

Title: Sin Is Both Personal and Systemic

Today:

Today is the last message in this series on biblical principles which, if I'd taken them more seriously a decade ago, would have kept me and others from hurt. We've talked about a number of things, from the reminder that culture is formative, that we have to nurture our boundaries and claim our time and attention, to demands that we be authentic and vulnerable, keep short accounts with others, and trust that God can work out something recognizably good for us from all the bad things that come our way.

We're closing out this walk with a declaration that "sin is both personal and systemic." Sin is both personal and systemic. There's nothing comfortable about today's message; I used all that up last week, apparently.

Let's pray:

Prayer:

Seeing Systems:

The way the world is structured affects individual choices. It provides for privileges and limitations to individuals and to groups. We immediately understand this in some ways: If you live your whole life in France, and can verbally communicate, you probably speak

French. We understand that where and when we're born affects our personal choices.

But by and large, we are people who don't see that the economic, religious, political, and civil systems that we're a part of exist. We take these things for granted, as "givens," that go on around us, and we don't, by and large--everything I say this morning will be general, and if I'm wrong about any one of us, sorry--by and large we don't understand that the religious, political, economic, and civil systems also provide for privileges and limitations on people.

In general, we don't see these things. We're blind to them. Instead, when we talk about the world and what's going on the world, we consistently--so consistently it's fundamental to us--retreat to the ideas of personal responsibility, personal character flaws or strengths, the idea that personal agency--the ability to do what we will in the world--can and will overcome all things. If we are the way we are, it's not because we were born and lived and died in a system that affects us, it's because we ourselves are brave or fearful, smart or dumb, lazy or hardworking, mean-spirited or compassionate.

I don't have to persuade us that "sin" exists and that there are "sinful" things in the world. We get that. We're going to talk about the fact that there are not just sinful people in the world, but sinful systems, too.

We don't see this. We suspect that when it's mentioned, it's some sort of liberal trap. We're suspicious that to talk about the ways our religious, political, economic, and civil systems are sinful—we're totally okay with talking about their bad systems, of course—but we're suspicious that to even discuss the ways our systems might diminish human flourishing is to, somehow, negate personal responsibility.

And we can't let go of personal responsibility, right? Paul in Galatians points out how "each one should carry their own load." But we might remember too that he says right before this "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." What we forget is that humanity has always allowed systems--religious, economic, political, and civil--to help people carry each other. And while Paul is talking to Christians about Christian life together, we should be happy whenever the world mimics what we're ought to do in the world. Too often we just despise any approximation non-Christians make to ways of living we'd call "Christian."

Behind today's message stand two major, major claims.

Two Claims:

First there's this claim: What we are blind to we cannot correct. And, following that: We are meant to be people who correct the world.

What we are blind to we cannot correct.

We'll talk more about this shortly, but in today's passage Jesus rails against the Pharisees for being "blind guides," completely unaware of the ways their behavior is sinful, outside the bounds of Israel's covenant relationship with God. (Of course, in this case he's opening their eyes to not, oh, guide them in a better way of behavior so much as to let them know that soon, they'll be shouting a cry of pain for the way they've been behaving.) Paul's letters are called "occasional letters," because they were written for "occasions." Mostly corrective ones, and when he launches into the Galatian First Church for "so quickly deserting the one who called [them] to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel," what he's first doing is trying to open their eyes, before correcting them and expecting them to change their ways. Paul's conversion to seeing the truth that Jesus was Israel's true Messiah literally involved a conversion from blindness to sight.

What we are blind to we can't correct. This is a principle that is at the heart of Scripture, which if it does anything, opens our eyes to Jesus and his way of life. This isn't a hard principle for us to buy. The next one's trickier.

We are meant to be people who correct the world.

Most Christians accept that we're responsible for

ourselves, and responsible to others. We're responsible for our own behavior, and have a responsibility to care for others as we're able, and to live in relationship with them. We're responsible for ourselves, and responsible to others.

Few people will say, this side of Christ, that God holds us accountable for other people's behavior. You can't get there scripturally much. Paul reminds us that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10). Ezekiel is sure that we know that "The child will not share the guilt of the parent." We're accountable for our behavior; but we're at least responsible for ourselves and responsible to others.

Other people, and I'm in this camp, suggest that we're responsible not only for ourselves and to others, but we also have a responsibility to care for the things that shape other people's life experiences. That can be things in our shared environment--we're responsible to care for water, earth, sky, and not poison them--but also the religious, political, economic, and civil systems that all of us are born into and that shape us.

