

10 Things You Wish Jesus Never Said

Week 2: John 8:31-38

“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin...”

I taught a Bible study for non-Christians several years ago in which one of the participants objected when I said that everyone is a sinner. He said to me, “You’re not a sinner.” I started laughing – and my wife started gagging – and asked him why he thought so. He said that I don’t rob banks, don’t cheat on my wife or on my taxes, and am not a drunk; therefore, I’m not a sinner. I started laughing again, but then I had to tell him that his view of sin was way too limited. Jesus couldn’t make it any clearer here in John 8: We are all sinners, and our sin enslaves us. The mistake we make is that we think sin is a matter of behavior, and the attitude of a lot of people is that if they can control their behavior, they are not a sinner. But scripture makes it clear that our condition is a lot more serious than that:

- “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless” (Romans 3:10-12).
- The heart of deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9).
- “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air...” (Ephesians 2:1).
- “You, who were spiritually dead because of your sins and your uncircumcision, God has now made to share in the very life of Christ” (Colossians 2:13).

Consider those men and women you regard as the five dominant figures of the Old Testament. Though everyone’s list will vary a bit, certainly these men would make most lists:

- Noah
- Abraham
- Moses
- David
- Elijah

Again, those aren’t the names that will appear on everyone’s list, but just how moral were these guys?

- Noah drank too much
- Abraham gave his wife to another man to protect his own skin, and he slept with his maidservant
- Moses grew so frustrated with the Israelites that he disobeyed God and was not allowed to enter the Promised Land
- David slept with Bathsheba and then covered up his affair
- Elijah was so filled with despair that he fled Ahab, thinking that God would not protect him

Each of these men – godly men all – failed to live a life that we would think met even the minimum standards of decency. If any of our pastors did any of these things, at the least, tongues would wag! More likely, they’d lose their job. So does this give us a sense of just how firm a hold sin has on our lives?

The truth is that unless we understand just how firm a grip sin has on our lives, we will never understand the enormity of God’s love for us and of our need for his help. If we think that sin is

simply a matter of cleaning up a few misbegotten behaviors, then we will see living the Christian life as a matter of self-discipline; we can grit our teeth, roll up our sleeves and git 'er done. It's almost as if we think that sin is a disease that we must fight and work to overcome. I hurt my back on Christmas Eve. I have never had back problems before and couldn't believe how much pain I was in and how limited I became immediately. But solving the back problem became a task, a challenge to tackle. Each day's routine included trips to the chiropractor, exercises to perform, laps to swim. My attitude was, "Tell me what to do and I'll do it." And that's the approach many take to sin. We think conquering sin is an intensive 12-step program that we must enter into and that with enough pluck and determination we can conquer sin.

But that's not how the Bible sees sin. Again, the word Paul uses in Ephesians is that we are "dead" in sin, and a dead man or woman can do nothing to overcome the grave. Every part of our being is affected by the Fall:

- Our bodies are prone to disease and decay
- Our will is self-serving and driven by ego
- Our minds are limited in their understanding of all things, but especially of God and His Kingdom
- Our soul seeks meaning in all kinds of inappropriate ways

Here is how the Westminster Confession of Faith describes the effect of sin in our lives:

Every sin...is a transgression of the righteous law of God and contrary to it. Therefore, every sin in its own nature brings guilt upon the sinner on account of which he is bound over the holy wrath of God and the curse of the law. Consequently, he is subject to death, with all its miseries – spiritual, temporal and eternal.

Every happily married person in the room knows how deeply rooted our selfishness can be. Even though we love our spouse and even though we publicly pledged to "love honor and protect," too often we seek our own ways in our marriage, not our spouse's. That's because our default position is to react selfishly – to expect the world to march to the beat of our drum and to accede to the wisdom of our wishes and point of view. Sin manifests itself in little ways constantly. Here is how GK Chesterton put it: "Countless acts by millions of self-centered – instead of God-centered – individuals may reasonably be thought to be destroying the world." And here is how Malcolm Muggeridge said it:

Christianity does not say that, in spite of appearances, we are all murderers or burglars or crooks or sexual perverts at heart; it does not say that we are totally depraved, in the sense that we are incapable of feeling or responding to any good impulses whatever. The truth is much deeper and more subtle than that. It is precisely when you consider the best in man that you see there is in each of us a hard core of pride or self-centeredness which corrupts our best achievements and blights our best experiences. It comes out in all sorts of ways – in the jealousy which spoils our friendships, in the vanity we feel when we have done something pretty good, in the easy conversion of love into lust, in the meanness which makes us deprecate the efforts of other people, in the distortion of our own judgment by our own self-interest, in our fondness for flattery and our resentment of blame, in our self-assertive profession of fine ideals which we never begin to practice.

We see sin as a series of behaviors; the Bible sees sin as the core reality of our identity. Yes, we are made in God's image, and yes, we are capable of incredible sacrifice, virtue and goodness, but at our core we are sinful men and women, and there is nothing we can do about it. Hence, we are

slaves to our sin. Sin has to be about more than simply behavior. After all, alcoholics do stop drinking. Adulterers do stop cheating. But no one escapes the trap of his own ego.

A slave cannot effect a change in his/her position; he/she is trapped and must depend upon the mercy of the master if that is ever to change. But if we deny our sin nature, we will never get well. Look at what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3-10:

Where does the path to God begin? Being “poor in spirit” means that we do not live with false pretenses; we recognize just how desperately we need God, and that is the first step on the road to faith. The second step is to mourn over our sins; only when we recognize how we have offended God can we begin to receive his comfort. That should lead to meekness since we no longer are ruled by arrogance or self-satisfaction; instead, we accept our sinful nature and respond in humility and gratitude. That should produce a hunger and thirst for righteousness – God’s righteousness – as we recognize for the first time just how far off the mark we have been. We’ll stop there, but if you read the rest of the Beatitudes, it seems clear that the godly life must begin with recognition of our sin and the hold it has on us.

Perhaps the clearest sense of how helpless we are in the face of sin can be seen in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Much of what follows comes from a series of three sermons that Tim Keller preached at Redeemer Church in Manhattan in 2006.

When Jesus came, people began to fit him into their a priori assumptions. Thus, the fact that he ate with prostitutes and tax collectors was troubling to many since his behavior did not fit their grid for the way a man of God should act. We still try to fit Jesus into our assumptions today. We think that he was all about love and peace and brotherhood; we think he was all about unselfishness and kindness and goodness. That is true to a point, but Jesus also came to explode our worldview, to tell us that the kingdom of God is not what we think it is.

When we look at the three parables in Luke 15, we often miss that they begin in a debate. The Pharisees and teachers are not happy with Jesus because they have not yet realized that their understanding of human nature and God and sin is wrong. They are prisoners of an old theological grid that is fallacious.

The Pharisees were not villains, nor were they extremists. Instead, the Pharisees were the popular party of the middle class, the middle of the road, mainstream leaders who protected the status quo while espousing traditional Jewish values and practice. They represented the good people, religious people who lived lives of balance. And they were the ones who were angry because Jesus was hanging out with Zacchaeus, with the Samaritan woman at the well, with lepers. To the Pharisees, Jesus was soft on sin.

Really, chapter 15 is not about prodigals, it’s about Pharisees. The father has two sons, an immoral, rebellious son and an obedient, stiff-necked son. Both are alienated from the father, but ultimately the “bad” one comes in to reconcile with the father and the “good” one does not. The traditional theological grid says good people are saved and that God loves good people. That’s not right: God loves good and bad people. Both are lost, but at least bad people recognize their need. The truth is, to be a Christian is to repent of our goodness. Keller quotes an old professor of his who once said, “The main thing between us and God is our damnable good works.” Christianity is the one religion that good people hate because it is our moral uprightness that alienates us from God.

The Pharisees were rooted so deeply into their paradigm that they just didn't get it. And most of us are as well. If you ask a liberal and a conservative how to make the world a better place, they both would basically give identical answers: If people would only believe what *I* believe and live like *I* do, the world would be a better place. That's the false paradigm. That's the argument that says *my* ideas, *my* values, are right. My goodness can save the world. To those who disagree, that mindset comes across as nothing short of arrogance. That's one of the reasons people run away from churches. Sinners do not seek a church based upon self-satisfied smugness.

We need to have a new idea of what sin is all about. Sin is not about behavior; it is about running from God. The Prodigal says to his father, "I can do this on my own." Breaking the rules is one way of getting away from God; so is keeping them. Flannery O'Connor writes in *Wise Blood* of one of her characters, "There was a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." That is, if I can just follow my own self-defined moral code, I don't really need Jesus. We don't say those words aloud, we may not even think them consciously, but if we can live within the confines of our own moral code and conscience, we don't need to trouble with Jesus. The average secular person may be a prodigal, but too many church-goers are older brothers. We think that God owes us because we do all these wonderful things for Him. We are entitled to our rights because we are good. We can escape God through rebellion or through morality, but the difference is that a moralistic escape is wordless and to the outside observer often invisible.

We can be lost because of willfulness like the prodigal. But we can also be lost because of self-righteousness, like the elder brother. Everyone – the moral and the immoral alike – runs from God.

We need to have a new idea of our value: We are of inestimable worth. We wouldn't spend much time looking for a lost quarter, yet God spends eternity looking for us. God is the searcher looking for that which he loves. Though God doesn't need us, he has tied himself to us by seeking to make us his sons and daughters. The secular world struggles to assign man meaning. If we are simply the end product of an evolutionary process, then we have no inherent value. But if we are created in the image of God, we are of infinite worth. And because we are created in His image, we cannot earn value; it is a gift. God searches for the most stupid sheep, the one that gets lost. He searches for the lost man or woman as well.

