

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

A Sinful Sermon

A sermon preached June 22, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Matthew 10:28-39 ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.¹ ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. ³² "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. ³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Romans 6:1-11 Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Among the handful of pianists who achieved legendary status in the mid-twentieth century was quirky Glenn Gould. He was a wonderful pianist, and a renowned interpreter of Bach. But he was a recluse, fanatical about his privacy, and refused to give public concerts; his fame depended on his recordings done in the privacy of a studio. He was a hypochondriac, and finicky to the extreme regarding his diet. You can begin to understand why his biographer titled Gould's story *Wondrous Strange*. He was also a near suicidal driver. Gould once complained that, "It's true that I've driven through a

number of red lights on occasion, but on the other hand, I've stopped at a lot of green ones but never gotten credit for it."

That comment reminds me of one of the finest persons I've ever known approaching me with a complaint following worship one day. He asked why our worship service compelled everyone to recite those degrading Prayers of Confession each Sunday. Unwittingly borrowing a Gould-ism, he said, "We try so hard to do the right thing, and yet we never get any credit for it."

We need to talk – about sin. One of the shortest of theological words, it is also one of the most vexing. What is sin? A good and simple universal definition is that sin is separation from God due to a condition of life or unrighteous actions. Were we gathered in Jonathan Edwards congregation in Enfield, Connecticut, in 1741, we could have heard him deliver his *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God* sermon.

The corruption of the heart of man is... boundless in its fury... the heart is now a sink of sin, so if sin was not restrained, it would immediately turn the soul into a fiery oven, or a furnace of fire and brimstone.

The *fire and brimstone* era is over for most Presbyterian preachers but, of course, the problem of sin remains. How are we to understand it? How can we be freed from the kind of scrupulosity that afflicted that fine man I mentioned earlier who thought of sin and goodness as a kind of debits / credits kind accounting procedure? And, how can we take the concept of sin seriously so as to live faithfully and respond thankfully to God's gracious erasure of the red ink of guilt and blame?

Back to Gould...if you own some of his many recordings, you know that each performance is flawless and precise. His interpretations of Bach are still a standard against which other artists' attempts are measured. And yet, if you have listened carefully, you know that each recording contains a kind of flaw: emerging from beneath Bach's intricate canons is the sound of Mr. Gould compulsively humming along, and not always in tune. It is the fly in the ointment, the flaw in the design, the worm in an otherwise perfect apple. An eccentric like Gould would be a hard person to live with, but I would have given a lot to spend an evening with him just listening to him play...and hum, of course.

Well, we are all peculiar in one way or another and few of us have a wondrous talent that can compensate. As you may have noticed, I'm not into fire and brimstone, and I'm not into sin ledger books, but I don't deny that sin has us in a grip. There is a snake in the garden, a mosquito in the bead of amber, a hairline crack in the crockery, a warp in the heart and mind. Many of us prefer to speak of sin in the plural – *sins* – which betrays an understanding that what's wrong in life is that we, and others, make bad mistakes, and if we'd just behave properly, everything would be alright. So, there are the classic *seven deadly sins* – pride, envy, gluttony, sloth, lust, anger, and greed – and there are lists of venial (easily forgivable) sins – peccadilloes, the little habits and reactions which we know as vexatious to others and harmful to us but, nonetheless, we do.

The problem with such lists is that they are prideful, dishonest, and self-serving. The classic hypocrite, as Jesus pointed out, is the person who sees the speck in others' eyes but cannot see the log in her own. Beside, from where do we expect to get the prescient wisdom to see the disastrous future consequences of today's noble intentions? How often have we proven capable of rising so far above our self-interest that our

motivations are purely altruistic? For that matter, where did we get the idea that anything in this kind of world ever approaches purity of any kind?

Reducing *sin* to *sins* gives us the illusion that we're in control of ourselves and our circumstances. And, of course, there's the root of the matter. As Christian doctrine teaches regarding sin, we're not the controllers; we are the controlled. Sin is our condition more than it is our behavior. That's why no matter how long or detailed the lists, they can never be detailed or long enough, because what we call sin is not just in our actions, it is in our *being*. The mere fact that we are free to make choices, and we do so with knowledge that is always incomplete and always fraught with complex desires, longings, and inadequacies inevitably results in choices whose consequences we fail to comprehend. And, remember – our freedom to choose is also everybody else's freedom to choose, which means that our choices will inevitably collide.

