

Sin is Real and Jesus is the Answer

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a seven-part series

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Luke 18:10–14 (CEB: Common English Bible)

⁹Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: ¹⁰“Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ ¹³But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

Romans 3:9b–11, 15–18, 21–26 (CEB)

⁹We have already stated the charge: both Jews and Greeks are all under the power of sin.

¹⁰As it is written,

There is no righteous person, not even one.

¹¹*There is no one who understands.*

There is no one who looks for God. . . .

¹⁵*Their feet are quick to shed blood;*

¹⁶destruction and misery are in their ways;

¹⁷and they don’t know the way of peace.

¹⁸*There is no fear of God*

in their view of the world.

²¹But now God’s righteousness has been revealed apart from the Law, which is confirmed by the Law and the Prophets. ²²God’s righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There’s no distinction. ²³All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, ²⁴but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus. ²⁵Through his faithfulness, God displayed Jesus as the place of sacrifice where mercy is found by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness in passing over sins that happened before, ²⁶during the time of God’s patient tolerance. He also did this to demonstrate that he is righteous in the present time, and to treat the one who has faith in Jesus as righteous.

1 Timothy 1:12–17 (CEB)

¹²I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful. So he appointed me to ministry ¹³even though I used to speak against him, attack his people, and I was proud. But I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith. ¹⁴Our Lord’s favor poured all over me along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I’m the biggest sinner of all. ¹⁶But this is why I was shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all. So I’m an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷Now to the king of the ages, to the immortal, invisible, and only God, may honor and glory be given to him forever and always! Amen.

There is no greater obstacle to the growth of Christianity in America than our culture’s loss of the knowledge of Sin, our collective unwillingness to admit that there is something wrong with us that we cannot fix.

Jesus once told a parable about two men who walked into the great temple in Jerusalem to pray.

One is a Pharisee. Educated and much respected by all. He attended to all his prayers and fasted twice a week. He tithed scrupulously. Indeed, the man was diligent in all such matters. And he made sure that everyone knew it. As he now makes sure God knows it. In the eyes of the world, this Pharisee is upright and righteous, the sort of man who must be embraced by the LORD God Almighty.

The second man is a far different sort. A tax collector, despised by all and hated by many. Like Zacchaeus (Luke 19) he is probably a rich man given his trade. But he won't even look up while he prays and all he will say about himself is that he is a sinner, in need of God's mercy. That's it.

One, to all appearances, an upright and honorable man. The other, a tax collector – about as far from honorable as you can get. Honor, you see, in the ancient world, and still to some extent in ours, was a socially-defined term. It was about how you appeared before others and there was little in life that mattered more. Even wealth was gained principally so that one could gain honor and reputation.

In the eyes of others and himself, the Pharisee is about as honorable and righteous as you can get. He even feels compelled to point out to God that he is far more righteous than lesser men, those robbers, adulterers, and assorted doers of evil. The Pharisee had always taken great pains to ensure that everyone knew he was a righteous man.

Sadly, the Pharisee has it all wrong. He is so concerned that everyone see and applaud his supposed righteousness that he fails to grasp the condition of his heart. If he ever did know, he no longer remembers that God's great commandments are to love God and others.

The scene of these two men in the temple is like that of a Jewish law court. The two men come into the room and the judge (God, in this case) declares one man in the right (righteous) and one man in the wrong (unrighteous). Who is declared by God to be in the right? The despised tax collector who admitted he was a sinner and begged for mercy. God saw in him a humble heart; not so with the Pharisee.

Why do we look at this story this week? Because the overarching point of the parable is that we are all sinners and live in stark need of God's forgiveness; we are all estranged from God, but for God's rescue of us through the faithfulness of his son, Jesus, the Christ. That is Paul's point in today's passages from Romans and 1 Timothy.

Yes, we are sinners . . . there is something wrong with us all!