And so, when God promises Abraham in Genesis 12 that all the world will bless themselves by him, or be blessed through him, then we who are the "children of Abraham," as Paul puts it, are meant to be a people of

blessing for the world. I just don't think that this means we simply bless people; it means that we take responsibility to shape the world in a way that blesses people.

If you don't think that Christians have a responsibility to influence, guide, and shape the systems by which the world operates, then nothing else I say will matter. It just won't. If we're in the "the world's going to hell, let's just abandon it" camp, I dunno: listen well so you can more excellently critique me after, and we'll roll with that.

What Do We See?

I don't know what we may have noticed in that long, long, long passage from Matthew that was read to us. What we probably noticed was how much Jesus came down on the Pharisees, right? They're hypocrites, snakes, blind guides. He rails against their character, over and over--seven great "Woe to you Teachers of The Law and Pharisees." We're used to the language, but a good translation would be "A scream of pain is coming your way, Teachers of the Law and Pharisees." This is what Jesus is saying.

And the scream of pain is coming because of what they do. How they live.

***"...Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:
"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit***

in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

This confuses us a little. On the one hand, we get personal responsibility. We get personal sin. They do sinful things, their way of life is every metaphor that Jesus can come up with in the moment: internally rotting, but nicely painted, like a tomb; blind to their own broken standards, like someone who strains out a gnat, but ignores the camel they're about to swallow. We see that the Pharisees way of life is marked by hypocrisy, and hypocrisy, we know, is a great, great sin, especially in those who claim to speak on behalf of God, even by degrees, so. But Jesus says to his followers, "you must be careful to do everything they tell you." This makes no sense to us. Why would Jesus say this when they are "terrible people," right?

And he can say it for two reasons: They have legitimate religious authority to teach the people-- although, frankly, and Jesus doesn't say this, they don't have it for long, because his death, resurrection, and the Holy Spirit are coming. But they have legitimate religious authority to teach the people, and the people have legitimate responsibility to live by their teaching. But they simply don't practice what they preach, and if his followers live not by their religious system, but their religious lives, then his

followers will take part in their sin.

Paul, in Philippians 3, talks about his engagement with Pharisaism. He knows that “as for righteousness based on the law,” his way of life has been “faultless,” perfect. But what he wants is not to be counted as faithful to God’s covenant because of the rules he has kept, he wants to, as he puts it, “gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is [through the faithfulness of] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

The whole point of the New Testament is that Jesus’ faithfulness to God’s covenant with Israel opened up a way for all humanity--ethnic Jew or outsider Gentiles like us--whoever trusts Jesus and follows him--to be considered faithful, too. If we follow Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit we’re faithful to what God wanted from humanity.

Jesus doesn’t lay this all out when he’s pointing out the Pharisees’ failures. What he lays out is the fact that their system and their way of life are not connected anymore, but that the Pharisees think they are. They think that they are “walking the talk,” living up to their own preaching and teaching, but they are not.

Jesus also mentions the Temple, which was, frankly, a

center of a different religious system that was only loosely connected to Pharisaism. Everyone Jesus talked to knew this; we don't see it when we read the Bible. Now, we know that the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD; Jesus speaks to that in today's passage, too. But my point is that the Temple, a religious system that guided the especially urban elites of Israel, and the Pharisees' common-life, everyday synagogue religious system, they are both going to be replaced, right? We could talk about Jesus' condemnation of the Temple's system when he kicks out the money-changers in the only area Gentiles were allowed to be in.

I have point in all this, and it's this:

What Do We See? Jesus

Jesus didn't come to earth to talk about the way the Pharisees and others were sinners. He came to earth to replace the religious systems by which they ordered their lives. On the way to replacing these systems, Jesus pointed out the ways the Pharisees and Law Teachers had become blind to their own hypocrisy. He pointed out their sin. He rails and rails against them, and lets them know that they'll hear their own screams of woe, of pain, for the way they've misled people.

And the reason that he does that is, I think, because we all "do as people do, not as they say" even though

we know that's backward. The "doing," the way of life the Pharisees have modeled, is the opposite of faithful. They are the truest realization of that passage that we talked about last week from Isaiah, in which people call "good" something that's "bad." Their religious system had become bad news for the people; it's good news that Jesus replaced it with a Spirit-led life guided by his way of living.

What Do We See? Bible

But when we open our New Testaments, what we mostly see, what we always take away is "Don't be like the Pharisees." That's not bad; first-century Jewish people who were following Jesus around ought not be like them, and we ought not be hypocrites. But we are blind to the dynamics of the religious systems at play. We don't even realize they are there. We read right past them, and they don't even seem important.

