the punishment of sin has been taken from us in the broken body of Jesus. That impenetrable barrier between us and God, was smashed once and for all by Jesus when He lived a perfect life for us, atoned for all sin on the cross and then conquered sin, death and Satan forever when He rose victorious from the grave. That is the truth. That is grace. That is the Gospel. That is the good news of Jesus Christ which we are called upon to preach to the world.

Before we looked at the ongoing problem of sin, I needed to establish for some, and re-establish for others, that sin no longer separates us from God. Jesus fixed that – once and for all time. You no longer have to worry if God is listening to your prayers because of sin in your life. If you stand in Christ as a believer, then God is listening to all your prayers, in spite of the sin in your life. Yes, this grace in which we stand is THAT radical. We are truly THAT free in Christ.

Now comes the question which Paul faced, and every preacher who has ever made grace as free as God has made it will face: If we are under grace and not under law; if our sin has been atoned for, past, present and future; does that therefore mean that we shouldn't be concerned about sin in our lives anymore?

Absolutely not. Sin is still as evil and as destructive as it ever was. Sin hurts people. Sin kills people. Sin destroys relationships. Sin distorts truth. Sin projects a false picture of God and leads people away from Him not to Him. Sin annihilates families and Church fellowships every day. Sin can also have an impact on our 'experience' of God and our experience of the many blessings He given us in Christ.

I will elaborate on all that more in my next sermon, but I want to give you yet another passage which firmly establishes this foundational understanding of grace, salvation and forgiveness of sin.

Colossians 2:8-15 *“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.*

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

We could spend many hours in this incredible passage, and I really wish we could, but let just me just quickly highlight some very powerful and very clear statements of truth here.

"... you have been given fullness in Christ ..."

Notice this is past tense. In other words, this has happened. In the package marked 'Salvation' we were given fullness in Christ, which includes all kinds of wonderful goodies like forgiveness, holiness, righteousness, eternal life, abundant life, faith, spiritual gifts ... to name just a few!

Now, whether we experience the reality of all those things or not is another issue entirely. Whether we appropriate, apply, use, walk in or exhibit the fruit of that fullness in Christ is always up to us. More about that later. Just understand one thing: all of this has been given to you already, in Christ, as part of the grace and salvation God has lavished upon you as His child.

"When you were dead in your sins ... God made you alive with Christ ..."

Let me ask you a question: Can a dead person do anything, other than smell and attract blowflies? No! Dead people are dead. They are totally incapable of doing anything except rotting away. They are worthless to everyone except the worms! So, it's no accident that the Bible uses the term 'dead' to describe our spiritual condition prior to receiving salvation.

We need to understand that we were totally and utterly devoid of the ability to desire God or respond to God in any way, shape or form. We were dead in our sinful, rebellious state. We were born dead: that is, we were born into a state of spiritual bankruptcy, and we needed a saviour. We needed someone outside of ourselves to step into our grave and breathe life into our decaying spirits and give us the desire to turn to God.

Well, guess what? God did just that ! Hallelujah! God made us alive with Christ. This is the gospel friends, and you should be leaping with overwhelming joy right about now! God raised us from our spiritual death. But He did more than just wake us up, He dealt with the enemy which killed us in the first place: sin.

"...He forgave us all our sins ..."

Fascinating grammar here. The word translated 'forgave' is past tense and the word translated 'all' is present continuous tense. That means that the forgiveness which is given for the sins I commit today (and tomorrow) is mine BEFORE those sins are committed. It is guaranteed – it comes in that glorious package labelled 'Salvation.' Now I am not hanging that truth just on this one verse. That is stated in many places all through the New Testament.

"But what about confession and repentance?" you might ask. An excellent question, which I intend answering later in this series. It's an easy one to deal with - much clearer than most people think. Just don't let questions like that rob you of the truth of what I have said thus far. He forgave us ALL our sins: past, present and future.

"...having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us ..."

