

The Heart of Sin

Genesis 3; Romans 1

I'm told the following statements actually come from an Australian calendar – but they're probably the sorts of things you can hear in all sorts of places in Australia – and in many other parts of the world.

- There is greatness within you – your potential is unlimited.
- Keep your belief in yourself and walk in your journey.
- Travel the road that you have chosen and don't look back with regrets.
- Tell yourself that you're OK just the way you are.
- Don't ever lose faith in yourself. You can do anything.
- Do what is best for you.
- Do what you love. Control your own life.¹

That's one popular philosophy within our culture – and it drives much of what goes on in our culture and how people think of themselves and how they relate to one another and how they bring up their children and a whole host of things. Is it right? Does it fit in with what the Bible has to say about us – with what God says about us?

Why This Series?

This week, we're starting a series on the Seven Deadly Sins. It's not a typical series in that I'm not sure when we'll get around to finishing it. The first sermon will be this week – an introductory sermon to get us going. Then we'll look at the first of the seven deadly sins next week – the sin of pride. But we're not likely to look at the second

sin until after Easter. In other words, we're going to fit this series around the other series – usually in the school holidays – but I haven't worked out all the details yet.

Why do a series on sin? Several reasons.

- First, it's in the Bible. In fact, it's in the Bible lots. That alone should be sufficient.
- Secondly, it's something our culture gets wrong. They think they know what it is – but they don't. And until they get it right, they're not likely to get the gospel right. The popular philosophy put forward in that calendar is a great expression of what sin is – yet, that's the way we're being encouraged to live.
- Thirdly, many people within the church also get it wrong. We've been living in our culture too long and we've allowed our culture's thinking to muddy our thinking. We've paid more attention to how our culture defines sin than to what the Bible says about it.

Tied up with that third point are a few things I've heard or observed during this last week. Spending time around a bunch of children is always a good opportunity to be reminded of sin. It's not that they're more sinful, just they haven't learnt to cover it up as well. But it wasn't just the things going on at Triple S. I also heard some reports of things people in our church supposedly said – which, if they're right (and I well know that grapevines often aren't right), show a distinct misunderstanding of sin. So it's a good opportunity to spend some time reviewing it.

What is Sin?

The Budget Edition of the Macquarie Dictionary defines

¹ Sermon by Phillip Jensen at 2008 AFES National Training Event..

sin as *a transgression of divine law*.² Wayne Grudem, in his *Systematic Theology*, is along similar lines, but goes a bit further:

Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature.³

I think there's something inadequate about both those definitions. They move us into the area of law instead of relationship. They move us into the area of lists of rules and regulations rather than focusing on God Himself.

From the Old Testament

I think the easiest way to see this is to go back to the Garden: to humanity's original sin. Turn to Genesis 2:16

And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die".

What's the serpent say about the tree? Genesis 3:4

"You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

And what's God say once they eat? Genesis 3:22

"The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever."

Now, I want to come at this in two different ways. First, was there anything inherently evil or wrong in the tree itself? No – it's part of God's good creation. God got to the end of day six and saw all He'd made and pronounced it very good. That included this tree. There isn't anything

² *The Macquarie Dictionary: Budget Edition* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1995) 373.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1994) 490.

wrong with the tree itself. The rule God made about this tree was a test.

- It isn't a test to see whether or not they keep the rule – although that, of course, was involved. But that's not the heart of the matter.
- The essence of the test is whether or not they trust God. It's whether or not they submit themselves to God and His authority.

Adam and Eve didn't trust God. They took matters into their own hands and ate of this tree. Yes, they broke the rule. But far more importantly, they rejected the relationship. They failed to recognise God's right to rule over them. They asserted their independence from God. They set themselves up as boss.

Now come at it from a second angle. What is this tree? It's called *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* – quite a mouthful. But what's the mouthful mean?

