

Sin And The Holiness of God

The Meaning Of The Cross

One of the things we do in modern day English is take a word that we use to describe something ultimate, and we water that word down and devalue the word until it becomes meaningless. Take the word **"Absolutely"**. Absolutely is used by TV reporters all over the world. It used to have a sense of finality attached to it. Now, when a TV reporter says "absolutely, they simply mean "yes". Here's another example. The word **"awesome."** Awesome was once used to describe God. But we now use that word to describe an awesome movie, or an awesome ice cream or an awesome day skiing. Here's another word. **"Sinful"**. Where do you find that word used these days? The most common place you will find it is in the women's magazines. But not in the celebrity section that describes the lifestyles of the rich and famous. No. In the recipe section. This chocolate sauce is "sinfully delicious." What's the meaning? It tastes yummy, but it's not going to be good for you.

Even amongst Christians, there's a tendency to steer way from the word sin. Take the popular song we have sung for many years "The Power of Your Love" One of the lines in it says "And Lord, I've come to know, The weaknesses I see in me, Will be stripped away, By the power of Your love". Now I love that song, but when I sing "The weaknesses I see in me" I have to keep reminding myself that the bible doesn't call these things weaknesses. It calls them sin.

Galatians 5:19 says **"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."** (Galatians 5:19)

- **Whatever happened to sin?**

Within each of us is the deep seated reluctance to face up to the gravity of our sin, which is often why the word has almost dropped out of our English language. Things that used to be called sins, have now become crimes. Those things in Society that used to be dealt with by the Priest or the Pastor, are now dealt with by the Policeman. Other things that used to be called sins are now called sickness. Punishment is now replaced by treatment. We have transferred responsibility and blame for some of our deviant behaviour from ourselves as individuals to society as a whole. It's no longer my fault, but my parents fault, or the education system, or the prison system, or the government's fault.

- **The implications of calling sin what it is.**

One of the reasons we are so reluctant to call sin for what it is, is that we are flying in the face of where our society is going. It's very fashionable to not take personal responsibility. We have a whole lot of scapegoats which we blame – our genes, our chemistry, our inherited temper and temperament, our parents failures during our early childhood, our upbringing, our educational and social environment. When we abandon a biblical foundation as a society, we slip into this defence of "It's not my fault." It's not my fault my marriage broke up. It's not my fault my kids are little tearaways. It's not my fault I got fired from my job. The end result of the Nazi regime in Germany was a whole lot of Nazis who at the War Crimes tribunal said that they were merely following orders. Translation. "It's not my fault."

But the bible forces us to call sin what it is. To acknowledge that it's our fault. To stop blaming everyone else and everything for the results of our choices. If we say that somebody is not responsible for their actions, we are actually demeaning them as a human being. It is part of the glory of being human that we are held responsible for our actions. When we acknowledge our sin and guilt, and receive God's forgiveness, and enter into the joy of his salvation, we become more completely human and healthy. What is unhealthy is wallowing in guilt which does not lead to confession, repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, and forgiveness.

- **What do we mean by the word Sin?**

What does the Bible mean by sin? The New Testament uses five main Greek words for sin. Here are the basic meanings

- **Missing the target. Failure to attain a goal.**
- **Unrighteousness. Iniquity.**
- **Evil of a vicious or degenerate kind.**
- **Stepping over a known boundary. Trespassing.**
- **Lawlessness. The disregard or violation of a known law.**

All these words point to a standard that we fail to reach, or a line that we deliberately cross. Every time we sin, we are demonstrating our inability to reach God's standard. Because he has made us in his own image, he has built his standard into our hearts. That's why, when we sin, we are not only sinning against God, but against ourselves as well. We are damaging what we were meant to be in the first place. Every sin we commit is actively refusing to acknowledge and obey God as our Creator and Lord. We were made to be dependent on Him, and our sin is a bid for independence. Every time we claim dependence on ourselves, we claim the position that only God can occupy. The heart of our sin is hostility towards God. Every time we sin it is an act of rebellion. At the heart of every act of our sin is defiance, arrogance, and the desire to do just what Satan did – to be equal with God. The spirit of our sin is the spirit of revolt against God.

1. What sin does to us

Quite apart from what our sin does to God, it damages us. Our sin destroys the image of God in us. As a teenager I remember once replacing a battery in a tractor. The cover for the battery was off, and as I was lifting it, I spilled some of the acid on my clothes. I didn't think it would matter, and didn't think my mother would notice. There was nothing to show that damage had been done. But the acid was there, doing its corrosive work. And it wasn't long before those clothes had holes in them and were ruined. Sin has this corrosive effect on our lives. The results don't show up immediately, but eventually, sin is so corrosive, it destroys the image of God in us. It eats away at our soul, destroying all that is good.

