
KNOWN AND LOVED

When we talk about sin, it's almost always in the plural—*sins*—as in the bad things we've done.

- But sin, described across the Scriptures, and particularly in Paul, is presented as singular—*sin*—no “s.”
 - In the singular form, sin is not so much a *thing* or a *set of things* as it is a *force*—the power that seeks to rob the children of GOD of abundant life—and a *condition* in which we are trapped: by nature, sinful and unclean.
 - In this second sense, thinking of the condition of sin this way leads you to view yourself very much in a constant state of insecurity towards GOD—being fearful or anxious that you are not enough, not good enough, not worthy of love and respect.

This matters primarily because sin (singular—this condition of insecurity) *precedes* most, if not all of our sins (plural—the harmful things we do).

- That is, we do bad things because of how we feel about ourselves.
 - In other words, when we feel insufficient, unworthy, and unloved, we are more likely to do things that make us feel insufficient, unworthy, and unloved.
 - I'm not good enough for GOD, so I'll make sure that others know that they're not good enough for GOD either, or at least makes me feel better about myself at someone else's expense.
 - Thus, we are constantly living with the condition of sinfulness.

I realize this may feel a little psychoanalytical or self-helpy, but let's test it by going back the beginning—you know, to the story of Adam and Eve.

We tend to think of this story as the birthplace of the “original sin” of disobedience.

- But when you read the story closely, you see that before there is original sin, there is what we might call “original insecurity.”
- That is, Adam and Eve (and let's keep in mind that while Eve does the talking, Adam is right there with her the whole time)—
 - Adam and Eve are insecure—worried that GOD has not shared with them all that they need to know,
 - and are thereby seduced or pulled into trying to establish their worth and place through their own knowledge and power—
 - and apart from their relationship with GOD as GOD'S children
 - And because of this insecurity, they disobey GOD'S command and sin—eating the fruit that will tell them what they think they need to know.

Why does this distinction matter?

- Because there are only two things you can do about sins—that is, those things we do wrong—punish them or forgive them.
- Either response, however, risks leaving the person involved unchanged—really, stuck in the condition of sin.
 - Punishment causes anger and resentment and greater insecurity.
 - Forgiveness often results in a dismissal of responsibility for the actions, and not motivation to change.
- Punishment or forgiveness leaves the individual stuck in the condition of sin,
 - unless you also deal with the underlying insecurity.
 - And there's only one way to deal with insecurity—and that's love.

Love creates a whole person—no longer plagued by insecurity.

- Think for a moment: when was the last time that you felt completely loved and accepted, worthy of dignity and respect, and confident that you are enough,
 - and still felt tempted to sin.
 - Again, we sin because we're insecure—believing that we not enough.
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That's what's happening in our country today.

- So much name-calling, and blaming, and ridicule directed at one group after another.
 - How can we, how can they, how can all of us not feel less than whole, less than worthy, less than loved, less than accepted under these conditions?
 - And what's the result of such feelings?
 - We sin. We lash out.
 - We call others names, and point fingers, and try to hurt others the way we've been hurt.
 - Hurt gives birth to hurt, and it grows and it spreads and it destroys, unless...there is love.
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In today's Gospel from John, JESUS offers freedom.

- In response, and made insecure by the implication that they are not free, HIS challengers justify themselves by claiming that they don't need JESUS' freedom because they have never been slaves.
 - (Apparently, they forgot about that whole Egypt thing when they spent 400 years building pyramids for Pharaoh, much less their own struggle to feel worthy before GOD.)

They are just so caught up in their need to justify themselves and to do so apart from anything JESUS might offer them.

- "I'll find my own freedom or at least redefine what freedom is so that I don't need YOU!"
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But that, of course, is what the Reformation was all about.

- All too often, we resort to self-justification as our attempt to somehow earn our salvation.
 - But self-justification—also known as "justification by works," trying to earn GOD'S love by what we do—is much more about our attempts, like those of Adam and Eve, to go it alone, to define ourselves on our own terms, to secure for ourselves a place in GOD'S Kingdom by our own means and devices.

