

WE BELIEVE: SINNERS SAVED BY GRACE

Erin Kesterson Bowers

Romans 5:12-21 1 John 1:5-10

August 7, 2016

First Presbyterian Church High Point, NC

Service for the Lord's Day

I'm not sure if you know this about me or not, but I know a lot about sin. I am what you might call an expert on sin. I have a Ph.D. in sin. I have, in fact, written a dissertation all about sin, comparing and contrasting the views of two different theologians on sin. I could tell you about how theologians through the centuries have dealt with the problem of original sin, whether they have followed an Irenaean or Augustinian model, and how they have categorized sins. I could talk to you about the distinction between individual and corporate sin. I could teach you about the medieval scholastics and how the sacramental system works in concert with the seven deadly sins. I could explain to you how different philosophers and theologians have named a particular essential nature of sin—be it pride, or ingratitude, or falsehood, or unfaithfulness. I know about sin.

But it doesn't take a Ph.D. (in sin) to know about sin. You and I both share in this knowledge of sin. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that the doctrine of original sin is "the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith."¹ In other words, it's the only Christian teaching that we can look around and see for ourselves is true. And in one respect, he is right. We see sin all around us. We see violence and greed and injustice and immorality. And we see lives torn apart because of these things. And perhaps we grieve for others who are involved in such activities and long for them to change.

And we also have to admit that just like the theologians of old we all have our categories for sin. We have some sense in our minds of which sins are worse and which sins are not so bad. Which are easily explained away by circumstance and which are not to be tolerated under any circumstance. If we are really honest with ourselves, we will confess that we have constructed some idea of which sins God really minds, and which God probably doesn't mind so much. And, I don't want to speak for you, but at least in my case, if I am really being honest, the ones that I have decided that God probably doesn't mind so much line up dangerously closely with the things that I am most likely to be involved in.

We make distinctions between ourselves and others, though, even when we're talking about the same activity. The field of sociology has recognized this phenomenon and has a name for it: *actor-observer bias*. It's a trap we all fall into at one time or another. The same negative action is judged entirely differently when we do it, when we are the actor, than when someone else does it, when we observe someone else doing it. Take for instance, grumpiness. Let's say we are grumpy in an interaction with a stranger. You and I are likely judge ourselves based on all the external factors that made us grumpy—our spouse snapped at us this morning, our kids were difficult, we have way too much going on at work, our lives are very stressful. Those are the things that made us grumpy. The blame is to be placed on outside factors. But if someone else is grumpy with us—our tendency is not to consider what factors might have led to this happening but to blame their character—this server or checkout person or church member or teacher or boss just ought to be friendly, and we don't make the same kind of excuses we make for ourselves. Now, I'm not saying that grumpiness is a sin, but we fall into this trap with all kinds of behaviors, excusing ourselves but judging others. The net result is, we are basically easier on ourselves than we are on others when it comes to estimating the degree of sinfulness of our behavior.

¹ Braaten, Carl E. and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Sin, Death, and the Devil*, 103.

So while I think Reinhold Niebuhr is partially right, he is also wrong. Because while we might be able to look around and see a sinful world, knowing about the sin out there is not the same thing as knowing our own sin. It's not the same thing at all. It's not even close. Because it's quite easy to identify sinful behaviors in others, in the systems of the world. But it's another thing altogether to recognize ourselves as sinful and to recognize our participation in those systems. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*

Now, if you have recognized the sermon to this point, it is because I have said all of this before. I said it before back in February. And you recognized it because you attended the Ash Wednesday service where I said it. But that is not many of you. Of all of our special services, I think our Ash Wednesday service is probably our lowest attended service. And I'm not sure exactly why that is. I think there are probably a number of factors. Perhaps it's the time of week, or the time of year. Perhaps it's because it's relatively new to Presbyterians (like, in the last 20 or 30 years, which is new to Presbyterians) that we have begun to mark Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday. Or perhaps it has something to do with the point of Ash Wednesday. Which is a service dedicated to recognizing our sin and our mortality. Somehow, that's not a big draw. Throngs of people don't come out for that. Not the same way they do for the triumph of Easter.