2. What sin does to God.

The prophet Habakkuk says this; **"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."** (Habakkuk 1:13) This next part of what I want to say is so profound, I don't know if I can express it strongly enough. Listen very carefully.

Because God is holy, He has a huge aversion to sin. He hates it. He can't even look at it. He doesn't want to have anything to do with it. The Bible writers use human terms to describe God's reactions to evil. God's reaction to sin is what the Bible calls his wrath. God's wrath is not some quick flare up of temper. It's more like a rumbling volcano that builds and builds until it finally spills over with a power and force that leaves us gasping. God has a zero tolerance for sin. He is antagonistic towards evil. He is described as light and fire. God lives in unapproachable light. Bright light is blinding. Our eyes cannot endure its brilliance. Our God is a consuming fire. The heat of the fire shrivels and destroys everything that gets too close.

Here's another way the Bible describes the effect our sin has on God. God reacts to sin so violently that it makes him vomit. When your body takes in something that is dangerous to it, there is almost an immediate reaction. First you feel nauseous. Then the body just reacts involuntarily and vomits out what it cannot cope with. Vomiting is probably the body's most violent of all reactions. That's how God finds sin. It's nauseating. It disgusts him. It makes him reach and vomit. When Jesus encountered the Laodicean church, the sin of that church literally made him want to vomit. God cannot tolerate or sin or hypocrisy. They are so repulsive to him that he must rid himself of them.

Because God is holy, sin is completely incompatible with his nature. He has a severe reaction whenever he is near evil. The word "Holy" means to be distinct or separate. He is completely distinct from anything and everything that is evil. Let me try and describe it in another way.

When we were in the UK we first came across stinging nettle. We didn't know what it was at the time, and those of us that had touched this plant came up in large itching welts. It was terrible, and the itching went on for days. The next time we went out in the English countryside, we kept a sharp lookout for the stuff, and stayed as far away as we could. When it comes to stinging nettle, I'm "holy." I'm separate from it. I don't want anything to do with it. Some of you have allergic reactions that are far stronger than that. Some of you have children who react to a bee sting in such a way that they swell up and can't breathe. If you don't get them immediate medical attention, they will die. So in order to protect your child you make sure they are never in a place where they could be stung.

God is severely allergic to evil and sin. He just can't tolerate it. His holiness means that he has to always separate himself from it. He doesn't want anything to do with it.

We need to fully grasp what sin and the holiness of God is all about.

About 1500 years before Jesus was born Moses wrote: **"Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you-- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"(Exodus 15:11 NIV)** Do you know why he wrote that? Because Moses had an encounter with God that was so profound that it just blew him right out of the water. Moses got a little glimpse of the holiness of God, and he was so afraid of what he saw, he hid his face. Isaiah saw God enthroned and exalted. In that vision of God, Isaiah saw just a little bit of Gods holiness, and he couldn't help make the comparison with himself. He was overwhelmed with the sense of his own uncleanness. When Ezekiel's caught a glimpse of the glory of God he fell prostrate on the ground, his face in the dust. Daniel had a similar experience. He collapsed and fainted with his face on the ground.

Even the angels in heaven are awestruck by God. When they speak of him, it not about how much he knows or how powerful he is, but how holy and pure he is. People in the bible who encountered the holiness of God were completely overwhelmed by his purity and superiority. The holiness of God is dazzling. His character is morally and ethically perfect. That's why the biblical writers say that no human being could ever set eyes on God and survive the experience. They might perhaps be permitted to see his back, but not his face – the sunshine, but not the sun. And all those who were granted even a glimpse of his glory were unable to endure the sight.

God is not some gentle, tolerant, easy going, accommodating grandfather in the sky. Yet you wouldn't think so by the way we worship. We roll into a worship service when we feel like it. We slouch or squat, and very seldom kneel, let alone prostrate ourselves in humility before God. It is more characteristic of us to clap our hands with joy, than to blush with shame or tears. We saunter up to God and treat Him like our mate. It doesn't occur to us that he might send us away.

The more I understand my own sinfulness and Gods holiness the more the words of the Prophet Isaiah make sense to me. When Isaiah had an encounter with the holiness of God, the experience so overwhelmed him that he said this: **"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." (Isaiah 6:5 NIV)** What happened? When he saw the holiness of God he just despaired. He knew how big the gap was.

3. How we measure up to the holiness of God.

The Bible makes a very blunt and unequivocal statement. It says **"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". (Romans 3:23)** Another way of saying that is that if each one of us is compared to the holiness of God, everyone of us comes up hugely short by comparison. Nobody measures up to God.