- Is it to do with knowing the difference between right and wrong – that God hadn't given them that knowledge originally, but by eating from this tree they could now tell the difference? That won't work – it'd mean they didn't know it was wrong to disobey God until after they ate from the tree. And secondly, the rest of the Bible tells us that, because of their sin, we humans have to be taught by God's word what's right and wrong. While we have a conscience that often prods us in the right direction, that conscience isn't infallible: it needs to be educated by God's word.
- Is it an experience thing – that they knew the difference between right and wrong all along but now they had a real knowledge of evil because they'd done evil. Two reasons why that won't work.

First, it's got to work in relation to both good and evil. Did they have no real experience of good until after they ate? Secondly, it has to work in relation to God as well because of what He says in 3:22 – and God doesn't know evil in the sense of having the experience of doing evil.

What it's about is knowledge in the sense of determination. I know I'm going to house church this afternoon. That is, I've decided or determined that's what I'm going to do. By eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve determined they'd be the ones to decide or determine what was good for them and what was evil for them. They set themselves up as rulers – as the ones who made the rules and regulations about what they'd do.

The essence of sin isn't to do with rules. It's to do with rejecting my position as a creature. It's rejecting God and His rule over me. It's failure to trust my Creator and His guidance for me. It's declaring autonomy from God. It's wanting to become the law-makers. It's treason and rebellion. It's evil through and through.

From the New Testament

Have a look at much the same thing from the New Testament – the passage we read in Romans 1. What's the essence of the problem there? We suppress the truth. We know God's there. We know He's the Creator – not us. We know we're creatures. We know we should submit to Him. But we suppress that knowledge. We don't like it. We don't want to be answerable to Someone Else – to Someone who holds us responsible for what we think and say and do in His world.

And so, we become idolatrous. Verse 21:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

We exchange the true God for false substitutes. We exchange the Creator for the creature. We exchange the truth for a lie.

Why would we do that? We don't want to obey – we don't want God to control our lives. Rather, we want to keep control for ourselves. Choosing a created thing allows us to maintain the illusion that we're in charge.

- In the ancient world, it was literal idols – images made in all shapes and sizes. For some, the images were their made-up gods; for others, the images merely represented their gods. It makes little difference – for the people became like the thing they worshipped.
- In some parts of our world, it's still literal idols. I saw plenty of those in Bali last year – people daily offering incense to the many idols that littered the island.
- In other parts of our world, the idols are less literal. They're the things people devote their lives to – for some it's money; for some it's security; for others it's power; family; career; pleasure; personal looks; academic achievement; the list is endless. It's still no different. Instead of using their lives for the purpose for which God made them, they give their

lives to these lesser things – and they too become like the thing they worship.

Again, that's what's at the heart of sin. At heart, it's not about breaking rules – it's about rejecting our Creator. Breaking rules is a symptom of the real disease. The disease is the failure to honour God as God – the failure to treat Him as Ruler and to desire to live for the purposes for which He made us.

What Comes from Sin?

I want to stay with this Romans passage a bit longer and move to the next question: What comes from sin? One thing is stupidity. Paul talks about their *futile thinking* and their *foolish hearts*. He says they became *fools*.

Imagine a child separated from her mother in a shopping centre. She looks round and sees a woman in the same colour dress. She goes and grabs the woman's leg. What would you think if the child insisted this stranger was her mother – even after she'd realised her mistake? Or what if instead of grabbing a woman's leg, the child grabbed a post and insisted that was her mother? Can that post feed her? Can it care for her and look after her? Can it protect her?

That's what it's like when we substitute something else for God. There's nothing else in the God-class – God is unique. It's not as if we can find some substitute that's close enough – or will do the same job for half the price. And so, whatever we substitute for God, it's always going to fail. It can't come up to the mark. It can't feed us. It can't care for us and look after us. It can't protect us. And, when we give ourselves to it, we show ourselves to

be foolish.

Foolishness is always the result of believing lies.

- The woman in the violent and abusive relationship who believes the man's affirmations of love.
- The man who wants to make a quick buck and who believes the promises of the conman.
- The woman seduced by flattery.
- The man hooked by the enticement of drugs.