This is referring to the Old Covenant Law of God. That Law which defined our sin. Without the Law, there is no definition of sin. The Law is what determines right from wrong. So, what is Paul saying here? The Law of God has been cancelled? How could that be? Easy, the Law was finally fulfilled completely by a man for all mankind in the obedient life of Jesus.

Jesus obeyed the Law completely and He did so on our behalf, thereby rendering the Old Covenant Law obsolete, replacing it with a New Covenant. Just in case you were in doubt as to what “cancelled” means, Paul makes it even clearer:

“...he took it away, nailing it to the cross ...”

The crucifixion of Jesus was, symbolically speaking, the place where the Law of God was executed for all time – not because it was bad – but because it was fulfilled, once and for all time, by Jesus, for us. Mankind had proven beyond any doubt that we were totally unable to obey the Law - we got it wrong over and over again.

So Jesus came and did it for us, served our sentence of death, then rose again three days later and ascended to the Father, only to return in the form of the Holy Spirit so that now, in these New Testament, New Covenant days in which we live, the life of Jesus Himself, the fulfiller of the Law of God, can be imparted to us and lived through us.

“...and having disarmed the powers and authorities ...”

When Jesus died and the Law was nailed to the cross, figuratively speaking, the tool which Satan had used to accuse us before God, namely the written code of the Law, was taken away. When a Prosecuting Attorney accuses you before a Judge and stands against you in a courtroom, he can only do that because there is a Law which defines your action as a crime. If that Law was taken away, you could never be successfully prosecuted ... not ever! The Attorney may still make a lot of noise and accuse you before the Judge, but the Judge’s response will always be, *“Sorry Mr Prosecutor, there is no basis for this charge.”* Sound familiar? It should. It is happening to you 24 hours a day before the throne of God.

Revelation 12:10 *“ ...Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God, day and night, has been hurled down.”*

Satan continues to accuse us. He continually tries to make us pay for our sins before God, even though Jesus did that for us. According to Colossians 2, Satan has no authority to do that because he has been disarmed by Jesus on the cross. But he will still try. He will torture us through our fallen imagination and conscience all the time. In fact, he is so relentless in this pursuit that He can actually have an effect on us, if we let him. He can never rob us of our salvation in real terms, but he can rob us of the present experience and assurance of our salvation.

If we don’t clearly understand what Colossians 2 and the rest of the New Testament affirms about our salvation and the forgiveness which is ours in Christ, once and for all sin, then we will start to feel guilt and shame all over again and we will effectively re-arm the devil and give him back the tools he needs to beat us up again.

He can’t beat us out of heaven – our eternal destiny is secure – but some days it sure feels like that’s what he’s done! Jesus disarmed the powers and authorities. He removed their authority and said *“ALL authority therefore is given to ME.”* That doesn’t leave much authority for Satan, does it? Not unless we give it back to him. How can we do that? It’s simple. We give Satan authority over us by receiving his accusations, and by falling away from grace and coming back under the law again.

When we are not rooted and grounded in truth; when we do not understand what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus achieved for us, then Satan can pick us off like sitting ducks and down we go in discouragement, depression and fear.

The other way in which we effectively give Satan authority over us again is through our sin. Satan inhabits the sin of God's people. We open the door to him by our sin. We "agree with him" in one sense. He finds something within us (sin) which resonates with his character and ministry and so an unholy 'connection' is formed, and we effectively invite him into our lives along with his ministry of deception, discouragement and despair. We can be substantially free from the enemy's influence and attack if we keep the two doors shut through which he enters most often: ignorance and sin.

I'm afraid I am going to have to leave it there for this sermon and continue this next time. I appreciate that there may still be some things hanging in the air, awaiting clarification, but stay tuned, they will be dealt with in the weeks ahead.

I want to encourage you to read back over this sermon and the previous one lots of times, talk to God about them and we will see if we can wrap this part up next time with some practical examples of the effect of sin in our lives and some suggestions about how we might deal with those things.

Let me just leave you with one of the many passages throughout the New Testament which sums up what God has done for us. Let this truth bless you.

Romans 6:9-14 *"For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."