



SIN AND FORGIVENESS
TAKE SIN SERIOUSLY

MATTHEW 18:1-9

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At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

⁷ “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Introduction

Today we begin a new series entitled *Sin & Forgiveness*. And here’s why. Because I believe the church is a mess worth making.

But if we’re going to be church, and not just play church or pretend church, then we’ve got to know how to deal with the mess.

Now, the mess is us. You and me, we’re the mess. This is the plain truth. Our lives aren’t what they’re supposed to be. We’re not who we should be. Yes, something is wrong with the world; but something is also wrong with each one of us.

Sin is what’s wrong. Sin is the culprit.

And not just the sins we do: the sinful acts we commit, the sinful thoughts we have, the sinful things we say; but also the *sinful people we are*. Sin is not only the spill, but the stain; it’s not only what we do, but what we become by having done it.

Sin has made a mess of things; and it continues to make a mess of things. From disintegrating marriages to tension-filled church business meetings, sin is an ever-present

reality in all our lives—and therefore in our life together, in our relationships, in our homes, in our church.

How, then, shall we live? How do we live in relationship, and together as the Body of Christ, when sin is such an ever-present reality?

According to Jesus, we've got to know how to deal with sin. Jesus knows this is essential for life together, the key to community.

And so in this chapter from Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives us some very specific and practical instruction on how to deal with sin. In fact, he sets out for us *four specific practices* for how to respond to the reality of sin in a way that honors him and maintains relationships with one another.

Here are the four practices, which will be the focus of four sermons over the next four weeks. First, take sin seriously (vv. 6-9). Second, pursue sinners recklessly (vv. 10-14). Third, confront sin faithfully (vv. 15-20). And, fourth, forgive sin endlessly (vv. 21-35).

Today, we begin where Jesus begins, with this first practice: *Take Sin Seriously*. If we're going to enjoy intimacy with one another, fervency in our love for Christ, a sense of urgency for the salvation of the lost, then we must take sin seriously.

We Don't Take Sin Seriously

Sin is serious. Far more serious than any of us think; far more serious than any of us can even begin to imagine.

Sin is, at its core, a violation of the first commandment, which says: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). Sin is, in essence, idolatry: exalting yourself over God. Sin is self-exaltation; it is self-glorification.

Sin is what Martin Luther referred to as the inner curvature of the self, where everything we think, say or do has a way of turning it back toward ourselves. Sin is self-centeredness, self-rule, self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction.¹

And if we could see sin for what it really is—the sinfulness of sin in itself or the infinite offense it is to a holy God—we would no doubt be completely undone. This is what happens to people when they get a clearer picture of their own sin: they're dismayed, horrified even. "Woe is me!" cries the prophet Isaiah, when he sees the holiness of God and the reality of his own sin.

The fact is, however, that we don't take sin seriously. Our culture doesn't take sin seriously. Sin isn't even a category we understand; it's a word we no longer use. Or if we use it, it's only tongue-in-cheek, about something we know we shouldn't eat, like the "Sinful French Toast" I once saw on a breakfast menu.

As Christians, I think we too struggle to take sin seriously. If you talk seriously or specifically about sin, people may accuse you of being a fundamentalist. Someone will invoke the dreaded fear of legalism and the conversation will soon be over; you'll be able to return to drinking beer and watching basketball.

¹ Lane and Tripp, *Relationships*, pp. 33-35.

The fact of the matter is that as fallen human beings we don't take sin seriously. Of course, this is one of sin's chief effects on us; sin causes us to not take it seriously. It's an ingenious feature of the disease called sin; one that makes you terminally ill yet convinces you that you're in the best shape of your life.

And then there's the World, the Flesh and the Devil. These three blind us to the seriousness of sin. The World normalizes sin, so that what's offensive to God comes off looking cool to us. Our Flesh deceives us about sin's seriousness; it whispers sweet-nothings in our ears and tells us sin isn't so sinister after all. And the Devil, he's very good at distracting us from even thinking about the sinfulness of sin; instead, he keeps us preoccupied with thinking about what we'll miss out on if we don't do what he says we should do.