Jesus died on a cross for our sins. Did he also die as an outworking of a system in which enemies of the occupying Roman State in Israel were killed if they caused too much revolutionary fervor? Yes. When the High Priest, Caiaphas, advises the Jewish leaders that "it would be good if one man died for the people," he's ironically talking not about Jesus' great self-sacrifice for all humanity, he's talking about how pragmatically, in a nice marriage of church-and-state, it'd be good if they give Jesus up to the Roman authorities, so they can kill just him, rather than buckle down with greater

martial law because of the uprising he's causing. There are great religious and political systems at play in the New Testament.

There are entire books of the Bible that make no sense to us because we ignore these things. Revelation is a perfect example. We half-joke, nervously, about how this or that is "the mark of the beast" from Revelation 13, when the best scholars points out that the "mark" is not a thing you have, so much as a thing you do: simply taking part in the Roman Imperial Cult, a religious system that infiltrated every part of the Roman Empire, included the economy. If you wanted to buy and sell anything, work and have food, pay your taxes at all, you had to take part in this marriage between religious and civil and economic systems, worship the emperor, handle cash that praised him as God incarnate, eat food sacrificed to the Emperor and his family as gods, and take part in civil parades, celebrations, festivals, and holy days that were dedicated to Caesar as God.

But we read these things and others, and see them in personal, individual terms, blind to the way every single thing Jesus and Paul and others talks about is connected to the religious, civil, political, and economic systems at play in the world.

Personalizing Everything: Radical Responses To Jesus

We read about how in the New Testament the early Christians lived radically, “The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers....All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone.” We read this and we say, “Oh, that’s so selfless of each of them.” We forget that what they were doing was rejecting the civil, economic, and religious structures that informed everything about their way of life up to their conversion.

In a society where bloodlines and family ties matter enormously, to say you are my sister and you are my brother, to follow a Messiah who rejected his own family and replaced them with those who trusted what he said, is to reject an entire way of organizing everything.

Personalizing Everything: Examples

Without even realizing it, we take every single thing that is related to civil, religious, economic, and political systems, in Scripture and in our lives, and turn it into

something related to personal choice.

An example: We all suggest that slavery is out of bounds, now; that you can't say God made people and loves them, and also sell them as property. We believe that to own a person as property is to make them less than human, less than God's beloved creation. And yet, our society is by and large still one that punishes prostitutes and not the men who hire prostitutes, even though most sex workers enter prostitution at 13, functionally enslaved by their owners who kidnap them, deny them any care or rights, and sell their bodies.

Instead of recognizing this, recognizing the way our civil code punishes the wrong people for prostitution, we jail women until they are released and their pimps beat them for it, and we almost uniformly describe those who are prostitutes as sinners lacking in moral character.

We ought to care about systemic sin while not neglecting personal responsibility, the same way Jesus told the Pharisees to care for justice, mercy, and faithfulness while also giving the tithes they were so proud to give.

When we hear about terrible things in the world, we try to find the bad guy at the heart of them; we believe that there must be some personal failure at

the heart of broken things; some person who was greedy, some individual who did wrong. We don't ever think, "I wonder what way the systems this person was caught in affected the choices that they made."

Nice People:

Nice people, though, don't talk about politics, right? We don't talk about religion, or economics. When it comes to civil society, it's not niceness that causes us to ignore it, of course; it's that we don't understand even the category.

But we have never been called to be nice. We have been called to be kind, called to be faithful, called to be Christians, and if "niceness" is about not making waves, we just don't worry about that. The Messiah we follow can calm waves anyhow. We're called instead to speak the truth in love. The truth about the religious, political, civil, and economic systems that are incompatible with whatever virtues we believe, in Christ, they ought to align with. Let me talk about those.

System Standards?

None of us say that because we won't be perfectly holy until Jesus' return, we ought to give up leaning into the Spirit and trying. In fact, we say the opposite. Paul writes, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" We're the

ones who “grow to become in every respect the mature body of...Christ,” the ones who, like Paul, “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [us].” So we keep on keeping on, knowing we’re not going to achieve perfect faithfulness in this life.

In the same way, we’re people who look forward to the promise of Revelation 11, when it’s announced “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” If we look forward to that day, a time we pray for, when God’s Kingdom “comes on earth as it is heaven,” then we ought to consider the ways our society’s structures and systems—the religious, political, economic, and civil structures—line up with God’s Kingdom.