Don't let the tragedies of such circumstances trick you into thinking these people haven't acted foolishly. The foolishness comes because they base their thinking on lies – on things that aren't true.

It's the same when it comes to God. God is the truth. He's the ultimate fundamental in the universe. If you cast aside that truth – if you believe something that's less than that truth and base your life on it – then you'll have faulty foundations. And if there's a problem with the foundations, then you've got problems with anything built on them. Things may look all right for a while. You may be very successful in the way our society measures success. But what will you do when you stand before God and God talks to you about how you've treated Him. At that point – and that's the point that really counts – you'll look foolish. You've exchanged the truth about God for something that simply doesn't measure up.

A second thing that comes from sin is God's anger. Verse 18 tells us this is already happening. Verses 24, 26 and 28 tell us something of how it's happening. God gives us up. It's very fair. We say to God: God, we don't want you butting into our lives. God says: OK, I'll leave you to your own devices. We get exactly what we ask for – but

what we ask for is disastrous.

For what's God give us up to? To wickedness – to sinful desires and shameful lusts and depraved minds. Many, of course, think that's not such a bad thing. From childhood, we quickly learn to feel a sense of excitement and satisfaction when we get away with doing the wrong thing. We boast to our mates about successfully disobeying our parents. And as we grow older, we revel in envy and malice and strife and deceit and gossip and sexual immorality and all sorts of things God says are wicked. It's not that sin's not attractive. It has its sugar-coating. And it allows us to think we're boss. And it's the way we're used to living – we haven't known anything else.

But, we weren't made to be bosses independent from God. We don't have the capability of ruling ourselves – not successfully. And, as the impact of being given up by God spreads, so we realise we've got problems.

- When our greed gets out of control, we have economic meltdowns and world recessions.
- When our sexual immorality gets out of control, we have the destruction of families.
- When our violence gets out of control, people can't walk the streets at night.
- When our respect for parents gets out of control, we have the breakdown of societies.

And so it goes on.

Ultimately, we can't even rule ourselves on the individual level. We do things we regret.

- We lose our temper with the kids.
- We say mean words to our spouse.
- We impulse buy stuff we can't afford and don't need

- We hold grudges and want revenge.
- We gossip about our friends.

We want to say: That's not the real me. The real me is nice – wouldn't hurt a fly. We find all sorts of things to blame – but Jesus won't let us get away with it. He says:

What comes out of a man is what makes him "unclean". For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit lewdness, envy slander, arrogance and folly.

We can't blame anyone else. This is the real me. And part of the reason God gives us up to wickedness is so we might realise this very fact.

For God hasn't given us up completely yet. That comes later – Jesus calls it hell. In the meantime, God's wrath is partial – giving us opportunity to realise the depth and extent of our rebellion and to give it up.

A third thing that comes from sin is slavery. In John 8:34 Jesus says:

I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

Paul says the same thing in Romans 6. This is a big topic and requires much more time than I'm giving it this morning. I hope to come back to it when we deal with each of the sins one by one.

Ever since the Garden, we're all born in corruption. The rebellion back then impacted us all. Their rebellion was our rebellion. And so we're born into the rebellion. No one has to teach us to set ourselves up as our own bosses – we do that automatically. Parents don't sit their children down and teach them defiance – they do that all by themselves. As Jesus taught, that corruption's at the very

centre of our beings – it's who we are – and it just flows out of us in all sorts of ways. Much of the time, we don't even notice it – that's how used to it we are.

It's like we're born in slavery. Our parents were slaves and we're slaves. That's the only life we know – our horizons bounded by our master's fences and our lives determined by our master's commands. We don't know the alternative. We actually claim we're free. We've set ourselves up as our own bosses. We make the rules. We decide what we'll do. It's a delusion.

- Do you think it's a good thing to lose your temper? Has anything good ever come from you losing your temper? Do you have the ability to never lose it?
- Do you think it's a good thing to say biting words to your spouse? Does that contribute to a loving relationship? Can you stop yourself doing it?

We're corrupted in our hearts and committed to rebelling against God. It contaminates all our actions.

What if we Get Sin Wrong?

They aren't the only things that come from sin, but I want to move to a third question: What happens when we get sin wrong? What's the danger when this focus on the relationship aspect of sin is missing – when people focus instead on sin as breaking a list of rules? Four things for this morning. I'm sure there are others I won't touch on.

One is you tend to get a hierarchy of rules. There are the big sins and the little sins. The big sins are murder and rape and armed robbery. The little sins are white lies and greed and envy. The big sins are the ones that get the newspaper headlines; the little sins are the ones that don't.

And once you've made that distinction, you quickly fall into the trap of focusing on the so-called big sins. I haven't murdered anyone or raped anyone or committed any armed robberies – I must be doing OK. I can pat myself on the back. Sure I've been greedy a lot – but that's only a little sin and so it doesn't really count. God thinks differently. Greed is just as much a rejection of God's authority as is murder – it's just as evil.

A second danger flows from that. Once you get a hierarchy of rules, there's a tendency to think in terms of grading. I should be OK as long as I get 50% – as long as my good stuff outweighs my bad stuff. I don't have to aim for perfection – just enough so that people think I'm basically good. Just enough to satisfy the Santa Claus level of goodness. But when you think in terms of relationship and rejecting God's rightful rule over us – of the creature rebelling against the Creator – it puts it in the proper perspective. What monarch would be satisfied with a subject being loyal 50% of the time?

The third danger is the rules tend to get redefined. Once the focus is on the rules, then it's the rules that become important – not the God behind the rules. And when you focus on the rules, you begin to ask whether the rules are reasonable – whether they meet my standard of what I think is good and not good. Or, in a democracy, whether the majority thinks the rule is good or not good. And if the majority changes its mind, then the rule changes – and we don't bother consulting God as to what He thinks. He's simply sidelined.

Think about one of the ten commandments: Honour your father and mother. Within the Old Testament law, that

certainly included obedience to parents. But it's watered down in our culture. We still believe it in general terms, but we make it harder to enforce. We criticise those who try. We promote the rights of the child in a way that undermines the authority of the parents. And this is such a crucial one. This is the foundation for children growing up to honour God. To paraphrase a verse from 1 John: If you can't honour your parents whom you have seen, what hope do you have of honouring God whom you haven't seen?

The fourth danger is that people believe in the essential goodness of humanity. Most people keep lots of the rules lots of the time and so we conclude we must be basically good people. Yes, we know no one's perfect. We all slip up from time to time – but they're only minor sins and we manage to keep things under control most of the time. And that stuff isn't what we're really like. Deep down, we're basically good people who just make mistakes.

That's not the Bible's view. Remember the words of Jesus. We're not contaminated by things on the outside – the contamination's already within. We've got corrupt hearts – hearts that reject God's rule and authority. This is the real us. And, because we reject God's rule at the centre of our beings, all this other wickedness comes out of us. There's even a problem with the good things we think we do – because we don't do them from a desire to please God.

Sin and Popular Philosophy

So, come back to those opening statements:

- Keep your belief in yourself and walk in your journey.

- Tell yourself that you're OK just the way you are.
- Don't ever lose faith in yourself. You can do anything.
- Do what you love. Control your own life.

That's the wisdom of our culture. This is how our culture tells us we're to make our way in life. God says: that's what sin is. That's what's at the heart of our rebellion against God. That's why Jesus came to die – to set us free from those lies. So who will you believe – our popular culture or God?

And so the label the Seven Deadly Sins is a misnomer. There's really only one deadly sin – the sin of rejecting God's rightful rule. That sin expresses itself in all sorts of wrong ways – all these other things the Bible call sins. Because rejecting God's rule lies behind all these other sins, they're all equally wicked and equally deadly. Gossip is just as deadly as greed; theft just as deadly as sloth or laziness.

I think there's still value in looking at these particular seven. They represent inner sins – the things that go on inside that don't always come to the surface – and we struggle with these things. Or if we don't struggle with them, there's a good chance it's because haven't really understood them and so need to have a closer look at them.