Over the summer, in a column marking the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, Peggy Noonan wrote this for the Wall Street Journal¹:

Once a few years ago a reporter who had covered wars talked about this with a brilliant, accomplished, famously leftist editor in New York. At the end of a conversation on a recent conflict the reporter said, quizzically: "Why is there so much war? Why do we do that?"

"Because something's wrong with us," the editor replied.

I told him it was the best definition of original sin I'd ever heard.

That's it in a nutshell. There is something wrong with us. Every one of us. All of humanity. We Christians put a name to it, original sin, but that is merely a label. The truth we proclaim, and which has been self-evident over the course of human history, is that there is something wrong us, something that we cannot fix, eradicate, or repair. It is as if we have flaw in our "moral DNA" that no amount of training, education, effort, or good intentions can overcome.

Yet countless people persist in the belief that deep down they are really ok, a good person, someone who can use some help and guidance, but, really, all right. And certainly, good enough for God to embrace us just as we are. But that's a lie, grounded in self-delusion.

And this self-delusion is growing at a fast pace across the national landscape. Talk to youth and young adults about their beliefs, and you are likely to discover that they have little sense that there is something deeply and desperately wrong with humanity, and

¹ Peggy Noonan, "The World the Great War Swept Away," *The Wall Street Journal*, (August 8, 2014)

certainly not with themselves. This loss of the knowledge of Sin² is undercutting all our efforts to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, I am increasingly convinced that this loss of the knowledge of Sin is the single greatest obstacle to the growth of Christianity in America. The Good News is good news only if it is delivered in response to bad news. Otherwise, it is heard as Good Advice about how we can straighten up our lives or become better people. And no one gets too excited about good advice, much less follows it. Thus, the indifference that American teenagers demonstrate toward Christianity isn't surprising. Kenda Creasy Dean on the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion:

The good news is that teenagers are not hostile toward religion. . . . Teenagers tend to view God as either a butler or a therapist, someone who meets their needs when summoned ("a cosmic lifeguard," as one youth minister put it) or who listens nonjudgmentally and helps youth feel good about themselves ("kind of like my guidance counselor," a ninth grader told me). Most young people (even nonreligious ones) believe that religion has much to offer, and those who attend church tend to feel positively about their congregations even when they are critical of religion in general. Almost all teenagers say that religion benefits individuals or society or both.

The bad news is the reason teenagers are not hostile toward religion: they just do not care about it very much. Religion is not a big deal to them. People fight over things that matter to them—but religion barely causes a ripple in the lives of most adolescents. Butler and lifeguards watch from the sidelines until called upon; therapists and guidance counselors offer encouragement and advice. . . . Teenagers gladly grant people the right to explore other religions, or to construct their own eclectic spiritualities, but they are not doing it themselves. So while religion is seldom a source of conflict for teenagers, it is also seldom a source of identity . . .³

Jesus is the answer

In a culture that has lost the knowledge of Sin, Jesus can seem like an answer in search of a problem, a cure in need of an illness. But losing the knowledge of Sin makes Sin no less real. There has always been something wrong with us and there still is. Any objective look at the last century reveals that our scientific and technological advances have left human Sin untouched.

So yes, Jesus is the answer to the most real problem of all. We are in desperate need of rescue and we will never accomplish this ourselves. But God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God has rescued us through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, "God's righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There's no distinction. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus."

There is no other answer, no other solution. Rescue cannot be had by any other means. There is no other path, no other route. In Jesus, God has done for us what must be done and what we would never do. This is genuinely Good News, not merely great advice about how to love more or become a better person.

Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and that's us! Praise God for his persistent love, his relentless pursuit of us, his willingness to take on human weakness and suffer the worst this world can offer – for you, for me, for us all. And prepare yourself to love others as you have been loved!

² I capitalize "Sin" here to emphasize that I'm not referring to all the individual wrongs we commit, but the universal flaw in humanity's "moral DNA," this darkness that lies in the human heart. John the Baptist looked at Jesus and exclaimed, "Behold, the lamb of God that takes away the sin (singular) of the world."

³ Dean, Kenda Creasy (2010-06-12). *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Kindle Locations 333-347). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