And we know about the things that will characterize the world when God fully and freely reigns, when “kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” It’s a “peaceable kingdom,” characterized by the end of conflict, of course; lions laying down with lambs and munitions turned into tools of honest labor. A world in which “neither shall they harm nor destroy” as Isaiah says. (cf. Is. 2, 11).

And Revelation 21 tells us more. “There was no longer any sea,” we read. The sea was, for Israel, symbolic of chaos and uncertainty, and that’s gone in the world to

come. “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” Chapter 22 tells us, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”

When the New Heavens and the New Earth come, the image God gives us to inspire us with hope, is one in which everything we now consider a good life is present and available. The world to come is one in which God is close to us all, one in which there’s enough food, enough medicine, easy relationship with God. Darkness is gone. Very concretely it’s a vision of a world in which it seems like there’s enough of everything that people need to live well now: enough relationship with God, enough medicine, enough food, enough light. No more darkness, no more chaos, no more death.

Systems Standards: Crazy, Dangerous, & Weird:

Imagine how America, just America, would be different if everyone had enough food, medicine, and light. The choice that many, many people make between having to eat, treat, or heat, is gone. And we're well fed when we imagine it; the almost 50% students at Brookside Elementary on free-and-reduced lunches, and their families, might imagine things things differently than we do.

And if it sounds crazy and dangerous, and weird to imagine a society in which all the systems that are in play--political, religious, economic, civil--are set up so that everyone is fed and cared for and free from chaos and darkness, then that makes sense, because it is crazy and dangerous and weird to imagine the world this way, and crazy and dangerous and weird to try to live this way. It would also be hard, and not efficient, maybe more compassionate than practical, even.

By and large the early Church understood this. It's why, as they did all they could to live for Jesus personally and reimagine the way the world worked, rejecting and changing it's religious, economic, political, and civil systems, they were not simply "turned the world upside down" as Acts 17 puts it, but soon enough, just like their God, killed by the authorities who were benefiting from the world right-side up, a world that didn't have much to do with the Kingdom of God's ideals.

Civics As A Special Case:

Let me push more. If Civics has to do with law and the way of life a law-abiding citizen lives, then civics is perhaps the greatest area in which we are silent rather than vocal, passive rather than active. Law, which we so deeply respect as a society, is consistently used to do things opposite the virtues that will be real when Kingdom Come.

For example, we could talk at length about the way the good old days were not good for, say, anyone who suffered under Jim Crow laws, about the way African-Americans were actively and legally barred from purchasing homes in those areas of major cities which have consistently seen in the past 50 years the highest appreciation in a process called "red-lining".

So what happens, in a society in which historically for the middle-class wealth is largely tied to home-ownership, and an entire group of people is barred from home-ownership in the very places homes are most valuable? What happens is generational poverty or simply being left behind as net-wealth increases for other groups of people, but not yours.

This is racism built into our economics and our civic systems. We could talk about the ways our civil response to the heroin and opioid epidemic is so much different than our civil response to the crack epidemic was, and how the sin of racism is built into these

things. But we neglect these systems that work against human flourishing, and in neglecting them, we allow them to continue in various ways.

Is this too political? Is it too economic? or civil or religious? We may think this isn't religious at all; that such things have nothing to do with Jesus and following him, but I want to say that this is simply not true. That belief is what happens when we only see sin as present in bad actors; but the systems that let bad actors get away with their badness persist long after those bad actors are dead.

If we, God's people who bear blessing for the world, decide to wash our hands of it until Christ returns and fixes it, then we're abdicating a gift and responsibility that no one else has, and the promise Jesus gives us that we'll do "greater things than these" is "pie-in-the-sky, we'll eat in the sweet by and by".

Becoming Pharisees Of A Kind:

And if, while waiting for Jesus' return and the world's renewal, we allow ourselves to benefit from the broken systems around us, while never critiquing the aspects of them that hurt others, you know what we are?

We're Pharisees. At least economic ones, or civil ones, or political ones. We may not be religious ones. To benefit from a system that hurts others, and to never seek to change that system, is to be on the side of

those who heard Jesus' compelling arguments against Pharisaism, and ignored him because it was just so good for them.

So what?

So what, right? What do we do this?

First of all, we focus on our own personal faithfulness, no matter what world--what institution or structure or system--we're engaging with. We pray, read Scripture, share life with God's People even if we don't agree with their views on, say, politics, civil life, economics, or religion.

