

life groups discussion guide

03.19.17 – serious about sin



“The worst sin there is, is the one you can’t imagine yourself committing.”

-- Bil Gebhardt

“For the most part, evangelical Christians are good at seeing sin on television and in the church lobby, but we fail miserably at seeing sin in the mirror. God’s primary interest is not your skill in diagnosing the sin of others. He wants to get YOU into surgery.”

-- James MacDonald

Sin is a tough thing to wrangle – in more ways than one. Scripture explicitly tells us that it is to have no place in our lives because God’s expectation of us is to be holy, like He is (1 Peter 1:16), and that sin brings death (Romans 6:23). Over and over again, the Word of God makes it clear that sin is to have no place in our lives. Yet, elsewhere in Scripture we are also reminded of the sobering fact that sin continues to be a present reality in our lives. John (in a letter very clearly written to a group of believers) even goes so far as to tell them (and, by extension, all of us as well) “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8). Actually, for most of us, this is not a hard sell. You don’t have to say a word for me to know and understand all too clearly that sin still crouches at MY door, and rears its ugly head in my life far more than I ever want. So what’s the answer then? It’s certainly not one that is steeped in complacency in any way. Sin is pretty serious business to God – so it should be to me as well. If I fail to see sin as serious, then I will likewise fail to respond in an appropriately serious way. The Bible tells us in Romans 1:18 that sin is the reason that God’s wrath is coming: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” God sees sin as something horrific and deserving of the focus of His great and terrible wrath. How off-base am I if my response to sin is one of mere ho-hum acceptance of my sinful condition?

There are a couple of books that are tremendously helpful if you want to take this issue to a much deeper level of study. The first is *Downpour* by James MacDonald. The entire book was transformational for me, and the chapter on sin is one of the best I’ve read about how serious an issue it needs to be for us. The other is by Puritan John Owen called *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, one of three similarly-themed works collected and updated in a volume titled *Overcoming Sin & Temptation*. I point out that Owen was a Puritan because the language of the book (even after being updated in the collected volume) makes it a bit of a challenge to read – but a very worthwhile one.

Let’s wrestle with this with a bit more depth and specificity. First, I think a clearly defined starting point is extremely helpful. Many of us were taught in church that sin means to “miss the mark” as an archer might who was shooting at a target, and indeed, that meaning is embedded in the original words *hata* (in Hebrew) and *hamartia* (in Greek). While helpful in some sense, this definition hardly feels worthy of the wrath of Almighty God. “Oops, missed the bulls-eye. Better luck next time, I guess.” It feels too easy to casually dismiss. In *Downpour*, MacDonald defines sin this way: “Sin is any failure to conform to God’s standard from His Word—in action, in failure to act, or in attitude.” It’s a fairly comprehensive definition that he unpacks in a very convicting manner. Revelatory for me the first time I read it was not the sinfulness of my actions or my attitudes (I’m, sadly, very much aware of the potential for sin in both of those areas) – it was the sin that manifests in my “failure to act” (what MacDonald calls “the good left undone”). How many times have I had opportunity to do good, but passed it by? Ouch! Scripture backs up that segment of the definition by the way. James 4:17 says, “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.” Paul has echoes of this in Romans 7 when he says “For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” Paul’s problem with sin was not just the things he did that were obviously bad, but the good left undone was weighing heavily on his heart as well.

In *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, Owen addresses this idea, then drills down even deeper as he incisively cuts into not just the good left undone, but the motive behind the sins we actually do try to “mortify” (or kill) in our pursuit of the holiness God has called us to. Owen says: “You set yourself with all diligence and earnestness to mortify such a lust or sin; what is the reason of it? It disquiets you, it has taken away your peace, it fills your heart with sorrow and trouble and fear; you have no rest because of it. Yea, but friend, you have neglected prayer or reading . . . These are no less sins and evils than those under which you groan. Jesus Christ bled for them also. Why do you not set yourself against them also? If you hate

sin as sin, every evil way, you would be no less watchful against everything that grieves and disquiets the Spirit of God, than against that which grieves and disquiets your own soul. It is evident that you contend against sin merely because of your own trouble by it. Would your conscience be quiet under it, you would let it alone.”

