

Why Are We in a Mess?

Genesis 3

Discipleship Essentials - Part Two: Understanding the Message of Christ

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Third Sunday in Lent; worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we sit here at the open windows of our souls, leaning out, yearning for you to reach in. Help us to hear your kind voice and feel your gentle touch as you help us to face our sin and embrace your forgiveness. We pray this in the name of God the Father who loves us, the grace of Jesus the Son who died for us, and the power of the Holy Spirit that stands in advocacy of us. Amen.

All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. If there is a truth that is standing right next to the powerful grace of God—that God loves us and has sent Jesus to die for us—it is the reality that human beings, each and every one, are sinners. Somehow sin doesn't ring well in our culture today. As parents, we want to guide our children through life without making too many mistakes. My daughter sent me a birthday card for my birthday that said this: "Happy birthday to my Dad, who has saved me from committing many a foolish act with these wise words: 'Go ask your Mother.'"

Sometimes we pass the buck on sin. We'd just as soon have somebody else deal with it. But the Apostle Paul does not avoid confrontation with the core of our human reality: there is a problem—we are in a mess, and the core of that is about our human sinfulness. Paul is rather dramatic in his statement that the reaction to sin is the wrath of God. Now that disturbs many people because, they say, 'God is not a god of wrath; God is a god of kindness and grace.' The implication of the wrath of God is that, in our sin, if we reject the grace of God, there is only one alternative, and that's the wrath of God. The consequence and result of continuing to do things that are not right will lead to disaster. The only solution, according to the Apostle Paul, is that salvation is only in Jesus Christ. There is no other one who can save us.

The nature of sin is that God has set a pattern of life that is good for us. If we will walk with God in life, if we will allow Jesus to lead us and nurture us, then we will go in the pathway of goodness. But if we do not...if we turn away from God...if we do not involve God in our lives...if we walk away or reject God...then we miss what God has that is best for us. Sin is to miss God's purpose, and way, and mark.

The nature of sin is given to us in Genesis chapters 2, 3, and 4 in the Old Testament. God plants a garden, and in the middle of the garden is a tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God says to human beings, "Don't eat that tree." Now whenever God says something to us, or another human being says something to us, about "Here it is - don't touch it," you know what the implications are—we just got'ta have it. But the temptation that is given to humanity is that, that tree is about the choices of good and evil. The core of sin is not so much that we have rebelled against God, which is the common answer, but that we have chosen to engage our own view of good and evil on our own agenda. That tree of the knowledge of good and evil that we eat of on a regular basis puts us at the center of judgment: "I know what's best for you." You know what's best for me? Who is God? And the contention that exists between that person who knows what is best, passing judgment on another person who doesn't get it, is what leads to the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The results are clear, according to Romans 1 and 2: there was a great distortion of our creation and our humanity in the image of God; and there is a great betrayal of our mutual need for God together. We pass judgment and condemn one another rather than help one another out of sin.

According to Paul, there are three groups of sinners, and none of them have an excuse. There is the group who really has missed the point—the group that has rejected God and treat God as though God doesn't really exist or have any purpose—in fact, building themselves up to be God and exchanging the creator for the creature, or exchanging the creation with who God really is. It's as if we would turn this building into our God. We would make more about it than we do about God. There is a temptation to do that, by the way. We make more of our automobiles than we do about God. We make more of our clothes than we do about God. We make more of our church than we do about God. The temptation is to distort the priority.

Paul says that Romans 1 is about those who distort the image of God-the hedonists, those that are participating in shameless immorality. And of course, our world is full of that today; American hedonism is alive and well. Those who approve sin and approve the sinners...the prostitutes and tax collectors...the adulterers that Jesus hung out with...those who are immoral, the one like the prodigal son, who went his way and spent all of his money on riotous living and women. Those who are anti-God; those who are primarily-and primal-ly-evil; the careless, and the clueless.

