

THE CALL TO SINNERS

JUNE 15, 2008

This day's official readings, as we the study and read our way through the New Testament, speak to the thorny issue of sin and how it separates men and women from God. This was a hot topic in the time of Jesus as people of faith struggled to do what was right. All around them they witnessed so many people who had given themselves over to frivolous and often evil lives. While not wanting to follow the example of these fallen people, there was never the less a fascination in the lives of others, even those they regarded as "not acceptable" to society or God.

The Bible takes sin in dead seriousness. Unlike many of today's religionists, who seek to find excuses for sin and to explain away its seriousness, most of the writers of the Bible had a keen awareness of its awfulness, culpability and tragedy. They looked upon sin as no less than a dreadful estrangement from God who is the sole source of well-being. They knew that apart from God, men and women are lost sinners, unable to save themselves or find true happiness.

It is not difficult to find biblical passages referring to sin; as a matter of fact, there are few chapters which do not contain some reference to what sin is or does. In a sense, in the Bible, it appears that men and women have only two theological concerns involving themselves: their sin and their salvation.

Men and women find themselves in sin and suffer its painful effects; God graciously offers salvation from it. This is, in essence, what the whole Bible is about. We sin, God offers salvation. However, as we know, it is not quite that simple!

As might be expected, as the Bible unfolds, we see a marked development in the understanding of sin. As far back as we can go in the origins of men and women anywhere on this earth, we see this dilemma of man in respect of sin. An unavoidable aspect of any religion has been the realization of some kind of estrangement between man and the divine. There is every reason to believe that even in the earliest days the Hebrews possessed at least the beginnings of a genuine awareness of the theological meaning of sin. As their understanding of God's being and personality developed, their recognition of the seriousness of sin only increased.

The prophets preached the tragic reality of the nation's sin, and the people learned it by experience, particularly in the events leading up to the Exile. The New Testament put sin in an even darker light as it simultaneously demonstrated God's amazing way of dealing with sin in Christ Jesus.

The Old Testament, with its emphasis on moral and spiritual values, is particularly rich in the vocabulary of sin. These Old Testament writers were not interested in creating a definitive definition of sin. Rather they strove to reflect in their rich and vivid terminology the profundity and the widespread effects of sin as they experienced it. In other words, by their stories taken from real life came the illustrations which made the concept of sin alive, believable, understandable and powerful.

They spoke of sin as a verb indicating moral and spiritual failure, either towards one's fellow man or toward God. They extended this to include the guilt and punishment accompanying sin. Sin was also meant as overstepping or transgressing the word, command, law or covenant of God.

Then they would speak in more theological terms, indicating sin as defiance against God. This is an active choice by men and women to revolt or rebel against God and his creation. In other words, they spoke of sin as willful disobedience, not an accidental slipping unknowingly into a state of sinfulness. It was a choice which led to an active defiance of God's rule.

The writers speak of the sinner's inner state. This is the state of moral and spiritual badness manifested in various forms of maliciousness and perversity. "Doers of evil" and "evil men" are the expressive terms used so often for sinners. In short, these terms express conscious and intentional badness.

The Old Testament writers had different terms for guilt. It is important to realize that the Hebrews did not distinguish between sin and its resultant guilt. Therefore all their words for sin also express guilt that accompanies sin.

So, we have the predominant conception of the nature of sin in the Bible is that of personal alienation from God. It was chiefly the great prophets who led Israel to see that sin is something intensely spiritual, and consequently deeply tragic. They proclaimed that sin in its awful reality touches upon a man or woman's personal standing with God. "Woe is me!" cried Isaiah as he received his vision of Yahweh high and lifted up, "for I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." (6.5) Thus, the sinner becomes particularly aware of his deep sinfulness in the awesome presence of the holy God. Such sin was rightly understood to be, in its deepest essence, estrangement or alienation from God as direct result of man's distrust and disobedience. Sin is above all revolt against God. And of significance was the Hebrew understanding that sin is rooted in the human heart and therefore all human life is liable to being tainted by it. To the Hebrew, no area of the human activity is exempt from sin. To the Hebrew, man **was** responsible for sin and could not escape that responsibility.