I find those words piercing. I also think that they beg some pretty deep questions about whether or not I’m viewing my own sin with the same eyes that God might. Is my conscience quiet about something I’m leaving out of my life that it should be roused up concerning? Sins that regularly trip us up (the wrong done) bring sorrow and grief into our lives, so we war against those – while the good progress we could be making spiritually, but instead neglect to pursue (the good left undone), might not show up on our radar at all, even though those missed opportunities bring sorrow and grief to God’s heart.

Then there are those Christians who run in the opposite direction. They say that because the grace of God covers our sins that we should not be hyper-focused on them. I know someone who thinks that because we’ve repented when we came to faith in Christ that we no longer need to repent of *anything*. Yes, we are saved from our sins through the cross. But let’s drill down into that a bit. Ephesians 2:8 says: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—”. In the original Greek, this verse uses the present perfect tense of the verb “to be saved”, translated here as “. . . you ***have been saved***.” (Strictly speaking, the Greek reads “you are having been saved”). In Greek, this tense indicates that something happened in the past, but with continuing results or implications. This illustrates that our being saved from sin comes in three distinct stages – past, present, and future. In the past, at the point of my salvation, Jesus saved me from the ***Penalty*** of sin (this is justification). The results of my salvation continue on into the present as Jesus is now saving me from the ***Power*** of sin in my life (this is the *continuing process* of sanctification). And in the future, Jesus will save me from the very ***Presence*** of sin (this is the ultimate goal of our faith – our glorification). So while the cross is vital in how we perceive sin’s role in our lives, it’s important to remember that it doesn’t shield us from sin’s invasive *presence* until the future when we each receive our glorified bodies. Until then sin is waging an aggressive, violent war against us. We may need to find a balance between focusing on sin more than the grace that brings forgiveness and healing – but to ignore the sin problem altogether is to bury our heads in the sand while the enemy marches boldly into our camp.

Q :: There is a tension between being hyper-focused on our sin and recognizing that as a Jesus follower our sins are all forgiven so we don’t need to be concerned with them at all. How do we still tackle the obvious sin areas we struggle with while being able to simultaneously rest in God’s provision of love, grace and forgiveness that are ours through the death of Jesus on the cross?

Q :: It seems to me that the whole topic of sin is rife with opportunities for the enemy to deceive us and even divert our attention from the work we need to do in our own lives regarding sin. Like disinformation efforts in a war where false information or propaganda that is intended to mislead is issued by one side to a rival power or the media. One such tactic might be to have Christians focus all their energies on seeing sin in others more than themselves. What are some other ways Satan might employ disinformation efforts against us as he seeks to have us not view sin as we ought?

Q :: If our propensity is likely to contend against those sins that most “disquiet our souls”, how can we gain a sensitivity to those areas of concern that aren’t showing up on our radar (but are probably disquieting to the Spirit of God)? (While some may have sin blindspots where they are clueless to the overtly sinful acts they are committing, this is more likely related to sins that result from the good being left undone).

Q :: Since God’s desire is for our holiness to be like His – which is perfect, by the way – how do we make genuine efforts to this end without falling into either despair (from how short – or often – we miss the mark) or into full-on legalism?

Q :: A real potential trap in taking sin more seriously is coming to believe that our relationship with God is only as good as our current efforts at sin-management.

It is sadly ironic that the sincere attempts at better sin-management that we put forth with the pure intention of pleasing God may actually undermine that very relationship by placing the false measure of relationship success squarely on the shoulders of **our** striving; **our** efforts; **our** ability to be good enough. When **my** performance is the determining factor in the success of my relationship with God, I’m in trouble.