The most ancient of questions, "Why is there evil in the world?" turns in part on this matter of freedom. As a diplomat once put it, "There are always going to be problems in a world where at any given moment two-thirds of its people are awake." What we call evil is often what someone else chooses as a good. Is there great tragedy and pain in the world? Undoubtedly. Is at least some of this tragedy and pain due to bad human behavior? Of course. But, if everyone did what was good and right, would pain and suffering disappear? Certainly not, for as theologian David Tracy observed, to be human is to experience contingency, transience, and finitude: unexpected things happen to us, everything – including us – changes over time, and we all die. Chance and change, tragedy and pain are given aspects of our existence, and no list of things to do or not do can ultimately change that.

The doctrine of sin encompasses all of this – both the moral choices we must make and the tragic dimensions of our lives. Sin is a theological term that describes whatever interferes with God's intention for human life and therefore separates us from God. If all this seems too speculative and vague, let's turn to the wisdom of Susannah Wesley, mother of John and Charles, the founders of the Methodist Church. This is what she taught: "Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things, that is sin to you."

"Whatever weakens your reason..." One of the limited benefits of *lists of sins* is the reminder that although we cannot be good, we can be better, and whereby reason can't by itself bring us to good conclusions, we are better off using our God-given heads than not. So, what weakens our reason? My soul feels overwhelmed much of the time with all the stuff in life that tries to "dumb us down" instead of "wising us up." Reading that never makes us think, movies that never stir us to anything but embarrassed laughter, cultural prejudices that replace critical thinking, the indulgence of personal wants and the stifling of self-honesty, all the cant and chatter of political speech that barely rise above lies, all the fascinations of celebrity and pop culture that is fluffy and titillating, all the coarsening influences of rude culture – all these things are sin to us, for they don't edify and enlarge us. At best, they only leave us the same. We have made the word *thoughtful* synonymous with kindness and sensitivity, which may be excellent outcomes, but let's keep in mind that first and foremost the word means *full of thought*.

"Whatever impairs the tenderness of your conscience..." *Conscience* refers to an awareness of ethical standards and the instinct of moral discernment within oneself. The root of the word *conscience*, means *to be intensely aware*. Again, the implication is that

we are to think, not just react, and to be intensely aware, in this regard, of God's demands and the dignity of others. Our calling is not just to be full of thought, but to know a way of thinking differently than those around us. Paul charges us to "have the mind of Christ." We are called to bring a Christ-like awareness of the needs of our neighbor, an Isaiah-like or Micah-like, or Amos-like awareness of the injustices of our society. "Believers know that while our values are embodied in tradition, our hopes are always located in change," Bill Coffin said. If we are not working for change, our consciences will inevitably grow dull-witted.

"Whatever obscures your sense of God...." Our sense of God is not just a matter of "being good" but a continual grappling with the implications of the person of Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. Christianity is not simply an ethical system. As William Blake wrote, "If Morality was Christianity, Socrates was the Savior." It is curious to me how many Christians seem to think that the Ten Commandments somehow comprise the essence of their faith and the supreme ideal of morality. But what I ask is this: why is it that no one seems to want to erect monuments on court house squares of the Beatitudes? Could it be that those words of Jesus represent too high a calling? Could it be that we would rather deal with the limited demands of the ten rather than the vast possibilities of soul and service embodied in Christ's teaching of what it means to be human and to be faithful under God? Our faith as followers of Christ is in the God whose will transcends our self-interest and whose call leads us into life's depths with healing and righteousness in our hearts and hands. The Ten Commandments is a place to start, but to stop there means we have missed the call into ministry that is at the heart of the gospel.

"Whatever takes the relish off of spiritual things...." Dylan Thomas is reported to have once said, "Someone is boring me...I think it's me." What is true of us is this: if we do not fulfill our vocation, the color and vibrancy of our whole life will be drained. Part of "having a sense of God" is having a sense that we were given life for a purpose, not as a whim. Thoreau's comment that most people live lives of quiet desperation still rings true for those who want to make the Self the center of their existence but find that it is far too shallow an anchorage to keep one centered on what is good and true.

Teilhard de Chardin said, "We are not physical beings seeking a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a bodily experience," an outlook that finds us rooted in God first and finally, and suggests that the meaning of our existence is not found within the meager number of years we live or in the selfish needs we indulge but in the enduring love of God for us and the whole world. If we have lost the relish of spiritual things, we have, in truth, lost a sense of self in relation to God.

"Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things that is sin to you." What Paul wants us to understand from his Letter to the Church at Rome is that – regarding sin – for God's purposes, sin has been overlooked as a factor in the relationship. If sin is, fundamentally, separation from God, that gulf, that distance, that relational break has been overcome by God's grace. Calvin described grace as "God demanding of us what only God working through us can achieve." As Paul says, in terms of our own understanding, we should live as though dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, worry less about sinning and more about serving, try to play all the notes right, but keep in mind as we follow the score that it's quite appropriate to hum along.