When you were a kid did you ever stand on a beach and have a stone throwing contest, to see who could toss a stone the farthest out into the water? Imagine all of us lining up on a beach at on the west coast of France for a contest like this. The objective is to hit the coast of the United States with a stone. The first person winds up and lets go. The stone flies 6 metres out into the water. Bad news. The next person gets 10 metres out. The next person has this whopping throw of 67 metres. We all go "Wow!". But then, we are trying to hit the United States. No matter how good the throw is, not one of us is going to hit the target.

That's the way it is in comparing our sinfulness with Gods holiness. If the stone throw is a morality contest, a mass murderer could probably only throw a couple of metres, while Mother Theresa might be able to throw half a kilometre. But what does it matter when the target is the United States? The point is not how far we made, but how far we missed. The standard for holiness is God, and our best shot just isn't good enough. It's totally inadequate.

That's the picture the Bible gives us. It's bad news. But if you don't understand what I have just been telling you, you will never understand the cross. You will never understand why Jesus had to die. Now, here comes the good news.

4. The Good News – The Cross.

The good news that comes with Jesus is that we don't have to be alienated from a holy God. There is a way that God has made that closes the gap between our sinfulness and His holiness. There is a way that we can be holy. The way that God made is that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to live on earth as the first sinless man. The plan was that this Jesus would die on the Cross in our place so that there could be an exchange. The exchange is that all our sin will be transferred to him and his holiness will be transferred to us. That's what Jesus did on the cross. He came and did his side of the deal. He died on the Cross to take Gods penalty for our sin. Our side of the deal is to accept the offer that God makes to us through Jesus.

Some people do, and a lot of people don't. Those of us that do are what the bible calls "born again". When a person is born again the holiness of Jesus is transferred to us. And when that happens, God gives us a new title. He calls us "saints". Do you know what saint means? It means "holy one". When a person becomes a Christian their legal classification before God changes from sinner to saint. However, it takes a lifetime for the practical change of holiness to take place. The practical change is that we become like God, in that we become separate from sin.

Imagine you are in debt. Some of you don't have to imagine, because you are in debt. But imagine you are in serious debt – like you owe 5 million Swiss francs. You know that in your whole lifetime, you don't have a hope of paying off that debt. Then Bill Gates transfers, not just five million, but five billion francs into a Trust account in your name. Because it's in a Trust account, Bill Gates can never take it back. The Trust account has got your name on it. It's yours. The moment the bank makes that electronic transfer, technically you are a billionaire. But you don't quite have it yet. You still owe the five million francs. So what do you need to do? You need to start making withdrawals from the trust. You start by paying off the money you owe. You start living like the rich person you have become.

When we become followers of Jesus Christ, we accept what he has done for us on the Cross. We are legally holy, but it takes time to withdraw the holiness of God from our account. It takes time to stop sinning and start acting like the holy people God has declared us to be. So as we grow in our understanding of what Christ has done for us on the cross, and the power and damage sin does to us, we step back from it and avoid it. We separate ourselves from it. The more we choose to leave sin behind, the more we will become holy like God, and the more our friendship with him will grow.

When Jesus died on the Cross, he died to deal with our sin. He is the bridge to life with God. As the holy Son of God, he took upon himself all of our sin. Do you know how we can know for sure that all our sin was piled on him? When he was nailed to the Cross, Jesus cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It was because God in his holiness had to separate himself from all of my sin and yours that was piled on Jesus. The Cross is the only answer God has ever provided for the problem of our sin. Jesus died there on that day for sinners like you and me, that we might be holy people who can be friends with a God who is holy.

Sometimes, when I think about the Cross, I think of the physical suffering of Jesus. But there's more to it than that. When I think about the Cross, I'm ashamed. For it was my sin that hung Jesus there. It was because of my sin that God had to separate himself from Jesus when he hung on the Cross. It was my sin that cost Jesus so much. I'm ashamed.

But when I think about the Cross, I'm also glad. I'm glad that God made a way for me to be holy. I'm glad that the Cross means my sin is dealt with as far as God is concerned. Every time I look at that Cross I'm reminded that it's God's gift to me. Without that Cross, I'm lost. With it, I'm found. Before Jesus died for me on the Cross, I was a sinner in God's eyes. Now I'm a saint. Once I was poor. Now I'm rich. Once I was blind. Now I can see. Once I was a stranger to God, but Jesus has died to bring me into God's royal family.

The more I understand it, the more I love that Cross. For me, it's the bridge to life. It's a gift I want to take in both hands, and hold onto for the whole of my life. Don't you?

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland