

## Getting it Right For a Change: Session One

### It's All About That Sin Thing

#### II Corinthians 5:16-19

We have established that God has course-corrected the Kingdom on occasion, and He did so due to operator error on the part of, uh, well... us, or people like us who came before us. Got it? Stated simply, for reasons known only by God, He literally left us to mind the proverbial store, and we haven't always done a good job during our shifts. And, this is an age-old reality. Israel made a boatload of mistakes on their watch (they managed to stretch a 250 mile trip into a 40 year journey); the first thirty-something years of the first century registered only a handful of people (possibly being generous here) believing Jesus was the actual Messiah, requiring two common *Joes* walking home to Emmaus to receive the news from an incognito-Jesus, who then lit up the world with the news; Pentecost, an otherwise small Jewish festival, served as the coming out event for the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the inaugural celebration of the Age of Grace; a desperate, hemorrhaging woman forced outside the love and care of the synagogue/faith community is rescued by breaking a litany of laws and grabbing a single tassel of Jesus' shirt; and, the list could go on, but it's high time to focus on "getting it right," and moving in the same direction as God.

Getting it right sounds a bit like "being right," and "right living," which all sound more than a bit like "righteousness," which is exactly where we are going with this session and series. The key to serving God and progressing His Kingdom can be distilled down to this single word. O.K., well done, the answer is clear, *righteous living* is the ticket, problem solved, class dismissed. But (so much for a short lesson), knowing we should live, think and act righteously is indeed the prime directive but going beyond knowing to actual doing is where the wicket is the stickiest.

The answer(s) seem to be linear. To live righteously, more often than not, requires conquering our sin issues. Conquering our sin issues requires our fully understanding what sin is, but also what sin isn't. After scaling that mountain we

must next understand how Jesus impacted sin with his death, resurrection and ascension; and apply all of it to our daily lives. While this is certainly not a piece of cake, it is also not as difficult as it sounds (after all, I figured it out, so how hard can it be?)

**So what is Sin?** Sin and sins are two very different things, although they are often joined together. We won't spend a lot of time on differentiating between the two. So, here are a few definitions of sin floating around the *theologyverse*.

Sin is that which is contrary to God.

God provides parameters within which we are to live. All existence outside these parameters is sin.

Soren Kierkegaard in *The Sickness Unto Death* defines sin as "In despair not wanting to be oneself before God. Matt Chandler translates this to mean, "In essence, Kierkegaard is saying that sin is building your self-worth on anything other than God."

J.R.R. Tolkien (of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* fame) likens sin to times of exile from God. He writes, "Certainly there was an Eden on this unhappy earth. We all long for it, and we constantly glimpse it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of exile."

Grudem defines sin as "the failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude and nature."

McKelway writes, "Sin is man's turning away from God and toward himself in order that he might make himself the center and focus of all reality."

Barbara Brown Taylor adds, "Contrary to the legal model, sin is not simply a set of behaviors to be avoided. Much more fundamentally, it is a way of life to be exposed and changed, and no one is innocent."

Roger Worsley defines it this way: "Sin means doing what we shouldn't do and failing to do what we should." He goes on to say, "when we opt to not act in accord with God's will, we *sin*. Sin means 'missing the mark.'"

Missing the mark is the classic Biblical definition as it's the most common meaning of the Greek word used for sin. Bows and arrows were in play in that era for hunting and for warfare. Shooting an arrow correctly and, well, straight, was the difference between eating or not, living or dying in battle. In the *Basics of Theology*, I liken "missing the mark" to veering off course. We sin when we veer off course, go astray, leave the path God prepares us to live. We can do this with malice aforethought or we can slowly slip away and end up off course (sometimes way off course).

**What Sin Isn't:** Sin is not/are not acts that require some form of legal retribution. There is no tote-board keeping track of our mistakes, and sin cannot be reduced to "If you commit x transgression, you deserve y punishment." I grew up with that form of limited theology. Our sin doesn't hurt God, He's seen it all, heard it all, forgiven it all. Our sin hurts us. We the sinners are hurt when we sin.

**What Did Jesus Do About Sin?** This may shock some people, but Jesus did not die to bring forgiveness of sin. **What!?** I know. I had to get very cozy with this notion too. We have been told for eons that Jesus died to forgive sin. He died to pay our sin penalty. Jeremy Myers writes: "Jesus did not die to rescue us from the wrath of God. Nor did Jesus die to secure for us the forgiveness of sins (God had been forgiving sins from the beginning and Jesus spent three years forgiving sin). The death of Jesus was to inaugurate the New Covenant of God with the entire world – that all people were now no longer slaves to sin."

