

The Joy Of Seeing Ourselves As Sinners

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A Celebration of the Gospel

Romans 2:17-3:20

This morning I am going to be continuing in a series that I have been doing from the book of Romans. For those of you who haven't been here, I just want to tell you why I have been teaching out of Romans. I started a series early in the summer on "The Heart of the Father" and, now, I have begun a new series that I am calling "A Celebration of the Gospel". But both the talks on The Heart of the Father, as I looked at the story of the lost son, the lost sheep and the lost coin and some of the other parables of Jesus, and now this, are really designed to lay a foundation, at least in this church, for pointing out the need for every Christian to be involved in the great cause of winning the lost for Christ. It is so important that we get encouraged in the direction of sharing our faith, if we are believers, and we see that as part of what we are about.

I have asked here in the church, as we prepare for the Summer Harvest Festival that we are going to be having toward the end of August—a time for bringing friends and family, I have asked you in the church to pray two things: 1) I have asked you to pray that God would give us a God-sized harvest. I talked a bit about that last week. But a God-sized harvest is something that goes beyond our efforts that cannot be reasonably accounted for except by God's intervention. And I think the God-sized harvest is what is referred to in Scriptures when they talk about 30 fold, 60 fold and 100 fold. I would encourage you to pray toward that end for the church.

The second prayer that I have asked you to pray and so that we would join together as a church in asking the Lord for these things, being in agreement about that, is that we ask God to make this church an evangelistic church. Part of what I think God wants to do this summer is to put in us this part of our genetic code that, frankly, wasn't here in past years. Certainly, we have seen far more evangelism in the last several years than we did in the past, but going back as I can, fifteen years in this church, there were long periods of time when the church was fairly inwardly focused and introverted. And what you can pray is that the Lord would sow in the church an outward focus and a spirit of evangelism that would last for the generations. That the church's testimony in Columbus would be "that is a church that really evangelizes." "They are a group of people who really reach out."

Now, I want to say a word to our leaders. I didn't have an opportunity the other evening to speak to those who were here for our leaders' meeting. Marlene and I left early. But I do want to share a word with you. If you have any influence in this church, I want to remind you that you can use your influence in one of two ways: to quench something that we are trying to do as a church or to encourage it. I have used the analogy in the past of every leader walking around with two buckets. This is the case. Leaders, women's groups, men's groups, worship people, prayer ministry leaders, kinship leaders, children's ministry leaders, you are walking around with two buckets. And one of those buckets is a bucket of water and the other is a bucket of gasoline. And you can come along as we are trying to encourage folk's involvement in bringing friends, you can come along with your bucket of water and pour it on whatever fire is going and quench it. I want to shoot straight with you. I think that most of the leaders

that I have talked with and most of the people have been beginning to really rally and have a sense of excitement about what the Lord might do in rescuing people.

But there are a few folks who have just been pouring water all over this and I would really like to challenge you to stop doing that. You know, the truth is that God really does care about the lost. And he does want this church involved. I haven't loaded up this summer with a lot of God-talk regarding the whole prophetic way that this summer came about, because I don't like to do that. I, frankly, feel it is a bit manipulative and I really don't think it is necessary. The Lord can take care of his interests.

But I would ask that some of you stop quenching the fire. On the other hand, others of you need to take your bucket of gasoline, you haven't been quenching it all, that is not where you are, but you really haven't been pouring gas on it either. And you are still involved in your world and what you are doing. But I would encourage you, leaders, to start pouring gas on this. Get on your knees and start praying for neighbors, friends, co-workers and family and figure out who you can invite and encourage others to do it. Be involved in the counseling on those evenings. You will have the opportunity to speak to someone and bring them to Jesus.

Well, enough said about that.

Anyway, we have been looking together at the book of Romans. Let me remind you of what Paul is doing and what the nature of his argument is. Basically, Paul is indicting the whole human race. He is coming at us as a great prosecutor would, bringing an indictment that would cause us all to find ourselves under the judgment of God.

