

What Does Every Sin Deserve

Romans 1:18-3:20

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I'm now looking out upon some of the finest women, men and young people in Oxford. I'm looking at leaders in the Oxford business community. I'm looking at young people who cheerlead, play on athletic teams, and participate in student government. I'm looking at civic leaders, active in the Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, mason's and other civic organizations that do so much good in the community. I'm looking at the leaders of social agencies. And yet you people, and I, need the gospel every bit as much as those terrible people Paul was talking about in Chapter One who have suppressed the truth and live in flagrant sin.

Not only the immoral pagan but the moral woman and man need the Gospel in order to have a right relationship with God. Paul says that whoever we are, when we judge others, we condemn ourselves. I'm sure most of you know what I believe about sexual morality. You know that I believe that the Bible teaches that the full expression of our human sexuality is to be experienced only within marriage between a man and a woman. And yet some of you would like me to speak out more strongly in condemnation of what Paul writes about. In fact some people have even left the church in the last year, in part because I didn't condemn homosexuality more vehemently.

There was a strong temptation, in preparing this sermon, to use the words of Paul with respect to homosexuality as a bludgeon. And I'm sure that if I were to do that I would have the support

and even adulation of the vast majority of this congregation. I'm sure that most of those Christians who first heard the words of Paul entirely agreed with his description of the pagan world. But in Chapter 2 and 3 the Apostle Paul attempts to show us that all of us are addicted to sin as the sexually immoral whom he describes in Chapter 1. Every one of us.

The Christian isn't someone who is better than others. "No one is by nature Christian or righteous," said Luther, "but altogether sinful and wicked. " If you are a Christian it's because you believe the story of Jesus; believe it with your heart and soul and strength and mind. I believe that my sin puts me in the same boat with the immoral pagan Paul describes in Chapter 1. I deserve God's wrath and curse. Apart from what Christ has done for me and is doing for me

I'd be lost, condemned. If I go to heaven when I die it will be only by the grace of God that comes through the death of Jesus and received as a free gift through faith. Jesus went to hell for those disreputable sinners Paul describes in Chapter One. Jesus also went to hell for us respectable sinners.

The church is filled with good people trapped by sins that you feel powerless to overcome. We sit surrounded by smiling men and women who seem very moral so we're afraid to admit who we are and what we're guilty of and so remain trapped. You can come to the worship service and smile, sing the hymns and shake hands after the service, and leave the sanctuary with lust, fear, greed, pride, and idolatry within your hearts. The tragedy is- the tragedy is that you may not even know it's there (Dolby). William Willimon writes, "Our sin is so serious, so deep-

rooted in our thought and action, that we are as incapable of seeing it as a fish is incapable of noticing water.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister who was executed by Hitler in World War 2, said, “Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone in our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy.” What tragic, but true statement about the church—a tragedy of dishonesty. The church was described by Augustine as a hospital for sinners. In the fellowship of sinner-saints we begin a life-long process of recovery. Through faith a repentance and the use of the means of grace. Hobart Mowrer, a psychologist, has said, “One would think that the church would be the place where people could confront one another openly and honestly, since the Church historically has made no pretense about man’s condition and his need of redemption. But all too often the Church is today a place where people hide behind Biblicism, and dogma, and theology.”

We’ve been assured for a generation that we’re basically good and that God is loving. The church has been quiet for a generation about the wrath of God. We’ve left that to fundamentalists. Hell is never seriously mentioned except as a joke. Judgment is not mentioned. We’re a generation who’ve been raised on pop psychology, “I’m ok and you’re ok” The church has been strangely silent about sin.

And yet I believe that a lot of you come to church every week and don’t buy the bill of goods

you've been offered. William Willimon has written, In spite of what good liberal theologians told them, people still experience evil with their own lives. In spite of our reassurances, they continued to feel something like the demonic at work in their world..." and in their lives.

"The cross challenges all notions that we are basically nice people who are making progress, that all we need is better education, better economic systems, better effort, and we shall be good... We call our sin mistakes or ignorance, or justify it by the circumstances of our social background, economic condition, or some other factor that gets the blame off our back. Our confessions of sin are thus so much play acting..."

When the church loses confidence in the power of the Gospel to save us and our world what can we do but to deny our sins and go to all sorts of elaborate lengths to call what is evil, good/ If we don't believe the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe what can we do but rationalize our sin, and moralize our behavior, and keep assuring ourselves that we're basically nice people doing the best we can?

We are, in Scott Peck's phrase, "people of the lie," building layer upon layer of self-deception, afraid to be honest, fleeing the light of self-exposure, the voice of conscience. No one need send us to hell; many of us are already living there, trapped in a web of self-delusion and dishonesty, victims of evil rather than victors (Willimon).

Paul writes, "We know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so

that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.’”

How can we escape judging others and coming to terms with our own sin which will destroy us unless we repent and believe the Gospel? Last week I spoke of a parent who discovered a broken cookie jar with missing cookies. If I go to one of my boys and say, “Whoever broke the cookie jar and stole my cookies is going to be severely punished”—the guilty child will surely lie and deny and blame someone else in an attempt to escape punishment. But if I come to my child and say, “I will replace the cookie jar and bake more cookies but I want to know who broke the cookie jar and stole the cookies. Don’t lie. Tell the truth. I want to forgive you”—my child, hopefully, will have the confidence and trust to confess and be forgiven.

God comes to us in Christ, clothed in the Gospel of God’s grace, and says to us, “You have committed no sin that is too heinous for me to forgive. There is no sin which holds you captive that I cannot break its power over you. I have gone to hell for you. I have already forgiven you, therefore, confess your sins to me, do not hide them from me and do not deceive yourselves. Let me begin to set you straight. Trust me—Trust what I say about sin and what it is and what it deserves. Trust that I have the power not only to forgive your sins but to save you from them as well.”

God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, Paul wrote. Repentance and faith are inseparable in the Bible. There's no genuine repentance without faith that God has in fact forgiven us through Christ. And there's no genuine faith in Christ without repentance. You can have a false faith which is merely mental assent that brings forth no repentance or change in your lives. Or you can have a false repentance that causes you to rely on your own good works and striving and good intentions without really trusting entirely on Christ to save you.

Repentance or conversion is a life-long affair. Protestant Reformers like Luther and Calvin were convinced that sin is so deeply rooted in human thought and action that only a lifetime of conversion will root it out.

The Gospel is the power of God to save. Believe in the power of God to convert and change and save sinners such as yourselves. The Church needs to be converted to the Gospel. The Gospel is for us. The Gospel, the story of Jesus, enables us to be honest about ourselves. We need not lie about ourselves because the gospel story is about a God, who, even as he is hanging on a cross, says, 'Father, forgive.' The God we know and trust in Christ is a God who eats and drinks with sinners, who comes to seek and to save the lost. You need not hide from this God. You must not hide our sinfulness from this God. Trust this God and let God begin to change you.