

## ***Recollected: On Sin***

### ***Today:***

Well, friends.

Let me be honest with us. Today's message isn't the one I intended to preach. I had hoped to share with us a version of what I think was one of the most important messages I've ever shared, and in fact the one that I've gotten the most pushback from, but the truth is that its content is heavy, so heavy, and too heavy to have kids in the room. I was going to talk about trauma and patriarchy and some other things, but I just don't think it's the right venue, so I am posting that to Facebook for us if we want to read the thing. Or I will.

### ***Today:***

Instead, we'll talk about something that's light-hearted and easy to explore: Sin! What I really want from us this morning is just to get the idea that sin is more than just personal, but also systemic. Sin exists in the systems that sinners set up.

It's something that maybe this pandemic positions to notice in a way we haven't before. So we'll talk about it. And if you nod your head the whole time because nothing I share is new, that's okay. Be woke, be wonderful, be patient with the rest of us.

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.***

One of the most memorable labels Jesus levels at the Pharisees is when he rails against them as "blind guides," completely unaware of the ways their behavior is sinful, outside the bounds of Israel's covenant relationship with God.

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. Paul's "occasional letters," these things he's written to the first churches, they're all about helping the congregations see their situation and the world correctly.

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.

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." Ezekiel makes sure 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.

Let me make another claim.

### ***Jesus' Work:***

Here it is: 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. 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

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. When we do, we only consider the way they’ve influenced individuals to personally sin.

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 Judea 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 only 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 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. We personalize everything.

### ***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.

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 to John, as he writes Revelation, is one in which everything we need to live a good life is taken care of. 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 its one where 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, light, and heat. 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. Others right now are not so, and they are waiting in lines--in person and on the phone--painfully aware of the decisions they’re going to have to make. We've had 30 million people apply for unemployment in a month.

But 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...good. We're paying attention. 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.

### ***Understanding:***

By and large the early Church understood this. 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 didn't just "turn the world upside down" as Acts 17 puts it, but soon enough, just like their God, were killed by the authorities who were benefiting from the devilish, dehumanizing world that was turned right-side up. When good means evil, and right is wrong, everything is broken.

### ***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 barred from purchasing homes in those areas of major cities which have consistently seen in the past 50 years the highest appreciation.

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. We could talk about how right now those who are black in America are more likely to die from COVID-19 than those who are white. It's not a racist disease; it's one that exploits the poverty-creating systems of racism that have caught up people and positioned them for death. 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. A good system stops the sin of bad actors and turns it into good. A bad system perpetuates evil.

If we, God's people who bear blessing for the world, decide to wash our hands of the world 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, 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. I'd rather we be like short Zacchaeus who realized just how much he'd benefited from a broken system, and sought to reject it.

## ***So what?***

So what, right?

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, hang out with God’s People even if we don’t agree with their views on, say, politics, civil life, economics, or religion.

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 this or that place is such a mess, and they say “It’s all because so-and-so.” We can say, internally, “Yes, but...” There’s a 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 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.

Think of things that have happened in the past, oh, decade. Things I hope we've been aware of.

Why was Syria terrible: It's because Assad was a bad leader. Yes, but...it was also because decades of corrupt systems had positioned sinful people, evil people, to do as they pleased without retribution. Why did the Mortgage Crisis happen? Because of greedy CEOs or mortgage lenders? Yes, but...it was 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 rewarded and still rewards profits over safety contributed to it, and a sinful company culture that favors plausible deniability over transparency was 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.

There is always more than personal sin in play--more than gluttony, selfishness, greed, or impatience. 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. If we blame only people for the situations they are in, we might very well be to blame for the situations that they're in. Life is more than just personal responsibility.

***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 a world made by men.

### ***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.

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 a little easier than most.