We have seen that the first few chapters of Romans can be outlined by first of all, an indictment brought against immoral Gentiles (Romans 1) and an indictment brought against moral Gentiles (Romans 2:1-17) and, then, an indictment brought against religious people, namely the Jews, (Romans 2:17 on). Immoral Gentiles, moral Gentiles, the Jews, what Paul is doing is sweeping in the whole human race under this broad condemnation and he is saying that no one, no one can slip through and make their way to God apart from the grace of God and apart from the cross of Jesus Christ. There is no salvation apart from God's grace and the salvation bought for us at the cross of Jesus where he paid the penalty for our sins.

Paul's argument would fall apart if even one could slip through and say that they could stand before God apart from his grace. If even one could somehow make it in apart from the atoning death of Christ, his argument would fall apart.

And so today we are going to go right into the teeth of Paul's indictment where he expresses the very simple thought throughout regarding religious people that we religious people are sinners. And then he turns to the whole world and he says that you are all sinners.

Now, I realize there is a great amount of resistance in modern culture to being talked to about sin and to being called "sinners". But what I am going to try to do today is to actually change your minds about being called sinners and, in fact, I hope that we will come, by the end of the talk, to the place where we really celebrate seeing ourselves as sinners. Because in that, we bring ourselves to the foot of the cross and find real salvation.

Friends, I want to tell you it is a good thing to see yourself as a sinner and to use the categories of sin as you look out at the world because, frankly, apart from the frame of reference of sin, I don't believe that you can understand your daily newspaper. Apart

from the frame of reference of sin, I don't believe you can understand world history. Apart from the frame of reference of sin, I don't believe you can understand why you struggle in your marriage to get along. Why you struggle in your relationships. Why you struggle at work with your boss or co-worker. Why your kids do the things they do.

There is no clear understanding of the world apart from the clear frame of reference of sin and sinfulness. This terrible twist that goes down to the core of every human being. This perversity, this moral confusion that runs right into our hearts.

It has been a peculiar modern phenomenon that since the enlightenment, we have gotten rid of the category of sin as a frame of reference, a frame of understanding. Part of the blame could be laid at the feet of a philosopher named Rousseau, who proposed in a paper to the French Academy for which he won a lot of money, but he proposed in a paper back in the 1700's that people were not sinful. Indeed, he said that people were born sinless. They were born good. It was only the result of societal influences that corrupted people. But he proposed that there was such a thing as a "noble savage." That if people were left alone, uncorrupted by modern civilization, they would be good and decent and loving and moral.

Margaret Meade, the anthropologist in our century, basically echoed Rousseau's thought in so-called studies she did on the Samoans (which has been thoroughly discredited). But she said that she discovered these Samoans who were untouched by modern civilization and as a result were good, decent and loving and were not violent. They didn't do terrible things to each other.

Friends, I want to tell you that this is a very popular notion and a very misguided one to try to eliminate from our understanding badness and relational disruption. Eliminating from our problems the framework of sin. You know, I believe if you eliminate sin from your framework, from your way of looking at life, you are going to come up with the most superficial diagnoses of the problems of the world and not only will your diagnosis be superficial, but your solutions will be even more superficial.

Have you ever wondered why so many government programs don't work? Why just throwing money at problems doesn't seem to solve the problems? Why changing people's environments, putting them in newer housing and changing the school systems and reworking the curriculum doesn't seem to stop the violence? Or people's greed or corporate pollution? There seems to be something else going on here.

Let me approach this from a different angle. My point is that you cannot understand the world without the irreducible core of seeing people as sinful. Recently, the panel of experts, historians and psychotherapists, politicians got together and were asked a simple question on the 50th Anniversary of the Holocaust, the slaughter of Jews by the Nazis in World War II. These experts were asked a simple question: How did the Holocaust happen? Why the Holocaust?

They wrote a book of essays about this. These experts proposed a number of causes for the Holocaust. They looked back at the state of Germany after the first World War and the wartime debt that burdened Germany. They looked at the unfairness of the Versailles Treaty that was proposed by the Allies. They looked at the German depression of the 20's, the charisma of Hitler—all of those things.

