

Sermon for Sunday, October 11, 2009
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SIN AND ITS CURE
Romans 2:12-29

A while ago I signed up to rent a movie package for a minimal rent. It has a DVD by mail component which I use to order old hard and rare movies from Mongolia and Kazakhstan. I ordered the 1957 crypto-existentialistic war movie, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, a strange but excellent movie. A few weeks later they sent me another copy of same movie. I e-mailed them and said, "You just sent me this movie." They wrote back, "So sorry we erred with your order; we are shipping *Bridge on the River Kwai* today." I said: "If I don't want two copies of the same movie I certainly don't want three," but things never improved. Their failure can be explained two ways. Either machines are reading the mail or a lot of customer service folk hate their job and hope to quit soon. When I finally reached a live person, they said, "It's not my problem; it's that department, over there."

This is a "mistake," not a "sin," but it illustrates a point. When things go wrong, we either face and remedy the problem, or we ignore it and make excuses. Most of Romans 2 considers the ways people excuse sin, the ways they try to avoid the problem. We must face and resolve the problem of sin. In the end, there are no excuses. Face your sin, yield to God's work. Repent and follow him.

Romans 2:1-3 says, "You therefore have no excuse." You cannot say, "I agree with God's judgment or condemnation of sin" as if you are totally on God's side, as if you do something noble by judging other people.

Further, Romans 2:4-5 says you can't say, "Yes, I have sinned, but God has to forgive, that's His job." God does not owe us grace. He does give us time to repent. God will judge everyone impartially, according to their deeds. If, having seen His divine power and learning of His law and gospel, we seek Him and the glory, honor, life and peace He offers, He will grant all that and more – eternal life. If not, if we live for self and self-promotion we face His judgment (2:6-11).

1. Consciousness of sin (2:12-16)

Paul was quite aware of a major objection to the concept of judgment: there is no equity in it. We say: How can God judge nations who have no knowledge of Jesus or the Bible? Paul expresses it this way: How can God judge Jew and Gentile impartially, when Jews have such an advantage? They have the law and the covenant; the Gentile is in the dark.

Paul replies, first, that the difference is not absolute. The Jew has the written law and the Gentile has God's law written on his heart (2:15). Besides, mere knowledge offers no favor; Jews must do the law. So, whether someone sins with or without possessing direct knowledge of the law, sin always leads to judgment.

Again, 2:13: "It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law." Reading, studying, teaching others – none of that counts if you refuse to do it. The rabbis of Paul's day agreed! James 1 says:

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law... and continues to do...it, he will be blessed in what he does.”

Scripture is like a mirror to our soul. We gaze in a physical mirror to inspect and perhaps improve our physical appearance, so we should gaze into the spiritual mirror to inspect and improve our spiritual appearance.

Like a mirror, Scripture discloses our sin, the need for repentance and grace. Therefore, we should remember what we see long enough to mend it. But we gaze at ourselves all too carelessly. We peer into the mirror each morning. We may even investigate the image. Is our hair turning gray? Is that a new wrinkle? Is it time for a haircut? But time rushes on. We shave our face or apply makeup – probably not both - and forget our appearance as we go to the day's tasks.

This is sensible, but it can be embarrassing if something is amiss. It's awkward when someone points out a button that is undone on our shirt. We think, "I knew that button was undone. I was going to fix it in the car." But it can get worse: Spinach or lettuce in our teeth. Worse, you've noticed when someone isn't quite looking you in the eye... "What? What is it?" "You've got... sauce on our lips."

We should pay attention to our face, much more to our soul. Paul says Jew and Gentile are both responsible for this. Gentiles have some light. You know that Job and Melchizedek were no part of Israel or the covenant community, yet God found them and they found God. Thus it's possible for outsiders to pursue the truth and find it – find God. Likewise, everyone has a sense of right and wrong. In virtually every society known to man, murder, betrayal, and lying are immoral.

God wrote his law on our hearts. He granted an innate sense of right and wrong, gave us a moral compass. We may not always listen to our conscience, but it speaks. It isn't infallible, but it speaks. We can silence or distort our conscience. If we treat someone like dirt long enough and keep telling ourselves they deserve it, we may believe it. But whose fault is that?

The conscience is a God-given, but fallible, guide. Like mind, body and will, the conscience doesn't work perfectly, it's tainted by sin like all the rest. But it is a God-given guide that tells us some things are wrong – we should listen. It also tells us that some things are right – even if just about everyone disagrees.

So, through nature and the law written on the heart and conscience, God gives everyone enough light that he can judge all flesh. As Jesus says, that will be according to the knowledge we possess. He will judge our hearts, our secrets.

Augustine was a church leader who was quite alert to the problem of his sin. Of course, he spent decades shunning the faith of his mother, pursuing his career and dabbling in other faiths, such as Manichaeism. But he never forgot his lusts and vacillations. In his early adult life, he lived with a concubine.