If we ignore our personal faithfulness, we end up with Jesus saying "woe to you." That was what the Pharisees tried to do; they traded faithfulness for the role of policing religious law, and they saw lawbreakers everywhere but in the mirror.

But if the Church is the People of God who have the Holy Spirit, who are called to--whether we want to be or not--bring blessing to the world, then one of the greatest ways we can do that is nudge the systems at play in the world--economic, religious, political, and civil systems--closer to the virtues that characterize the Kingdom of God, if this is who we are and what we are capable of, then we ought to consider what we can do.

And we can do some things in addition to guarding our own faithfulness to Christ. Let me give us little baby step ideas, most of which are, oh, postures we can take.

What can we do?

Resist Only Personal Explanations:

I'd invite us to resist the urge to consider everything bad that happens only in personal terms. We do this. But let's add to it a "but also." So if someone talks about why Syria is such a mess, and they say, "It's all because Assad is such a bad leader," we say internally, "Yes, but." And there is always a but.

What can we do? Discover The But:

I'd invite us to discover the but. And the "but" is a systems thing. We ask ourselves what religious, political, economic, and civil or, really, institutional systems are in play that are hurting people, keeping them from peace, keeping them in chaos and darkness, keeping them from discovering God's love, and from food and medicine.

Why is Syria terrible: It's because Assad is a bad leader. Yes, but...it's also because decades of corrupt systems have positioned sinful people, evil people, to do as they please without retribution. Why did the Mortgage Crisis happen? Because of greedy CEOs or mortgage lenders? Yes, but...it's also because years of intentional deregulation allowed repackaging of bad

debts that could be labeled as good debts and sold on a derivatives market. Did a few selfish or scared engineers toy with the computers on VWs so that they could cheat on emissions tests and leak so many pollutants into the world? Maybe? But an economic system that rewards profits over safety contributed to it, and a sinful company culture that favors plausible deniability over transparency is in play, too. Why are we Americans so overweight? Because of personal gluttony? Yes, but...for decades, our civil systems have subsidized sugar and fat in our food supply rather than, say, fiber. We spend so much energy talking about presidential candidates, and their personal sin levels, and so little time talking about the levels of sin present in the systems that form our civil life.

There is always more than personal sin in play; this doesn't mean we excuse personal sin, but it also can't mean that we excuse the way our systems position people toward sin and away from Christian virtue.

What can we do? Consider Our Privilege:

Consider your privilege. What do you get away with because you are ethnically, racially, linguistically, or religiously who you are? What rails are greased for you that aren't greased for others?

If we are blind to the way the systems privilege us, for any reason, then it's going to be hard to use our great privileges for the good of those who don't have them.

What can we do? We listen without dismissing others.

Lastly, I want to encourage us to listen to those who are without the privileges we have, or at least feel they are without them. It is easy for us to suggest that complaints people make about what they aren't receiving, compared to others, are because of their personal failures, their sin, and that their complaints have nothing to do with the economic, religious, political, or civil systems that are at play in the world.

But the more we listen, the more we discover that we have been blind to the ways certain religious, political, economic, and civil systems give an easier time to some people and a harder time to others.

If we were brave, we could go beyond listening and ask questions of those who have experienced systems set up against them. The lowest hanging fruit here is for us to ask our daughters, mothers, sisters, wives about these things, because it's not easy to be a woman in the world.

Conclusion: Conversations

Christians can change these things. We have the power if we have the will. I'm not suggesting this morning we do any great thing, except take on the hard work of inviting God to help us think differently about the world than we do right now.

We can only speak the “truth in love” if we believe in love. If we are scared of speaking about the way economic, political, religious, or civil systems position people for chaos, conflict, darkness, ignorance about God, hunger, or illness, then it may be helpful to explore why.

Frankly, if “fear has to do with punishment,” the reason we’re afraid to discuss these things is because we’ve been punished for discussing them at some point.

I hope that we can be a church where no one is punished for asking questions about the way the world is or imagining what we can do to nudge it closer to the Kingdom of God that we long for. I hope we can love each other enough to, by God's power, strive for a world that's set-up for each other, our children, our families--much less strangers, the poor, those not privileged by society the way we might be.

For those of us who have experienced economic, political, civil, and religious systems that have hurt us, have worked against us, I pray we can feel free to talk about it without being told we’re simply not strong, faithful, clever, or sinless enough to make it in the world.

We have a way to go on this, but I think of all the congregations I know, and I know many, we can be

this sort of hopeful, faithful, loving place.