You know what was missing? An adequate understanding of human sinfulness. How can we explain Auschwitz? How can we explain the madness that was rampant in Germany and throughout Europe? How can we explain taking children and murdering them apart from some evil in the heart?

You read the daily newspapers. How do you explain Susan Smith, a mother who watched her children drown? You know, Susan Smith, indeed, may be a Christian. She certainly has all the language and reads her Bible faithfully. Her stepfather, who sexually abused her, appears to be a Christian. How do we understand these strange, most evil twists even among the religious if you get rid of the category of sin?

Oh, some people like to propose that well, what we have is hold-overs of evolution. We are not evolutionarily advanced enough. We have hold-overs from animal behaviors. We are just acting like apes, but that will eventually be worked out of our system. I think that is really unfair to the apes. Any time someone calls human evil behavior animal-like, I think it is a slur on animals. Because animals don't do what we do. Animals, generally, don't sexually abuse their children. Animals, in general, don't abuse their children at all. Animals don't relate the way human beings do. They don't kill other animals for nothing or the thrill.

Other people try to reduce it to a therapy concept. What we are watching is neurosis or sickness as if there is an evil virus that gets in our brains. But there is no virus that we have discovered that makes people immoral, that causes us to be greedy or selfish or self-indulgent.

Part of the reason why we need to recover the concept of sin is to understand the world. And a second reason why we need to recover the concept of sin is to understand ourselves. We are constantly involved as human beings in self-conscious examination of ourselves. We are the chief object of our own fascination. We are constantly dealing with why we do what we do and looking at our motivations and struggling with our inabilities to be better than we are. Why is there so much moral chaos in us?

You know, sometimes I think that we do have a good understanding of sin in the world, especially religious people tend to. Sure, there is lots of sin out there. We saw that in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector last week. Religious people have no problem looking around and saying, "Yeah, I see sin over there and adultery here. In that man there is greed." But religious people need to come to grips with sin in ourselves. That there is no proper framework for understanding ourselves and why we do what we do. It is easy to externalize sin and to see sin in your mother or your father or your ex-spouse or your current spouse, isn't it? Your children? Your boss? Your pastor? Your whoever? It is easy to look at that.

But to say about ourselves, there is a twist in me. There is confusion.

G.K. Chesterton, the English writer who is known for his humor as well as his profound insight, once answered a magazine question posed to the readership of this particular magazine. The question that they were asking for essays on was "What is wrong with the world?"

Chesterton telegraphed in two words. In answer to the question "What is wrong with the world?" G.K. Chesterton said, "I am."

Any situation that we enter, we pollute. What is wrong with your marriage? In part, you. Me. What is wrong with our family life? Us. What is wrong with our relationships at work? Us, in part. We are sinners. We are always going to come up with superficial answers to why we struggle the way we do unless we use the frame of reference of sin.

About 30 years ago a psychotherapist looked out at the counseling methods of his day. Carl Menenger looked around and he saw that there was so much counseling going on that focused on potty training and parental styles growing up and conflicts

between the id and the super-ego. Menenger wrote a book that became a national best seller, but which the point is easily lost. His book was called *Whatever Became of Sin?* In it he chastised his fellow therapists and said that we cannot reduce sin any longer to the categories of sickness, or dysfunction or deviancy or crime. There is something in people that is immoral. There is a twist in us that is, in fact, unethical and self-centered and self-indulgent.

Friends, if you are getting counsel, I would encourage you to go to a counselor who uses the frame of reference of sin because apart from that you are going to get a superficial answer for your marital problems or a superficial answer for your child raising problems. I am so grateful for Danny here in the church and also for other counselors that I have talked with who understand that human problems, fundamentally, revolve around this issue of sin.

But you know why we should celebrate an understanding of sin? It is not just because of a clear understanding. It is not just so that we can get insight into the world or even insight into ourselves. It is because understanding sin is the precondition for really appreciating the cross of Jesus Christ. What Paul is trying to do is to draw every person to the cross. To celebrate the cross and to appreciate the cross. Loving the cross of Jesus. And when you get a handle of who you are and what you are capable of, you just fall all the more in love with the cross of Jesus.

Well, this evening, I am going to be talking about Taking Joy in Seeing Ourselves as Sinners. Let's pray.

In chapters 2 and 3, Paul is establishing his case that everyone is under the judgment of God and needs God's grace to be saved. But we don't see that. In fact, we often think that everything is okay between us and God. We also don't appreciate the cross enough. And so, point by point, he brings us into a fuller knowledge of our own sinfulness. How does he do that?

Well, in his first section, he tells us religious people that we can know sin in ourselves by simply comparing the distance between what we know and what we do. Religious people, church-going people, Christian people, you know a lot. You have read a lot of the Bible. You have heard a lot of talks and sermons. You have listened to tapes. You have read Christian books. You have had infinite numbers of discussions, some of you, in Bible studies. You want to see sin in yourself?

Do I do all that I know? Have I put into practice all that I have heard?

You know, the longer that you walk with Christ, the greater the distance will be between what you know and what you do. And Paul is calling upon the Jews to come to grips with this distance. To live in this separation for a while and to try to explain it to yourself. You know, we have just in the 20th century come to this silly, superficial viewpoint that all we need to do is to disseminate more knowledge and that will deal with people's bad behavior and their immoral conduct.

Ted Turner, who is radically anti-Christian and who has, on many occasions, publicly said that the world would be an infinitely better place without any fundamentalists or any Christians around, was quoted as saying not too long ago that the Holocaust would never have happened if CNN had been around in the 1930's and 40's because, he said, people wouldn't put up with it. If they saw what was happening and they knew what was happening, the world would have put a stop to the Holocaust. All people need is information. And that drives us to action, right friends?

Well, of course, that is false. We have news reports every day of every year of famines and slaughters in Bosnia and in Rwanda and Cambodia. We have all kinds of

information, but it doesn't drive us to action. How many of you cigarette smokers feel that what you need is more information about the harmfulness of smoking before you will stop? Is there not something else going on inside of you that causes you to continue to smoke even though you are loaded down with governmental information?

Those of you who are addicted, you are struggling with a certain problem, maybe it is television watching or an eating disorder or a sexual problem or drinking or a problem with your anger or a problem of reading romance novels and fantasy books all day—why don't you just stop? Is it that you need information?

Paul says one good way of getting in touch with this thing, this undefinable core in us, this twist, this perversion is just beginning to see all that you know and how little you practice.

Christians, are you saying that you don't know the Bible message regarding giving financially to the work of the kingdom of God? Then, why don't you do it?

Are you saying that you don't know the Bible message that you are supposed to pray continually? That you are to spend time studying God's Word? Then why don't you do it?

Are you saying that you don't know that you are supposed to serve your spouse and continually forgive them for their faults and their slights? Then why don't you do it?

And why don't I do it? Because we are sinners.

Indeed, Paul says, there is a deception in knowledge. You know, when we become instructors, "You who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?" You know, there is a particular deception in teaching and in accumulating knowledge. It is particularly true in the conservative evangelical wing of the church that we have taken an approach to people that said that what we need to do is just give them more information and, thereby, we will change them. We don't take sin seriously enough.

And those who are teaching, those of us who are teaching can particularly deceive ourselves because we are dispensing the information. It is so easy to believe that because you can say it to another and explain it to another, you, yourself, are doing it. Teachers, how many of you have seen yourself fall into that trap? Believing you were farther along in your Christian walk and in your intimacy with Christ than you really were because you were teaching a Bible study or sharing how to come to Christ with another.

How do we gain knowledge of sin? Well, simply, look at the distance between what you know and what you do and live there for a while. A real creative exercise, you may want to write on a sheet of paper all the things you know you are supposed to do as a Christian and then go down the list and ask how many of them am I really doing? Or all the things you are supposed to refrain from as a Christian and then say, "Now, how many of those things am I really refraining from?"

Well, Paul goes on and he says, "Now, let me give you a second way of coming to a knowledge of sin. Look at the Jewish people." Verses 25-29. It is so important that you understand the place of the Jewish people in the plan of God. What Jews were chosen for.

Jews have been chosen, first of all, to reveal God's way of dealing with people. You say how shall I understand the way God wants to relate to me? Look at the Jews. Look at the way God deals with the Jews.

How does God deal with people? You know, we are constantly wondering about God's ways and how does God relate to people? What is God like and how does he relate?

God has given us a means of revelation. He has pulled the veil back, if you will, and he says, "Here is a way that you can know the ways of the invisible God. Look at the Jews."

You say, "Look at the Jews? What do you mean 'Look at the Jews'?"

Well, first of all we see that the Jewish people exist, which is a miracle. This tiny group of people that up until the 1940's, 1948, didn't have a homeland. Always existed as a minority everywhere. Persecuted. Thrown in gas chambers. Great peoples of the world and great empires have vanished off the world's stage. They are no more. The Roman Empire is gone. The Greek Empire is gone. The Turkish Empire is gone. Jews remain. The Jews remain.

This reveals to us the faithfulness of God. God has promised that he is going to bring deliverance to Israel. He has promised that before the return of Jesus that a significant number of Jews will be saved. That means there must be physical Jews and they are going to be saved. Romans 11. We see the faithful dealing of God and his ability to preserve people against all the odds, against all the onslaught, God can preserve. We see in the Jewish people God's way of dealing with disobedience. God the Father knows how to punish, he knows how to confront, he knows how to deal with sin.

We see with the Jewish people God's incredible patience. His long-suffering, his willingness to endure anything and still keep on loving and seeking.

But you know what else we see with the Jewish people, not only God's way of dealing with folks and the revelation of the heart of God, we see in the Jewish people the revelation of the heart of religious people. The Jews have something to say to us as church people. The Jews, as the prototypical religious people relied on outward symbols and outward conformity as being the guarantee of exemption from God's discipline or God's judgment.

In this text from verses 25-29, Paul speaks about circumcision to which the Jews of Paul's day had an almost magical perspective on. They just believed that if a boy were circumcised, that boy was saved. And the Rabbis taught that circumcised men do not descend into hell. They also had a little saying: Circumcision will deliver Israel from hell. The Jews revealed the tendency of religious people to rely on outward signs and outward acts of piety to gain favor of God.

We would change the little saying to be: Church going delivers people from hell. Prayer delivers people from hell. Attending a Bible study delivers people from hell. Or at least delivers people from the discipline of God.

And even though we know better, even though we know that we are to rely on the death of Christ and not on our acts of piety, yet we can hardly do anything, any activity, without feeling better about our status with God because we have done it. Yes, sir, I must really be advancing in the eyes of God after what I just dropped in the offering plate. I feel really good in the sight of God because of my devotional time. It is so hard for we religious people to continually rely on the mercy of God and the grace of God for our status with him over against our acts of piety.

You know, Paul tells us what God is after in the Jews and therefore what God is after in us church goers. You know what God is always looking for? He is always

looking for two things from people, from you, me—God is always looking for two things. Number one, he is looking for an obedient heart. Paul says,

“Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?”

Circumcision minus obedience equals uncircumcision. Uncircumcision plus obedience equals circumcision. God has always wanted from people an obedient heart. When God says something to you, he wants you to listen and to do it. That is what he wants. He wants you to be soft to him. To not constantly sit on the throne and say, “No, I am going to pull the string. No, I am going to rule in my life. No, I know better.” God wants to be what he is in your life. He wants to be the Lord, which means your master, your ruler. Because that is who he is and he wants you to recognize that and come under it.

And the second thing he is looking for from you, along with an obedient heart, is that he wants other people to praise him because you exist. He is looking for praise to come out of your life. Verse 24, Paul says the broken heart of God is with us and says regarding the Jews, “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” God is mocked very often. Jesus Christ is mocked and his name is dragged through the mud because of what we Christians do. Folks at work look at Christians, maybe sometimes they look at us, we Vineyard people, and say, “Ha! You know that’s what Christians are like! That is what Christians do!” You are a great witness in your Bible study and in your religious talk. That is the way you work and how you relate to people. That is your humor. That is the kind of attitude you take toward authority. Whatever you have on your wall plaques, whatever bumper sticker you have on your car. Is it not the case that the name of our Lord is dragged through the mud by the witness of Christians? God wants people to praise him because we exist. To say I am so thankful to God because you are alive, because I know you.

This idea of people praising God because we exist—do you know what the name “Jew” literally means? It comes from Judah, one of Jacob’s sons, and it means “praise.” The Jews were called to bring praise to God.

The Lord just wants really two things from you: obedience and that others would praise him because of you. Part of the way others are going to praise God because of you is if you share your faith and they come to a knowledge of God. They will thank God on your behalf. If you serve someone else, or because of you or your gifts and the use of your gifts you bless others, people will praise God because of you.

And Paul raises in Romans 3, a number of objections—

Romans 3:1-8: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: ‘So that you may be proved right in your words and prevail in your judging.’ But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, ‘If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?’ Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as

saying and as some claim that we say— ‘Let us do evil that good may result’? Their condemnation is deserved.”

And, again, his main point is to bring about in us a knowledge of our sin. He does that by showing, first of all, the distance between what we know and what we do. He brings about a knowledge of sin by looking at the way religious people relate and by showing that religious people relate sinfully by looking at the Jews. And this is an interesting thing that Paul is doing. He is raising a lot of objections to what he is teaching. Have you ever noticed that when you read [those of you who read the New Testament], you see Paul arguing back and forth as if there is this objector who stands up and who says, “Well, what about such and such?” And he loves to debate things back and forth. Have you ever noticed his writing style?

Did you ever ask yourself the question: Who is Paul’s objector? In other words, who is it that is saying, “Well, isn’t it a good thing that I sin because then God’s grace will be shown all the more?” Where does he get this stuff from?

I will tell you who I think Paul’s objector is and where Paul gets all this stuff from. I think Paul’s objector is Paul. I think Paul gets the other side of the argument not just from what others are saying and that he hears them saying, he is not simply reporting what his opponents are saying, I think he is reporting what he, himself, thought as an unbeliever, as Paul the Pharisee. Paul in Romans 3:1-8, as an example, is debating with Paul.

Let me personalize this and tell you where I am going. I will frequently get the compliment from some of you after I get done with a message and this has been said to me just a lot of times, so I will share it with you. I have folks come up and say, “You know, it is like you had a bug in our bedroom this week, or in our house. You just laid out exactly what we were talking about.” Or, “You laid my sin right out there and showed me. How did you know that I was involved in this or that?”

Well, I don’t have to know that you are involved in this or that, or how you feel, because I just examine my own sinful heart and then project it out there. That is what Paul does. If you want to come to a knowledge of yourself as a sinner, start mucking around inside. You will see all kinds of flesh. Start examining your motives for why you say certain things or why you structure certain comments and see if you don’t detect in the way you relate a great amount of self-centeredness. Examine your heart as someone else near you is getting complimented or praised, especially if that someone else is someone you feel a bit competitive with. Examine your heart and look inside. Do a bit of self-examination and you will come to a clearer knowledge of yourself as a sinner.

And the fifth and final thing that I think Paul is driving at in providing us with the light of the knowledge of our own sins is he is suggesting in this paragraph how badly people misuse their privileges and the grace given to them by God. You know, the Jews were given so much by the Lord. Paul asked the question in Romans 3:1 – What advantage is there in being a Jew, of what value is there in circumcision?

Well, if it doesn’t keep you out of hell, doing all these outward things, what good is being a Jew? He says, “Much in every way. First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.”

Later on in Romans 9:4-5, Paul goes on and talks about all the wonderful privileges given to the Jewish people. He says theirs is the adoption as sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, the promises—theirs

are the patriarchs, from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ who was God over all forever praised.

So many privileges. Here is the final way that we can come to a knowledge of our sin. Consider how often it is that we abuse our privileges and, indeed, trade in our privilege status in some act of disobedience. That the privileges, in other words, that were given by God to us are such a small thing in our sight that we throw them over in a mad rush to do what we want to do in any given moment. Yes, I know that God has called me a daughter or a son of God; I know that he has given me the Word; I know that he has put me in a certain position; and on and on and on. Nevertheless, I am still going to look at this particular thing. I am still going to hold onto unforgiveness in my heart. I am still going to spread a vicious report about someone who made me angry. I am still going to walk away from my marriage.

The way to understand your sinfulness is to see how regularly you trade in the privileges and the grace God has given you in order to do your own thing. Hebrews 12:16 speaks of Esau. It says, "See that no one is sexually immoral or godless like Esau who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son." Esau had been given the birthright, the blessings and privileges of inheriting the promises. And yet, God's blessing on his life was such a small thing in his eyes, that he traded it in for a meal.

Friends, sometimes God's blessing on our lives is such a small thing in our sight, intimacy with God, closeness to God, that we willingly trade it in for something else, some other activity or some sin. And this reveals to us our own sinfulness—trading in the privileges.

In Romans 3:9-18, I am going to read that:

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: '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; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves, their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.'

And here is Paul's thunderous conclusion to his case as a prosecutor. He says, first of all, that sin is universal. Look at how many times Paul uses the words, "no one" and "all." In verse 10: No one is righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands. No one who seeks God. All have turned away. They together have become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.

If this was math, the set of people who don't sin would be an empty set. It would be called a null set. There are no items in the set, Paul is saying. The set of people who squeak through to God and don't have to rely on the grace and mercy of God to save them is none, apart, of course, from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sin is universal. It is in the heart of every person, the good, the bad, the in-between. Folks like us who are in the grays. We are all sinners.

And he goes on and talks about another important doctrine in terms of understanding sin. Sin is not only universal, but he goes on and talks of the total depravity of each human being when he says,

"Their throats are open graves, their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are

swift to shed blood, ruin and misery mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know.”

What Paul is saying is that sin touches every part of our beings. That is what total depravity means. You know, that phrase, “total depravity” as it applies to people has been sadly misunderstood. Many well-intentioned Christians have said, “I don’t believe in the total depravity of people” because they think that by total depravity, Christian theologians are referring to an idea that people are as bad as they can possibly be. That there is no goodness in us. That the image of God is obliterated. That we are as bad as demons.

Total depravity doesn’t mean that we are as bad as we possibly could be. It doesn’t mean that there is no good in us and it doesn’t mean that the image of God is obliterated. In every person, the image of God still shines. We still see something of God in the most wicked of people. That gives people dignity and worth.

All total depravity means is what Paul is saying here. That is every part of us is stained with sin. Our reasoning processes are stained with sin. Our speech is stained with sin. What our activities are as we walk through life are stained with sin. We are like white shirts that have been washed with a brand new red shirt. And when we are pulled out of the washer, every fiber of our being is pink. Every part of us is stained. Our emotions are stained. Our wills are stained. Total depravity. Sin runs everywhere in us.

T.S. Elliott, the poet, said that total depravity can be compared to a house that has leaky plumbing. And the sewage from the pipes is dripping out. Despite every effort to fix the plumbing and no matter how many plumbers are called, nevertheless, the stench of the leaky plumbing pervades the house.

Friends, that is what we are like. The stench of our sins pervades our entire being. How we relate, how we think, what we are after, what our goals are, what our motives are.

Sin is universal. It touches every person. And sin touches every part of every person. Not making us as bad as we could be, there is much goodness in us by the grace of God, but there is also this tainted stain. And ultimately, it is all rooted in the lack of fear that we have in God. Paul says, “The way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Where is sin rooted? In our lack of fear of God. In our unbelief. I have always believed that the heart of sin is unbelief. We do not believe that God is who he says he is or that God will do what he says he will do. When God says that there are consequences for sin, we say, “No there aren’t.” When God says, “Here is a better way for you to live,” we say, “No, it isn’t.” When God says, “Don’t do that,” we say, “Why not?” When God says, “Stay in your marriage,” we say, “No.” God says, “Don’t get involved in premarital sex,” we say, “Yes, we are going to do it anyway.” There is no fear of God. We don’t take him seriously enough. And we don’t take his Word seriously enough and so we live out the consequences of what God says because it is always true.

The sweeping indictment is that he has brought us to a knowledge of our sin; he has showed us what we are like; he tells us that every person falls under this indictment; and, he says, “Here is where you stand, friend.” We know that whatever the law says it says to those who are under the law so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

He has now closed his case. He says, "The prosecution rests." He is picturing a great courtroom. We are standing before the judgment seat of God. We have just been indicted as sinners. We have heard all of the evidence. God has heard it. And now God turns to us and he says, "What do you have to say on your behalf? What do you say in your own defense to this charge, friend, that you are a sinner and that sin touches every part of your being?"

Paul says, "The law, whatever you are hearing now, is designed so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." When you are asked the question: what do you say in your own defense? Paul's answer is that we say nothing. We have no excuse. We lay out hands on our mouths. We hang our heads and we hear the verdict pronounced on our lives: guilty. Guilty before God. And the Lord says, "Where is your witness to defend your righteousness?" We say, "We have no witness. We have no case. We have nothing to offer into evidence. We are sinners."

Friends, I started the talk today saying there is a blessing in seeing ourselves as sinners. It is a good thing.

You know, there is story from the Old Testament that I want to finish out with. In Genesis 32 [and by the way, I got this insight from Zacharias' book, *Can Man Live Without God?*] God is wrestling with Jacob and he says to Jacob, "What is your name?" Now, it is a strange question for an omniscient being to ask. Someone who knows everything to turn to a man and say, "What is your name?" But in that moment of being confronted by God, his father, and being asked his name, Jacob, I believe, flashed back to the other time in his life when he was asked by his earthly father the same question. Years before Isaac, Jacob's earthly father, said to Jacob, "What is your name? Who are you?" And when Jacob was asked years before what his name was, he lied. He said, "I am Esau. I am your first born son." And in so doing, he stole the blessing that God wanted to give him, but he stole it. And that led to years of unhappiness for Jacob.

Well, now he is confronted again with the same question: What is your name? Only this time the question is asked by God, the father. And this time, he answered the question honestly. He said, "My name is Jacob." The name "Jacob" means "deceiver", "grabber". And what Jacob is saying is God, I have come to see who I am and I am going to be honest about it. I am a deceiver. I am a grabber. My whole life has been lived by twisting the truth and turning things to my own advantage. And now I am going to be honest before you and tell you what I really am.

And God says, "Now that you are willing to be honest, Jacob, you have come to a clear self-understanding, I am going to call you "Israel". I am going to give you a new name. You are going to be a person who overcomes sin in your life. You are going to be an overcomer, one who is victorious.

Friends, I believe that all God is looking for at this moment is just that honesty of confession. Where we come before the Lord and say, "God, I am a sinner. My name is Jacob. I am an addict. I have done these things in my marriage. These things with your Word and with what you have given me."

God says, "Well, then, I will name you Israel, overcomer. I will change you."

Ultimately, the beauty of seeing ourselves as sinners is that we come to the end of ourselves. To the end of all of our striving. We come to the end of our rope and it is there, at the end of our rope, that we look for the only source of life, a life-line, the cross of Jesus. It ought to be no great fear to disclose fully what we are and what we have

done. Because that is the way that we can, then, find the cross of Christ fully and the grace of God that is able to rescue us.

Let's pray.