All of which means we must have a higher view of salvation. It is personal and life-changing. Isaiah, Abraham, Peter, and Paul are transformed by their encounter with God. God seeks out each of them at great cost to himself. The Cross is the ultimate statement of our value. As seen in the 3 parables in Luke 15, the shepherd goes to the rocky places, the woman crawls on her hands and knees, the father runs from the sanctuary of his front porch to find the lost, and Jesus goes to Calvary. Jesus is the shepherd, not the horse trainer. Horses, cats and dogs can live without humans, but sheep cannot. We cannot live, were not created to live, apart from God. The Sunday school picture of the shepherd carrying the sheep over his shoulder looks cute; in fact, the shepherd has had to go out into the wilderness and lasso the sheep before hog-tying him and dragging him back to a place of refuge. That's a pretty good picture of our resistance to God. Sometimes he has to drag us kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God.

Prodigals and older brothers stand on opposite sides of a divide. The older brothers say the problem with the world is the value system and influence of the prodigals. The prodigals say the problem is all those up-tight judgmental types. Jesus condemns both. In each case Jesus has to go out of his home to bring them in, but only the prodigal agrees to come in. The moralistic man

is less able to admit his own sin, less able to admit his need for grace, less motivated by humility than the prodigal.

To become a recipient of God's grace, we must come to our senses, as does the prodigal in verse 17. Look at 2 Timothy 2:25-26 for a definition of repentance. The mark of a life of grace is repentance. In a moralistic grid, repentance is abnormal; it only occurs when I screw up. I am basically ok but occasionally need a little tune-up. Of course God loves me! I'm good! When I repent, I am sorry for my actions because they run counter to my sense of self. But that kind of repentance is not coming to our senses at all.

The prodigal comes to his senses because he realizes he has been running from God and has sought to control his own life. His sin is not about breaking rules; it's about breaking relationship. Sin means to do whatever it takes to be in charge. It can mean breaking the law (the prodigal) or keeping it (the older brother). In the case of the prodigal, his sin is that his request for his inheritance is actually a declaration that he wants nothing to do with his father. He is essentially saying, "Give me what I want and leave me the heck alone." In the case of the older brother, his sin is that he is saying, "My obedience to you gives me the right to call the shots."

In another sense, sin means that we are seeking a home where there is no home. Home is not a place; it's a relationship, a place I belong. The prodigal leaves home to find home, but in taking control of his life, he loses control of his life. Only when he comes to his senses and realizes that his pursuit is folly does he begin to become whole.

When the prodigal comes home, he never gets to make his well-rehearsed speech of repentance. He is all set to tell his father that he will live with the servants, but before he can even get the words out his father has rushed from the porch, embraced him, given him a kiss, and showered him with gifts. His love for his son was not caused by the son's repentance; it predated that repentance. The son does not have to earn his father's favor; it is freely given. The relationship was broken on the son's end but not on the father's.

The older brother is incensed by the lack of justice in this return. Why doesn't the idiot younger brother have to pay for his misdeeds? There is no need for a payment because the father has already paid a heavy price. He has liquidated 1/3 of his assets for the prodigal already, and now he declares, "Everything I have is yours." He gives him his calf, his robe, his ring, his sandals, his love. All of the sacrifice is one-sided: from the father to the son. That mirrors the way in which we are reconciled with God; it is all one-sided – His work on our behalf.

The climax of the Parable of the Prodigal Son is not the return of the prodigal; it's the dialogue between the older brother and his dad. This parable is a warning to good people: Nothing comes between us and God more than our virtue.

The older brother is lost. Though he is dutiful, obedient and disciplined, he does not love his father. We can be with God yet be far from Him. It's the pattern we see in John 14:9 and Matthew 7:21. It is possible to do all that Jesus asks us to do yet still be lost. We can be involved with God's priorities yet not be involved with God.

The older brother is, in fact, more lost than his brother. The prodigal ends up inside with his father but the older brother remains aloof because he objects to the way his father is running the show. His goodness masks his battle with his father. Sin is all about trying to be our own savior and lord. The prodigal makes no bones about his rebellion, but the elder brother doesn't even recognize that he is defiant. His goodness is his main weapon: "I've been good, I've obeyed, now

give me what I want. You owe me!” By the end of the story, the older brother is all about pride while the younger brother is all about humility. Of course we need to repent of our badness, but we need to repent of our goodness as well. The older brother hates the law he obeys. He calls his father’s leadership “orders” and says, “I slaved for you.” He is lawless in his heart but lives in teeth-gritting obedience. Moralists and Christians both obey the law, but their motive could not be more different. A godly man delights in the law (Psalm 1). A moralist uses the law to get what he wants. The elder brother is not motivated by love or gratitude but by a sense that if he does what the father asks, he can get what he wants.

Because of all this, the older brother lacks a sense of assurance. He complains that his father never even gave him a goat, but the older brother never asked for a goat because it never occurred to him to celebrate with his father; there is nothing to celebrate in his view. He says of his brother, “That son of yours,” indicating his anger and his sense of judgment. His whole mind-set is “I would never do that” and he is accordingly bitter and self-righteous. The father tries to draw him in, but the son will have nothing to do with his father’s love.

So there we are...We would like to think that we can break free of sin on our own, but Jesus makes it clear that the only solution is to rely on the mercy and love of the father to break the chains that enslave us. We are indeed slaves to sin, but the love of Jesus and the power of the Cross have given us a way out of that bondage.