**So Now We are Getting to the *Getting it Right* Part.** When we move away from our myopic, laser focus on sin we might see that God has always wanted his people to have faith, humility, mercy and righteousness. Think about it. We over-focus on sin day in and day out and rarely see real progress. This leads us to spend most of our time on what Dallas Willard calls *Sin Management*. Spiritual life becomes an endless battle with and within us over our sin. We can't seem to get it right. We can't seem to make progress. We feel badly about ourselves and that merges into our relationships and actions and, well, the slope gets more slippery and the descent grows steeper. And life isn't meaningful. And we waste a lot of valuable time. And then we meet that one Christian who seems to really have it

together and we want to have whatever they have, and we want to figure out what they have figured out. Surely it's in a book somewhere, or possibly a seminar or a podcast. *If I could only read that book, I'd be the person I want to be.* Actually, you already have the book. You know, the one about Jesus, starring that guy Paul. The answers can be found on virtually every page.

To get it right, to live life in ways that progress the Kingdom, to make a difference in the world, is within the reach of all believers. We simply need to stop dealing with sin in the ways that have never worked well. I believe it was Einstein who said, "The definition of insanity is to do the same things over and over and expect different results." Let's try a different tack.

**Sin Management Doesn't Work.** Dallas Willard wrote extensively on the concept of sin management and he paid a price for saying things that needed to be said. The conservative church movement of the mid-to late twentieth century focused heavily on sin, forgiveness and going to heaven. In my church there were more re-baptisms than first time baptisms. Did my church enjoy water so much people dipped into the baptismal pool multiple times? No, we were told that if we continued to sin we were not really saved and that we were headed to hell. Many revivals came and went and we remained a bunch of sinners with rapidly diminishing self-esteem.

Willard believes that we need to accept the whole Jesus and not just the *save me from hell fire Jesus*. This would include our rescue from the eternal power of sin but also a new lease on a deeply spiritual existence *here and now*. Going to heaven is great, but God provided grace and reconciliation for us to live for Him here, in this life, and to progress the Kingdom (and if more of us did this He wouldn't have had to do so many course corrections). Willard explains his stance in the following ways.

*What must be emphasized is the difference between trusting Christ, the real person Jesus, with all that that naturally involves, versus trusting some arrangement for sin-remission set up through Him – trusting only His role as guilt remover. To trust the real person Jesus is to have confidence in him in*

*every dimension of our real life, to believe that He is right about and adequate to everything.*

*It is left unexplained how it is possible that one can rely on Christ for the next life without doing so for this one, trust Him for one's eternal destiny without trusting Him for "the things that relate to the Christian life."*

*... when all is said and done, "the gospel" for many is that Christ made "the arrangement" that can get us into heaven. In the Gospels, by contrast, "the gospel" is the good news of the presence and availability of life in the kingdom, now and forever, through reliance on Jesus the Anointed.*

While Willard does believe the sacrifice of Jesus delivers us from the eternal penalty of our sin condition, he does not believe that it should be our eternal focus. There is more to following Jesus and serving the Kingdom than daily sin skirmishes.

*We cannot pass into a new life from above without forgiveness. Certainly it is Christ who made possible such a transition, including forgiveness, through life and death. We must be reconciled to God and He to us if we are going to have a life together. But such a reconciliation involves far more than the forgiveness of sins or a clearing of the ledger. And the faith and salvation of which Jesus speaks obviously is a much more positive reality than mere reconciliation.*

The Takeaway: There is more to living for Jesus than hassling daily with sinning, especially when the sins seem to be on a loop. No progress can be made if we are myopically focusing on our sin ledger and worrying if our salvation is real (we really are hung up on the *not going to hell* part). Roger Worsley teaches that "avoiding sin" must give way to "focusing on love" if we are going to experience true life in the Spirit day to day.

*A (any) Christian campaign to stamp out sin "will always bring about less light, less love and less wholeness in the world than a "campaign to live in love." Instead of focusing solely on not sinning, progressive Christians seek to emphasize following Jesus' over-arching teachings that God is love, God loves us, and we are called to love ourselves and our neighbors in response.*

If we do just that, love God, love ourselves because God loves us, and love other people, we will sin less. We will be happier. We will be more fulfilled. We will experience our salvation here and now and not worry so much about the afterlife. We will also be more apt to follow God's will for our lives and in turn do the things God has for us to do. And there won't be the need for so many course corrections as operator error will occur less frequently.

*So, from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them (II Corinthians 5:16-19)*

That's worth an Amen and an Amen.

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