This kind of self-justification takes on many forms.

- In JESUS' day, it was by observing tradition for tradition's sake,
 - ignoring or denying that GOD was doing a new thing in JESUS.
 - JESUS challenged tradition by saying that love for GOD was not shown in sacrifices and following rules,
 - but rather by showing love to all people.
 - In the sixteenth century, in Martin Luther's day, it was creating and using the veneration of religious symbols and relics as the means by which to guarantee one's place in Heaven,
 - ignoring GOD'S free gift of salvation in JESUS.
 - Martin Luther challenged those religious mechanisms by teaching that acceptance by GOD was a gift of love—grace—offered to all people unconditionally, simply through faith in JESUS.
 - And today, we try to claim worthiness by acquiring sufficient wealth, status, or prestige through which to create the illusion of a meaningful and purposeful life.
 - Whatever the particular time or devices, however, all of these attempts share in common the desire to craft for oneself an identity independent of our relationship with GOD.
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Eventually, however, these attempts fail.

- No matter how much wealth I have, I cannot buy love, especially GOD'S love.
- No matter how many hours I work or awards I win, I have no guarantee that they will create for me a sense of meaning and purpose.
- No matter how much power I accumulate, it doesn't bring acceptance.
 - And when our attempts at self-justification don't seem to work, we typically have bought so deeply and thoroughly into the worldly mentality that you must go it alone,
 - that we can only redouble our efforts, sacrificing personal and community relationships, to try to have what continues to be unachievable and unfulfilling.

This is what JESUS meant by talking about the "Kingdom of GOD" in contrast to the world.

- In GOD'S Kingdom, we are known for who we are, as we are, and accepted, not because of what we've done or acquired or accomplished, but simply because GOD loves us.
- Our identity isn't some hard-earned achievement, but rather a gift of grace, freely given by GOD.
- And our destiny is secured not by our own merit or achievements, but rather it is secured *and* guaranteed by the ONE who died on a cross and was raised again,
 - proving once and for all that GOD'S love is more powerful even than death.

Paul puts it a little differently in his letter to the Romans:

There is no difference...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of GOD, and all are justified (found innocent of sin) freely by HIS grace (the gift of forgiveness and love without requirement) through the redemption (being made worthy) that came by CHRIST JESUS.

- Paul continues: *Where, then, is the boasting? It is excluded. Because of the law? The law that required works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

Paul's description of our condition and GOD'S response is so important.

- None of us can establish value in ourselves on our own and, indeed, we have done great harm to each other trying to do so.
 - Because missing any way by which to secure our future on our own, we too often compare ourselves to each other, ultimately try to make ourselves worthy on the back of our neighbor, or suffering guilt and shame when we recognize that we fall short.

GOD, however, loves us too much to allow us to try to justify ourselves against each other.

- GOD'S ultimate response is not judgment—and, by the way, while sins (plural) would be punished, sin (singular) would remain.
 - Instead, after demonstrating that our attempt to make ourselves innocent of sin is doomed, GOD justifies us by divine sacrifice, giving us by grace what we cannot attain ourselves and drawing us back into our identity as beloved children of GOD.

The bottom line is this: GOD knows us—even our insecure attempts to justify ourselves through our work, accomplishments, wealth, or status—even better than we know ourselves.

- But GOD loves us, accepting and loving the insecure, wayward persons we are.
 - Not the person we tried to be or promised to be, but the person we really are.
- And so, GOD not only forgives us those sins (plural) that we commit, but also promises us GOD'S unconditional love, acceptance, and respect.
- And this gift of grace and love both puts to death our attempts to justify ourselves (sin, singular) and raises us to new life as we discover not only that we deserve love and respect,
 - but have already been given those things by none other than the CREATOR of the universe.
 - No longer do we live with insecurity.
 - We are known for who we are, but by our gracious GOD we are loved in spite of who we are.
 - We are known and loved.