But Paul does not leave sin there. He goes on to talk about a whole second and third group of sinners: those who stand in judgment of the first group. Those who condemn the first group. Those that, in some kind of self-righteous perspective, say, "I know what is good, and you are evil;" who stand in judgment as if they are God. This probably includes the Greek Stoics, who had a philosophical sense of self-righteousness, as well as the Jewish legalists, who seemed to be able to name that which was good and bad, and declare the heathen and barbarian as bad...and themselves as good. The Pharisee and the lawyer...the condemners of sinners...the self-centered moralist... the self-righteous person... the elder brother in the prodigal son story-the one who tries to stay at home and pronounce judgment on his younger brother, the prodigal. The sophisticated...the critical...and the condemning. That pretty well covers it all, according to Paul; because his conclusion in chapter 3 is: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," -those who distort, and those who condemn.

Two great sins of Romans 1 and 2 are: those who suppress the truth, and those who judge others. You notice the emphasis on they suppress the truth, and you judge others? Paul is making a point here. Sometimes we are so critical of those people out there-as if the whole problem was their problem. Paul turns that in a very specific way, to point to his own congregation and say, 'But you- you judge them, you condemn them; you reject them; you don't seek grace for them; you find ways to reject them. Sure, they've exchanged the glory of God for the glory of humanity. They do not acknowledge God. Yes, their minds are confused. They applaud people who are doing devious and hurtful things. But you...you religious people-you who supposedly are people of faith-you are worse than they are. You are condemners, and rejecters, and "judgment people.'" There's always a temptation to believe that it's only about Jewish people; only about Greek moralists. I think the point of the Apostle Paul is that any person who sets their life up as faithful judge-the one who uses God as an excuse to pass judgment on others-is the sinner.

Romans, chapter 1, explains the sins of distortion and the ignorance of people who exchange themselves for God. In his book, Discipleship Essentials, that we've been using as a parallel discipleship manual for these sermons, Greg Ogden mentions the story of a pastor who has a conversation with a man who doesn't think he's a sinner. So the pastor says, "Well, have you been absolutely faithful to your wife in all things?"

"Well, I travel a lot."

"Well, what about your expense account? Do you write things down on it that aren't really your expenses?"

"Well, everybody does that."

"Or what about your insurance claims that you write out? Do you overestimate any of those?"

"Well, that's standard practice."

"Well," the pastor says, "let's see. You've just told me you're an adulterer, a cheat, and a liar. But you're not a sinner."

Now, the temptation of the pastor, after that, is to pronounce judgment on the person who is the sinner; and that reflects back on the sin of the righteous, or the person who is self-righteous. The sin of condemnation or arrogance is something that sneaks into all of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus. The other day I was complaining about a truck that didn't signal and just cut me off, almost driving me into a telephone pole. I was hot. The next day, unbeknownst to my own action as a driver, I looked in the rear view mirror and I'd just cut off a truck; I almost drove them into a telephone pole. What's the moral

of this story? Beware if we judge, lest we be judged. To berate...accuse...demean...devalue...gossip...and conspire against another person because they are a sinner...is just an affirmation of our own sinfulness.

Henry Ward Beecher said, "Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation." Oh, but it feels good to condemn another person. You can just feel that anger welling up within you to name the sin and condemn the sinner and really stick it to 'em. Yes, we all go there. We see a person make the mistake; we pronounce judgment...we pass a sentence on them...we shut them out...we attack them...we hurt them...we turn our anger on them. Rather than caring, or helping them to change, or to understand what is necessary to make good of their life, we just keep keeping on judging. Thomas Hobbes, the 17th-century philosopher, said, "People who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor are always observing the imperfection of others." If I can just keep looking at your problem, I don't deal with my own.

Jesus said, "Take the log out of your own eye before you try to move a little speck out of your neighbor's eye." John Stott calls this "projection:" it's a device that enables us simultaneously to retain our sins, and our self-respect. Our tendency is to be critical of everyone except ourselves. We are often as harsh in our judgment of others as we are lenient on ourselves. We gain a kind of a vicarious satisfaction from condemning in others the very faults that we excuse in ourselves. Paul is very clear and so is Jesus: we tend to see the sins in other people that we quietly are practicing on our own. 'Methinks you protest too much.' Jesus said, "Take the log out." If I attack the other person, I am distracting others from my own sinfulness.