In the New Testament, the presence and the problem of sin are just as much a part of the New Testament as of the Old Testament. However, there is an astounding difference. All the old terms and concepts for sin are here in the New Testament, but deepened and strangely transformed. The one factor which makes this great difference is the work of Jesus Christ. He provides something which the saints of the Old Testament yearned for but never could find: real and certain victory over sin.

The doctrine of sin in the New Testament is dominated by the assurance that Christ has come to conquer sin. Thus whatever is said to emphasize sin's deadliness and seriousness only serves to magnify the greatness of the salvation from sin which Christ has obtained.

Jesus, according to the gospel writers, offered no statement on the nature of sin. He was not interested in sin in an abstract way but rather he was more interested in sinners. In the Sermon on the Mount he showed that all the hidden attitudes and emotions are involved in sin, just as much as the outward actions. It is what lies in the heart that counts most in God's sight. It is the sin in the very depths of man's being that defiles men and women the most.

In the New Testament, the sinner is never excused of his responsibility for his sin. Equally important, no sinner is considered beyond saving. Sin is a debt that must be paid unless God mercifully forgives it. The fact that the sinner is continually urged to repent is proof that he is responsible and that there is help for him if he sincerely seeks it.

This is why Christ appeared: "He will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21); he is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29); he "came not to call the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:13); "the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19: 10).

In a sense all of this explains Jesus' attitude toward the notorious sinners in Jewish society, with whom he intimately conversed and even sat down to table. He really was a "friend of tax collectors and sinners." The proud and self-righteous Pharisees scorned Jesus for this; in their eyes it proved his own baseness. But Jesus knew the only way to help a needy sinner was to enter into a close relationship with him with his own holy presence. This was not only psychologically sound but also theologically meaningful. It is in the presence of one who is holy, yet gracious, that a sinner will confess and renounce his sin. Like John the Baptist, Jesus preached repentance and demonstrated God's forgiveness. This preaching of repentance and the demonstrating of God's forgiveness must still be the urgent appeal of the church as it carries the gospel to many places.

We are to preach that Christ's work, and particularly the reconciliation which he obtained upon the cross, is set forth as the crowning victory over the power of sin. As St. Paul makes so abundantly clear in Romans and Galatians, a sinner obtains justification before God through faith in this Jesus Christ. This leads to the regeneration and transformation of the sinner. The believing sinner is now a new man or woman in Christ. He or she is nothing less than a new creature; it is no longer he or she who lives but Christ who lives in him or her; because of this the old sinful nature is being put to death and a new spiritual nature brought to life. It is his or her duty now to be completely transformed, rather than to continue in conformity to the world.

What is interesting as we consider this is that all this puts the problem of sin into an entirely different light.

The burning question is no longer how to obtain righteousness (this is God's free gift) or how to rid oneself of guilt (Christ has taken this upon himself), but how to live consistently in this new sphere of life.

So, we can be comforted knowing that even the purest saints are never free from sin. A believer tries not to sin and yet he or she does sin. The difference for the Christian lies in the principle of our lives. A true Christian can never give himself or herself over to sin; yet he or she will every day still need to pray: "Forgive us our sins." (Luke 11:4) it is for this reason that we can never claim a righteousness obtained by our own efforts. Our abiding consciousness is that of our debt to the grace of God.

So much more could be said about sin, including the effects of sin. However, the key from all of this really is the essential message that God in Christ has offered forgiveness and walks beside us so that we can grow in stature, wisdom and strength as we attempt to become the people God created us to be.

The call to sinners by Christ is as follows: Come unto me all you who labour and I will give you rest. I will sit down with you and celebrate with you your journey of faith. My very presence will indicate your value in the eyes of God who is forgiving, energizing and gracious.

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