

Sunday, July 14, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Ephesians 2:1-10
Romans 3:19-31

Sin and Grace

Sin and grace. Now, I need to be honest for a moment here and say, when I opened up this sermon request and that was all it said—sin and grace—my reaction was rather...overwhelmed is not quite the right word, but something close to that. I thought, “Okay, pick two of the biggest ideas and beliefs in Christianity and throw them together in one sermon—sin and grace—alrighty, then.”

However, at the end of the day, it does make sense to put them together—as major and as large as of ideas as they may be. For as Christians, we ought to never really talk about sin without talking about grace. And we can’t talk about grace without talking about sin. So, sin and grace. Here we are.

We’re going to start with sin. It was first on the list but also, it’s a little easier to talk about grace if we’ve established where we’re at with sin, first.

The definition of sin that I usually function with and tend to offer to people is this: Sin is anything that separates us from God. Or put another way, sin is anything that comes between us and God, gets in the middle of our relationship with God. Period. End of sentence. It’s not, sin is anything bad in the world or sin is whatever we decide is bad. No, sin is whatever might exist in our lives that is separating us from God. Augustine used the idea of orientation. Sin is anything that orients us away from God.

This is an important distinction to make—that it’s not necessarily about what we might decide separates all of us from God, but about what actually, for each of us individually, is. The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

separating us from God. This is important because it means that sin is different for every person and what might not be a sin for you could be one for me and vice versa. An example to help illustrate this point:

One really common one that we don't often talk about—TV. This is something I've discovered in my own life in the past few years. I enjoy a good movie or TV show and there's nothing wrong with that. However, there have been times when I've used the TV to escape—to not think about issues I need to deal with, to take up time in my day so I “don't have time” to spend with God or doing other things. So, for most of us, most of the time TV is not an issue; however, for some us, sometimes, it becomes a barrier between us and God. That's when it becomes sin.

This idea carries over into all areas of our lives. Anything in the world has the potential to be a sin for us, if we use it the wrong way or allow it to enter the relationship we have with our Creator. It's up to each of us to figure out individually what are the things that cause us to sin, what are the things that turn us away from God. And to be conscious of the fact that it's not the same for everyone—that we all struggle with different things and part of being a community of faith is supporting each other in the areas where we struggle.

Some last few things specifically about sin. First, a question, would you say that there are some sins (some things that separate us from God) that are worse than other sins? If you said yes, I'd like to ask, where did you learn that? Where did we learn that some sins are worse than others? And you know where it comes from? Dante's *Inferno*. Dante created levels to hell and decided which level people would end up in based upon what type of sin they'd committed.

That's not the Bible. That's not Scripture. I do not know of a passage where God says, if you

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commit this sin, I'm going to judge you more harshly than if you had just committed this other sin. It doesn't exist. Dante and society have taught us there are levels of sin and it's just not true.

Why isn't it true? Because, as Paul points out in our passage today, "There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:22-23, NRSV). We have all sinned. We've all allowed things and continue to allow things to separate us from God. So, if we think that because our sin isn't "as bad" as someone else's, that we're closer to God than they are, that we're better than they are, we're wrong. God does not rank sin. Sin is sin is sin, period. And we have all sinned.

So, it's pretty great news that is not the end of the story. For God has offered grace to all people. What do we mean when we say that? When we talk about God's grace or even just the term grace?

David Bartlett, professor of preaching, offers a definition and explanation that I really appreciate and so I offer them to you now:

Because we fall short of God's glory, only the God of glory can make us right. God does this as a gift. The word for God's gift to us is "grace." Grace *means* gift, abundant gift, undeserved gift, gift that makes everything wrong wondrously right... God's grace forgives, passes over, forgets our former sins. God grants unconditional amnesty. God is like a governor who at the last minute gets an appeal to commute our sentence. The governor not only commutes our sentence; the governor declares us innocent, wipes our conviction off the books, sets us free. God's grace justifies, makes right—puts us into right relationship to God so that we acknowledge God as God. God is like the parent who welcomes home the child who has wandered far away, not only forgiving and forgetting,

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but loving and rejoicing: arms always open, heart always open. (*Romans: Westminster Bible Companion*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 1995. 39)

God reaches out to each of us, saying, “I love you. Exactly the way you are. And for all the things and ways you’ve let the world come between us, I forgive you. And I love you.

This is the power of grace. This affirmation and assurance that no matter what we’ve done, no matter how much we might have turned from God, or allowed the world to separate us from God, God is still right there with us; loving us; accepting us; telling us we are worthy. Grace changes everything.

Like I talked about with the children, grace means that we are valued, we are worthy, we are loved. Grace means that even though we might make bad choices, we might commit or allow sin into our lives over and over and over, we are not bad or evil people.

How life changing can grace be? Here’s one example from Timothy McMahan King, author of the book *Addiction Nation: What the Opioid Crisis Reveals About Us*. This is from an article that was adapted from his book, published by Sojourners magazine on July 11, 2019 and titled “Grace is the Most Powerful Antidote for Addiction.” (<https://sojo.net/articles/grace-most-powerful-antidote-addiction?fbclid=IwAR2iZCy6wCdVN7YqvWSOEKzPVNdylwouzSwPPVzgT9KKc8PTseeXJPT5Sb0>)

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That is just one example of the power of grace—the power of living in a way that shows the world we may not always agree with their decisions but that doesn't mean they are evil, bad people. They may have just made evil, bad decisions.

We all need that reassurance—that we are beloved just as we are, that we are worthy of the gift God offers to us—because we all sin. We all do things that separate us from God. And God still keeps saying, you are my children, my beloved, receive my grace.

So, sin and grace—some major ideas and beliefs that form part of the foundation of our faith. But there they are—or at least there's one small piece of understanding and explanation of sin and grace.

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