I am even aware of a pastor—not a pastor of this church, or even of this denomination—but I am aware of a pastor, who, when confronted by Ash Wednesday, wondered aloud to his staff, “I wonder how we could put a positive spin on this?”

And it's easy to make fun of that pastor, but in some sense, that's what we all do with our own sin. Because I imagine that most of us tend to make light of our sin, and please understand that I am including myself here.

Because there is the notion that there are sinners and then there are *sinner*s. That you and I might have our foibles, but that there are *really* bad things that we would never do. But the trouble is, that if we are thinking like that we are misunderstanding the power of sin at work in us. That we are thinking that it is possible to stand in some sort of position of neutrality with regard to God, when in fact there is not such position. And we are, at the same time, devaluing Jesus' work on our behalf. Because the truth is, any participation that we have in sin is just part of the journey to what we may think of as increasingly “bad” sin. And though we may not be there, nor bring it to fruition, our participation in sin means that we are on the way. We are working in opposition to God and God's kingdom. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

And I wonder if you are like me, and you have ever participated in the act of praying the prayer of Confession on someone else's behalf. Of reading those words in the prayer and thinking, “Oh, yeah, I sure am glad so-and-so is confessing this!” Or if you're like me and you've ever heard a sermon, and thought to yourself, “I sure wish so-and-so could have heard that sermon today—they really needed to be convicted of that!” *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

And the truth is, even the good that we do is often tainted by sin. Karl Barth describes the way our good works can be done for ourselves rather than for the ones they are intended to serve: “*There is a form of love—mere charity—in which we do not love at all; in which we do not see or have in mind the other man to whom it is directed; in which we do not and will not notice his weal or woe; in which we merely imagine him as the object of the love which we have to exercise, and in this way master and use him. Our only desire is to practice and unfold our own love, to demonstrate it to him and to others and to God and above all to ourselves...There is thus a form of love in which, however sacrificially it is practiced, the other is not seized by a human hand but by a cold instrument, or even by a paw with sheathed talons, and therefore genuinely isolated and frozen and estranged and oppressed and humiliated, so that he feels that he is trampled under the feet of the one who is supposed to love him, and*

cannot react with gratitude.”² The point of this lengthy quote is that we can do harm to each other even as we seek to serve one another, if what we really intend to serve ourselves. When we serve out of a need to demonstrate our service, our neighbor becomes a dehumanized object of our service, rather than an object of our love, and this too becomes sin. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

There are a couple of problems with this, with our inability to truly recognize our own sinfulness. First of all, it’s sinful. It’s sinful to not be able to recognize our own sinfulness, especially when we can so easily point it out in other people. But here’s the larger problem. If we don’t really understand our sinfulness, we can’t ever really understand grace. And that’s what I want to say something about now.

Because the last thing I say to you before I leave you for several months cannot be just that we are sinners. The last words I have to say to you cannot be about sin. That is not my last word to you. Neither is it God’s last word to you. God’s last word is always grace. Grace goes together with our recognition of our sinfulness, because grace goes together with gratitude. If we truly recognize the depth of our sinfulness, the break that it has caused in our relationship with God, then we are grateful beyond measure for God’s grace. Ingratitude means we do not really accept God’s grace because we do not really think that we need it. We see this in the words of our Romans text. “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”³ Paul isn’t suggesting that we sin more so that we receive more grace—but simply that the more we are aware of the depth of our sin, the more we recognize our need for God’s grace.

And that is the one good thing about being a sinner—that sinners are who grace is for. Grace isn’t for those who can fix themselves. Grace isn’t for those who can do this on their own. Grace is for all those of us who continue to live against God, even though we’d like things to be different, who can say like Paul will say a few chapters later in Romans, “*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*”⁴ Grace is for those of us who beat ourselves up over every little thing. Grace is for those of us who have trouble even admitting that we sin, but we sure do struggle with judging the sin of other people. Grace is for those of us who live in fear because we are harboring secret sin that we have never confessed to anyone. Grace is for all of us.

And then, the good thing, some people might even say the amazing thing, about grace is this: it changes us.

Amen.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p. 440.

³ Romans 5:20b, NRSV.

⁴ Romans 7:15, NRSV.