This was common among upper class Romans. Families often took years to arrange a proper marriage for their children, one that consolidated wealth and prestige. During that period, parent or child found a low class woman, one who could never be a proper bride. But she could provide companionship and every physical comfort. Then came the engagement, and they sent the concubine away.

Augustine's father got him a concubine when he was eighteen or twenty, but arranged his marriage when he was about thirty. So he lived with his concubine for ten to twelve years; they had a child. When they sent her away, she left in terrible grief. Augustine wept too; "My heart... was cut and left a trail of blood." Nonetheless, since his marriage was still more than two years away, he procured a second concubine for himself. Miserable man: he couldn't forget his first love, but couldn't bring himself to call

her back. Meanwhile, he couldn't live chastely, either. He knew this was wrong, but he couldn't stop. This is the problem of sin¹

2. Denial of sin (2:17-24)

Paul is well aware that many of his readers will claim, "That is not my story." So he turns to the problem of evasion. Paul says everyone sins, whether they know they're breaking God's law or not. Asians and Europeans, living millennia ago, didn't know Moses said, "You shall not steal." But they knew it was wrong to steal because the law was written on their hearts. So no one gets off saying, "I didn't know the law." So far, Paul knows his Jewish friends will agree with him.

But now Paul pursues that reader with sharp rhetorical questions. In that day, it was the Jew. Today, perhaps it is someone who grew up in church. Religious people commit the same kinds of sins as pagans and so are liable to God's just judgment, too. The Jew, Paul says, "relies on the law" and brags about his relationship with God.

This goes wrong two ways. He follows the law as a work, not by faith and thinks he can "fulfill it in such a way as to put God in his debt." Or he imagines that the mere fact of possessing" the law gives him spiritual security. Paul is especially blunt with those who claim to be enlightened in versus 2:19-24:

"If you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth — you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'" (2:19-24).

Some people think they know what really matters, what is good and what is best. They are guides for the blind, the instructors of fools (2:18). They boast and parade their knowledge, but "You who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?" (2:19-20).

If teachers fail to practice what they preach, they heap shame on God's name. They invite people to say, "These religious people, they're all hypocrites." It destroys the witness of your fellow Christian. It dims the light of Christ and the gospel. Some even curse God's name because of people who profess to know God but publicly violate his law. As a pastor, people tell me, "I know a pastor who...". Some say, "I know a pastor who..." and quit the church for five years as result.

It's easy to denounce the pagans who bowed to idols, but it's not that simple. An idol is anyone or anything takes the place of God in your life. It is anything that gives you identity, meaning, purpose, love, security. We look for a center, a source of direction and significance. A foodie finds it in food and a druggie finds it in drugs. That's easy. The educated find it in knowledge. The successful find it in respect or power.

We talk about fashion gods – Armani and Prada. We have a TV show called American Idol. If you wear an image of a musician on your shirt, or if you go to his concert that is within seven hours of your house, if you collect his memorabilia, if you leap for joy and weep in sorrow for your politician or sports team, or if you live for your children and neglect every other relationship for them, it's all idolatry.

¹ Jacobs, *Original Sin*, pages 26-27

Back to the law: So it's no excuse to say, "I didn't know the law" and it's no use to say, "I know the law very well." There is just one question: do you obey it? More precisely, do you obey in a spirit of faith?

The claim of knowledge is just the first of many ways to evade the charge that everyone is accountable to God for their sins. Paul mentions the Jew, the well-educated religious person. Learned people: There is no merit in mere knowledge. Education is no excuse for sin. Even if you knew God so well that you could substitute for him on judgment day, that won't exonerate you. What counts is your life, not your data base.

But people try to escape God's judgment other ways. If one appeals to education, others appeal to lineage. George Whitfield, the great 18th century evangelist, gained the friendship and trust of the Countess of Huntington, who introduced him to her peers. Whitfield consistently began his preaching of grace with the problem of sin, especially original sin. Another duchess, the Duchess of Buckingham, was displeased: "The doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their Superiors. It is monstrous [and] 'highly insulting' to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth." So the doctrine of original sin "offends every aristocracy, real or imagined".² But doctrine doesn't offend, it enables us to see our brokenness.

We all have our strategies for escaping culpability for the problem of sin. Some appeal to knowledge, some to lineage. Others deny their problems. Denial may be the most common approach when a man or woman is caught in major sin. Are you taking drugs? "No!" But the truth is "yes". Are you telling me everything I need to know? "Yes", but no. The truth usually comes out but not all the truth about everything. But big sins, escalating sins, come out. Ask Bernie Madoff.

We use other excuses for sin. We shift blame and get angry at others: "I failed, but it's really his fault." We pity ourselves as failures so wretched and miserable that there is no point in trying. Or we brush it all off, pretending we don't care. Or like the fans who used to attend games of the once dreadful New Orleans Saints with bags over their heads, we try to create ironic detachment from ourselves.

