

Sept. 7, 2014 – Matthew 18:1-20 (OT: Ezekiel 33:7-9, Epistle: Romans 13:1-210)

Sin is serious!

How do you view sin? Is it something you try to avoid at all costs? How does your sin compare to someone else's? It is easy to minimize and excuse the things that we do, but hold others to a higher standard. That is why Jesus warned about looking at the speck in our brother's eye without considering the plank in our own eye.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus graphically illustrates the seriousness of sin. In vv. 8-9 He says, *"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire."*

Have you ever considered plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand or your foot? Jesus said it would be better to do that than to be left with your sin. Sin is so bad, its source needs to be cut off and done away with. *"For the wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). As Jesus tells us here, it's not just physical death, but eternal death – everlasting hell fire.

Some people claim that God isn't fair. How can a little "mistake" or "weakness" earn us eternal damnation? This thought minimizes our sin and minimizes the holiness and perfection of God. God lives in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). One must be perfectly blameless in order to stand before Him.

If you followed Jesus' advice here, would you still have both your hands and both your feet? We have all gone places or done things we shouldn't have. How about your eyes? Have you ever look at something with an ungodly desire? This covers a broad range of things, including coveting something that belongs to another person or wanting something that you cannot afford or really shouldn't buy.

Jesus also warns against causing others to sin in v. 6: *"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."* We can lead others to sin by setting a bad example – causing a scandal – and also by neglecting them and not helping or encouraging them when they need it. It would be better to have a millstone tied around your neck – and Jesus isn't talking one of the smaller millstones that can be pushed by hand, but a large one that required a donkey to turn it – and then to be thrown in to the deep sea. That would be better than to cause someone to sin. This is another graphic image of how serious sin is.

God knows that these offenses – these sin-traps that lead to death – will and must come, but that does not give anyone an excuse. Jesus still pronounces *"woe to that man by whom the offense comes."*

What Jesus is saying here is that the causes of sin need to be rooted out and gotten rid of! So should we start cutting off body parts? Or ordering millstones?

Jesus list of hand, foot, and eye is not exhaustive. He didn't mention the tongue, but James talks about the tongue. He said, *"If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body...But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison"* (James 3:2b, 8). So we should cut out our tongues too?

Each Sunday we confess that we have sinned not only by word and deed, but also in thought, so we need to remove our brains.

What was the sin that got us on this topic? In v. 1 the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “*Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” They wanted to know which one of them would be number one! Would you call that pride? Selfishness? What body part would you remove to get rid of that?

Jesus Himself made it clear that removing these external things that cause us to sin won’t do the job. He said in Mark 7:21-23, “*from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.*”

So what is the solution? The solution to our sin is far more radical than amputating a body part, even more radical than being thrown into the sea with a large millstone. It is God becoming flesh in His Son to seek and to save the lost, to live a perfectly blameless life and be “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29) by dying an innocent death and rising from the dead on the third day. Romans 6:6 tells us that “*our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.*” God has done far more extreme surgery than we ever could. So “*reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 6:11)

In the beginning of our reading, Jesus settles the question of who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven by calling a little child to Himself. He says we must become as little children or we won’t even enter into the kingdom of heaven.

What does it mean to be like this little child? Jesus explains what He means in v. 4: we are to humble ourselves like that child. When we hear Jesus calling, we come to Him simply because He called us, not hoping to receive something. In Mark’s record of this account we are told that Jesus took the child into His arms. What a beautiful picture that is! As a humble child we let Jesus take us in His arms and provide His salvation for us.

Earlier I mentioned that some people think that God isn’t fair in punishing sin. But consider the lengths to which God has gone to save us sinners. Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be held onto but He took on the form of a servant and came in the likeness of men. He humbled Himself and became obedient even to the point of death on the cross (Philippians 2:6-8)!

Jesus illustrates God’s love here in the story of the man with the hundred sheep. He leaves the ninety-nine and goes to find the one who strays. And he rejoices when he find it and carries it back to the others. God isn’t sitting up in heaven with paper and pen waiting for you to screw up! And when you do, He declares, “That is! You’re out! Into the eternal fire with you.” No! Verse 14 tells us, “*It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*” Jesus isn’t just talking about little children, but us as well, as we are to become like little children. We are to believe in Him as they do.

Jesus, the Son of Man, came to save that which was lost. He also tells us to do same. Just as we are not to put up with sin in ourselves, neither are we to let our fellow believers continue to sin. In v. 15 Jesus tells us, “*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.*”

That last part is the goal: to gain your brother. We don’t go to someone who has sinned against us so that we can get an apology, or have the person somehow make amends. The purpose is to help that person see their sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. We go because we are concerned about our brother or sister, not about ourselves. We do it out of love for his or her soul.

Notice Jesus doesn't say, "Tell someone else about it." Or "tell your Pastor and have him go and confront the person." No; you are to go, as you are the one with first-hand knowledge of the problem. Go show him his fault just between you two. If he listens, that is the end of the matter. You have gained your brother.

If he does not listen, however, you are to take one or two more with you. This is often where the pastor does become involved. Those you bring will serve as witnesses to the person that what he or she has done is in fact a sin. If the person refuses to listen, they will also serve as witness that person refuses to repent when you bring the matter to the congregation.

Don't miss the third step, as Jesus doesn't spell it out. The church does not then excommunicate the person. The congregation first confronts the person with his or her sin and attempts to call them to repentance. It is only after he refuses to even hear the church that to be "*like a heathen and a tax collector.*"

The goal of excommunication is not to punish the sinner or to remove them from our midst. It announces God's judgement that if the person remains unrepentant he or she will be cast into the everlasting fire. We hope and pray that through this warning God will bring the person back to repentance and save him or her from this fate. We are to treat the person as someone outside the church who needs to hear the law and the gospel. Jesus didn't avoid the heathen and tax collector, but came to call them to repentance (Mark 2:16-17).

Jesus ends this section by giving us, His believing children, the authority to bind and loose sins. This is called the ministry of the keys based on Matthew 16 where Jesus referred to this authority as giving us "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19).

This authority to bind and loose is not the authority to decide what is sinful and what isn't. I read an article not long ago that tried to claim just that, that based on this passage it is the church that decides what is wrong and what isn't; so if the "church" decides that homosexuality is no longer sinful, then it isn't. I was tempted post a comment and ask the author, "if this church decides its OK, but this other church says it isn't, who wins? Who get's to decide?" The answer to that is God. God determines what is sinful and He has revealed that to us in His word. And we do not have the authority to change it.

The authority Jesus does give us here is to announce the judgement of heaven. If someone refuses to repent, we bind their sin and condemnation to them. This is the negative aspect of the keys. It is one we use carefully and prayerfully as a church. It is the judgement of Jesus who is there in the midst wherever two or three are gathered in His name.

Far more enjoyable, however, is the positive side of the keys: the loosing of sin. As we gather each Sunday, we confess our sins. As your pastor, you have called me to exercise the ministry of the keys on your behalf when we are together. My favorite part of the service is when I get to announce God's grace to all of you and by God's command tell you that your sins are forgiven! I can think of no greater privilege then telling you that Jesus has taken away your sins.

Because sin is serious! It is eternally fatal and leads only to everlasting fire. But praise God who "*made [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God has dealt with our sin and made us His children. When we stray, may He always find us and bring us back. And may He give us the same concern for one another so that we all enter the kingdom of heaven.

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