How many times have we heard somebody complain about divorce? Divorce is a sin, and yes it is. Divorce is the result of sin. Divorce is the ultimate implication of sin. OK, it's sinful. But don't leave it there. We like to kind of stick the screws to the person who's divorced and keep helping them feel miserable about their status-as if somehow we are more righteous than they are. Paul says: Not true. Sin haunts all of us-those who are distorted, and those who are arrogant.

How do we differentiate between that which is good judgment, and that which is bad judgmentalism? What does it mean to move from good judgment to condemnation...from assessment to assassination...from observation to obliteration...from contemplation to condemnation...from reflection to retribution? Is it not to take the tack that, "I am now judge. And I declare you a sinner, and I will not relate to you anymore in humility or meekness. I'm going to reject you and keep you rejected. I will keep you on the defensive so I will not deal with my own problems."

There's a nuance of a shift from angry condemnation to graceful confrontation. It's in the example of the Apostle Paul, in his time before he was a believer of Jesus. He was Saul-the condemner of the faithful. He used his religion to kill people. We see evidence of that all around the world today-use of religion to kill other people. It is deeply-embedded in every one of our souls; and it is magnified by millions who are still practicing it with deathly intent. Paul breathed threats and murder against the church. Jesus stopped him one day on the road to Damascus, and said "Saul, why are you persecuting me? Why are you sinning against the church?" And then that is the nuance of the difference between condemnation and confrontation: Jesus did not go on to say, "I'm killing you, Saul. I'm doing away with you. I'm getting rid of my enemy." He did not do that. He did what Jesus does: he confronts-and then the change of Paul's attitude; he forgives-and helps Paul become a person of grace to the church.

That is the way of solution. All have sinned. All fall short of God's glory, God's best for us. But there is a solution; and the solution is in Jesus confronting us with all of our sins. Not with the attitude that Jesus is condemning us; because we know that, even in the gospel, Jesus took a woman in adultery, and saw that she committed it; confronted the accusers, as if to name their sins by writing them all on the ground; and they one-by-one left because they, too, were sinners. Jesus forgave the woman and sent her on her way—not by saying, "There is no such thing as your sin," but, 'You are no longer the one who's guilty, who has to bear the sin.' "I do not condemn you," Jesus said.

We are all liars, and faithless, and unjust. There's no one who's righteous or understands. Every one of us has turned aside, become worthless. None of us show kindness. All deceive...all speak death...all spit poison...all shed blood...all are ruined...all have missed the way of peace...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We don't like those words; they're kind of harsh. But deep inside of us resonates when

we face our own reality—that there, too, we can go, and do damage. This enters the church, particularly around our battles around sexuality: those who don't believe that Romans 1 has any standard of measurement for sexuality—that God has not created any standard or balance; we have not distorted it—it's just a cultural view. But more so, the others in chapter 2—who stand in judgment of those who distort; and we in our self-righteousness act as though we have no sin.

The only solution is Jesus Christ. And Jesus does not condemn us. Jesus, when the opportunity was given to condemn us, laid down his life for us, so he could lift us up, and lead us by grace into a new life. That is the action of justification and righteousness—that we would not stand in judgment of our brothers and sisters, but that we would find a way to lift them, restore them, and help them rebuild in the grace of Jesus Christ. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, according to Paul, for the law of the spirit of life in Christ has set all of us free from the law of sin and death. We offer mercy, not condemnation. “God so loved the world” was not something that the early people of antiquity would understand, because the pagan attitude was: gods of mercy are not worth much; people of mercy are not really to be trusted. How can you really trust somebody who's got such an emotional connection to other human beings? Jesus was countercultural...then, as well as today.

And so if we are going to live into the solution, and not be part of the problem, we have one mode to follow: and that is Jesus, the Christ, who lay down his life for us. I invite you to personally acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior...and your solution to sin, and distortion, and judgmentalism. Confess that—and lead a life of mercy, like Jesus.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, we see in you the love of your Father. We see in you the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of sin. We see from you, the Holy Spirit, given to us—to stand with us; to confront us with our sin; to convict us of our evil; and to convince us to live in your way. We pray that you would move us to let go of our sin and to embrace your grace and mercy in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.