So we deny our sin in many ways, but none of them works. Nor does the last mechanism that Paul describes in 2:25-27: the Jews' appeal to his position as an heir of the covenant and a recipient of circumcision, the sign of the covenant. Circumcision was indeed a sign of the covenant and a token of the blessings of God. The equivalent today is baptism.

Paul says it would be a foolish complacency to rely on circumcision – or baptism - as a "certain passport to salvation". If a child is circumcised or baptized and the adult ignores and violates the covenant, what good is it? Well, it isn't worthless. The child who has some connection to the faith has still heard the Word of God and God never forgets the people who stood inside his covenant family (Romans 3:1-3, Romans 11).

Still, the parent who baptizes the child and fails to raise the child in the faith hasn't really helped his child. Neither Jew nor Christian is helped by a superficial bond to the faith. Complacency can blind him to his need and danger. The prophets say such a person has an uncircumcised heart. The apostles might say an unwashed heart. The ritual touches the flesh, but the spirit is untouched. His life is a contradiction. There is a relationship with God, but it's negative.

² Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin*, page 76

It's like a woman who has a father, but the relationship is fraught with tension and disappointment. Yes, the woman has a father, but what is the good? There is the possibility of reconciliation, but either father or daughter must seize it.

On the contrary, there is another person who does not receive the sign of the covenant. There are no public vows. Yet he or she follows the law – not perfectly, but sincerely. He worships no idols. She loves the Lord with heart, soul, mind and strength. One person has the law and all knowledge, the other loves God and tries to obey; who then is right with God?

Brothers and sisters, don't rest in your knowledge. Don't be content with baptism and catechism and membership vows.

Don't be impressed by religious rituals and ceremonies or by knowledge and study – not even your own. Aim for true religion, public and private worship of the Lord – that is, the Lord Jesus. This is the true cure for sin.

3. The true cure for sin

"A man is not a Jew (or a Christian) if he is only one outwardly", if the signs of the covenant have touched his body (2:28). "No, a man is a Jew – or a Christian – if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (2:29). Such a man, as Jesus says elsewhere, will rise up and judge those who had so much light and chose to fool around with religion, instead of believing.

Moreover, some people are believers by all outward appearance – in the Old Testament, a Jew, today a Christian. But true religion is inward and spiritual (2:29). The letter, "the written code", does not change a man. The Spirit must "circumcise" or cleanse the heart. That is, true religion never rests on human efforts to follow a code. As we know, there is a code. It's important and true and we should follow it, but that code and our obedience are always secondary. As Moses told Israel long before, "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts... that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live" (cf. Jeremiah 4:4, 9:26, etc.)

Back to Augustine: In his youth he wrestled with his desires, but he also battled his ambitions. He wanted to teach rhetoric, a noble calling at the time, but shifted from Carthage to Rome to Milan. He dabbled in Manichaeism, a popular religion of his day, but he also liked Christianity. Yet the Christian ethic seemed too demanding. With his close friend Alypius, Augustine read stories about people who dedicated their lives to God, but he hesitated and hesitated until one day he cried to his friend, "What is wrong with us!?" Good question.³

But there is more. In another place Augustine says our sin made us God's enemies. Yet because our sin had not entirely consumed his handiwork, "he knew... how... to hate what we had done [to ourselves], and to love what he had done" [in creating us]. Therefore he calls to us.

And God did call to Augustine once more. After his anguished cry, he went outside, sat under a tree, "steaming with self-reproach, yet still agonizing as he hesitated. Soon he heard a child's voice calling "tolle, lege" – take, read. He took this as God's command and picked up a copy of Romans, lying nearby. He opened to Romans 13 and started to read:

³ Jacobs, *28 Confessions*, book 8

“Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (13:13-14).

Augustine says, "I neither wished nor needed to read further." But Alypius asked him to read the next sentence. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him" (14:1). At once his uncertainty fell away. Before long he studied the word full time with a band of friends. He quit pursuing his career in rhetoric; he gave his all to Christ; in a few years, he was a bishop – and Alypius was also. The Spirit touched him and he truly called on Christ. As should we.

The apostle Peter stood before Israel's priests– very religious people who did not believe in Jesus - and said, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name... given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

There is no other name. And it is our name. "**We** must be saved." Not just outsiders, insiders too. There is no difference: all of the redeemed are right with God by grace alone through faith alone. God saves us the day we sincerely trust in him, he saves us day by day as the Holy Spirit applies the work of Jesus more and more, and he will complete it one day.

So look into the mirror and confess things as they are. Don't evade the issue. Turn to Christ, whether for the first time or for the first time in a while. Or turn to him again in delight, as you do every day. He is for all of us.