Dread The Thought Of Causing Others To Sin (18:6-7)

We take sin seriously, however, when, as Jesus says, *we dread the thought of causing others to sin*. Yes, you heard me right: dread. For dread is precisely the kind of reaction Jesus wants you and me to experience at the thought of causing someone to sin.

That's why he uses such a dreadful image in these verses: "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (18:6).

I can hardly imagine a more horrible way to die, than having a rope tied around my neck and attached to a huge rock, which is then thrown over the side of a boat, ripping me off the deck and into the ocean, pulling me down headfirst toward the ocean's bottom.

But when the stakes are high, and we're prone to not appreciate how serious something actually is, we need our imaginations to be shocked with graphic images to awaken us from our slumber of insensitivity to reality.

My dad was a big outdoorsman, and so I grew up fishing and hunting. We were always around guns. And when you're a kid, guns are cool. You want to spin your dad's pistol around your finger, or you want to point his shotgun at your older brother and tease him by pulling the trigger. You're completely oblivious to the seriousness of guns.

That's why my dad enrolled me and my brothers in a hunter's safety course. It was a very effective course, partly because of what I learned about safely handling a gun; but partly because the course scarred us half-to-death. They showed us videos of hunters who'd mishandled their gun when climbing a fence or getting down from a tree-stand. The course did its job because from that day forward we dreaded the thought of ever mishandling a weapon.

Jesus uses this horrific image of drowning in the depths of the ocean for the same reason. He wants to instill within us dread of causing others to sin. He wants us to be horrified by the thought; more horrified by that, in fact, than by experiencing that kind of horrible death.

Unfortunately, of course, the world is full of people who don't dread the thought of causing others to sin. And, in fact, there are some who actually delight in causing others to sin. Here I think of the porn industry. Jesus has a word for those who don't dread causing others to sin: "Woe!" His is a word of judgment: "Woe to the world for temptations to sin!" (v. 7).

For those who don't dread the thought of causing others to sin, Jesus has only one word for you: "Woe!" You see, when you won't take sin seriously, there's nothing left for Jesus to say to you, other than to pronounce judgment over you: "Woe to you!"

But how about you? Do you dread the thought of causing others to sin? And are you aware of the ways in which you can or perhaps have caused others to sin, by the things you choose to do or the things you choose to say?

To take sin seriously means to dread the very thought of causing others to sin.

Take Aggressive Steps To Avoid Sin (18:8-9)

But being serious about sin also means, secondly, *you'll take aggressive steps to avoid sin yourself*. You'll not only dread the thought of causing others to sin, you'll take aggressive steps to avoid sin yourself.

Taking aggressive steps to avoid sin is just what Jesus calls for in these verses. I don't know how else to understand this hard saying of Jesus.

And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire (vv. 8-9).

Jesus is obviously serious about sin; and he's clearly serious about you and me being serious about sin as well. So much so he calls us to sacrifice a hand or a foot or an eye in order to avoid sin.

These three—our hands, feet, and eyes—are how we engage with the world. They're symbolic of what we do, where we go, what we look at. And they're the sources of virtually all the sin in our lives.

Are there things you do, places you go, stuff you look at, that tempt you to sin? Does going to Oak Brook Mall—browsing through J. Crew or Anthropologie or Crate & Barrel or the Apple Store—does that encourage contentment or covetousness? Does watching that television show replenish your joy, or add to your apathy? Does listening to that particular talk-radio engender humility, or stir-up anxiety, even anger? Does your recreational use of alcohol foster within you thanksgiving, or is it at root an emotional coping mechanism for overly stressed-out life?

Does cruising around on Facebook help you pray more intentionally for the people in your life, or does it simply scratch the itching sore of curiosity or, even worse, tempt you to troll around looking for your old boy friend or girl friend? Does having lunch with that particular friend elevate you spiritually, or engage you in fruitless gossip? Does reading that particular magazine nourish your soul, or provoke worldliness and materialism? Does listening to that kind of music elevate your affection for God, or subtly provoke a kind of youthful sensuality and lust?

And, most importantly, are you and I willing to cut off, gauge out, throw away whatever it is that might tempt us to sin? Even if it doesn't seem like it's that big of a deal; and even if it's going to be a painfully severing sacrifice, lopping off something we really like?

It's amazing the pain we're willing to endure, indeed, willing to inflict on ourselves, if we know our life is on the line. Perhaps you've heard the story of canyon hiker Aron Ralston. While climbing canyons he managed to get his right hand pinned under an 800 pound rock. He was

trapped for 5 days, a total of 127 hours. Then came an epiphany: if he could break both bones in his forearm, then he could probably use the small, dull two-inch knife blade he had to cut through his arm and release himself from the rock.

And that's just what he did. He severed his arm, freed himself, and six hours later was rescued by park rangers by helicopter. When talking about the incident and the extraordinary thing he did to survive, Aron says he didn't lose his hand; instead, he gained his life!

It's amazing what you'll do when faced with the stark choice of losing a limb or losing your life. Of course, no one wants to lose a hand, much less have to cut it off yourself with a dull knife. But if it means saving your life, then severing a limb isn't courage, it's just commonsense. It's the better option by far.

That's precisely what Jesus is trying to tell us in this passage. If you're serious about sin—which you and I very much need to be—then you'll take aggressive and often painful steps to avoid it.

When was the last time you severed something from your life, because it was tempting you to sin? No doubt, if you can't remember a time when you've ever had to do that, then you're probably not taking sin as seriously as Jesus means for you to take it.

On the other hand, some of you have specific temptations coming to mind even now. Resolve right now, friend, to do something about it. Commit this very moment to cut it off, gauge it out, throw it away—for Jesus' sake and for the sake of your own soul. Stop exchanging suggestive glances with that attractive coworker. Don't visit that person's Facebook page anymore. Cancel your cable subscription. Put the filter on the office or home computer. Stop gossiping or grumbling with that person over the phone.

You see, this is the real test of how serious you are about sin: not whether you're able to judge sin in the lives of others, but whether you'll take aggressive steps to avoid sin in your own life.

Embrace God's Solution for Sin

There's one last way in which we take sin seriously: *when we embrace God's solution for sin*. And this is God's solution to sin: *Forgiveness*. "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3).

You might be tempted to think that this would be easy to do. But it's not. It's easy, of course, to think that you've embraced God's solution for sin, when in actual fact you've only winked at it from a distance, or perhaps gotten close enough to shake hands with God's solution for sin.

But embracing God's solution for sin means owning God's verdict against sin; and not just sin in the abstract, but your sin. To embrace God's sacrifice for sin is to own the full extent of your guilt. "Terribly black must that guilt be for which nothing but the blood of the Son of God could make satisfaction."²

Frankly, I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't be more offended by the cross of Christ, if we truly grasped what the death of Jesus says about who we really are. How bad must I be if the

² J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, p. 6.

only way I can be forgiven is for God himself to die in my place? How infinite my debt if God himself had to die in my stead to make things right!

It's all too easy, I suspect, for us to mistake embracing God's solution for sin with thinking that we've made sufficient excuse for ourselves to God so that he can take us as we are. It's not easy to embrace God's forgiveness for what it truly is. We often think we are, when what we've done is pacified our own conscience by giving to God our excuses for why it is that we did what we did.

But giving God our excuses isn't embracing God's solution for sin. In fact, it's not real forgiveness at all. As C. S. Lewis explains:

Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it.³

Conclusion

You see, when you look at our culture, and you look at our lives, it's safe to say that we just don't take sin very seriously.

But do you know what we take even less seriously than sin? *God's amazing grace and wondrous mercy, revealed to us in the death of Christ.*

Yet if our grasp of sin is only superficial, then our appropriation of the cross of Christ will only be surface-deep. The work of Christ won't penetrate the depths of our soul, where it needs to go.

And when that happens, we're left in a state of profound spiritual insecurity: insecure in our relationship with God, but also in our relationship with others.

But as we confront the seriousness as sin, we're able to embrace the beauty of the cross. In fact, the more serious we are about sin, the more precious the cross of Christ will be to us.

Let us be humbled, then, by the seriousness of sin. And yet let us be evermore grateful for the preciousness of Christ. He is God's wondrous solution to sin.

"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Amen.

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³ Lewis, "Forgiveness," in *Weight of Glory*, p. 181.