

Sin, Holiness, and Communion

There's nothing simple about Christianity, as the many topics of these Sunday School lessons confirm. It's impossible to reduce Christianity to a few slogans or a few essential doctrines. Yet, there are a few matters in Christianity that are so central, so exceedingly important to everyone, that we need to focus on them. They are first, the issue of sin. Then there's the related issue of holiness. And the third topic is fellowship, or communion. I offer the following discussion in the hope that readers have a sincere desire to know truth, to love it and to live it.

1. Do we realize how powerful our **sin** nature is? I suspect not. We have within us an exceedingly compelling force that causes us to be anti-God. It's a power that despises God and wants us to suppress our innate awareness of His Being, of His existence. Our sin nature controls the mind so that we think only sinful thoughts. We can't stop it. Sin controls our feelings so we love only to sin. And our will . . . sin powerfully controls the will so we want only to sin. All the time. This for us, believers!

The sin nature is from God. It's a judicial act imposed on all humanity by an offended, wrathful God. That's why it's so pervasive, so controlling, because it's from God. Because of rebellion, because of refusal to honor Him for who He is, in justice God imposed this sin nature on Adam and all his descendants. Why? It's so that we are continually necessarily offensive to God and therefore deserving of just condemnation. We were made as God's image, but having used our moral freedom to disobey, God didn't merely mar the image, He made it grotesque, ghastly. God deliberately confirmed us as objects of wrath. So we can't not sin, no matter how hard we may try. And so we're doomed. The only way for the sin nature to lose its power over us is for us to die. When we're dead, the sin nature no longer controls us. But then it's too late, because then comes the judgment.

I think we all fail to grasp how serious sin is. Our engagement in politics, for example, is because we don't understand that everything politicians do is an expression of sin. Our modern American culture is a ghastly expression of human sinfulness in the aggregate. Our relationships with others inexorably becomes dysfunctional if not chaotic because of sin. We have an innate self-love that blocks us from doing anything but sin. Sin causes us to be indifferent to God and His will and to be indifferent to the needs of others. We do things we shouldn't, perhaps knowingly, and presume upon God's grace. We routinely put God to the test, as if daring Him to wipe us out. Sin is not only wrong deeds but the failure or refusal to do right deeds. We don't know what it is that's right that we should do, and we don't even want to know. **"There is none righteous, no not one."**

Sin so thoroughly pervades our personality we can't detect it. Like a fish doesn't know what water is, we live our entire lives in sin. So pride, being critical or contemptuous of others, wanting to get even for wrongs, anger, exaggerating or stretching the truth on issues, needing to satisfy our lusts, inability to be content, these and more are so characteristic of us we see them as normal. Vastly worse, our sin nature throws open the door to demonic influences. Demons surround us, delighting in every opportunity to speak to us to get us to offend God in some way. We're oblivious to such influences.

More. We're all tainted by humanism. We suppose that there's really good within us. In our self-love, we then become self-righteous. We suppose that, because we don't murder or steal or bow down to carved idols, we're not sinners; we're basically good people. I suspect some of us even say to ourselves, "God must be glad to have *me*." Most of us have no idea what idolatry is, we're so immersed in it. We don't know what sin is either. Of course, we sense that we "fail" in some way from time to time, yet without grasping the gravity of our offense and without any sense of a need to repent of it. And our engagement with the world is "natural." We excuse it as being necessary, as part of every-day modern life. We say that God put us here to enjoy the grace of life. We sometimes do something or perhaps say something we ought not have, but most of the time -- Hey! we're pretty good people. We expect sin to be denounced from our pulpits, but it's abstract sin, theological sin that we denounce, not our own inner nature. We believe such slogans as "God hates the sin but loves the sinner" without wondering where that is in the Bible. (It isn't.) So we pass off sin as irrelevant as long as God loves us. We treasure the Gospel component that says "We have forgiveness of sins," which means we don't really need to be concerned about it. We have eternal life and have escaped hell, and that's all that matters. We have no concept of a purpose-filled life, or that God has purposes and responsibilities for us to fulfill and we assiduously don't want to know. We're smugly satisfied with how our lives are. We're not merely superficial, we're woefully self-deceived. Our state as humans is dreadful.

Why do we need to discuss this? Several reasons. (1) Because John wrote, **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** To "confess" our sins means we acknowledge them, we agree with God that He's correct in identifying us as incorrigible sinners. See 1 John 1:8-10. We need to know what sin is, how offensive it is to God, how it causes us to waste our lives and exposes us to God's

discipline. We need to allow the reality, the understanding what we've been saved from to change our thinking, our feelings and especially our will. (2) We need to know how serious sin is to understand what God had to do to deal with it. We've so often heard preachers talk about the shed blood of Christ and we've sung so many hymns about it that it long ago ceased to control our spirit. It's only when we realize what an ugly sin-saturated person we are that the humiliating and agonizing self-sacrifice of God Himself for us impels us to a transformed life, one that glorifies Him. Hey! Why must we be "born again"? It's only when we realize the gravity and the extent of our sinfulness that we gain that understanding. (3) We're called to a relationship with the living God, but no sinful human can even suppose such an exalted relationship is possible, let alone enter into it. Sin blocks that relationship; if we care about that relationship, we'll care about sin.

God's judicial imposition of a sin nature is because of a prior act of dishonoring Him. To dishonor our Maker is so grievous that God cursed His very good physical Creation and changed it into a malicious force to punish us. Tornados, earthquakes, vipers, diseases and much more are the judicial result of dishonoring God by disobeying Him. God likewise judicially placed entire societies under the dominion of evil supernatural beings that cause wickedness to be the norm for society, thus making us culpable. Do we get it yet?

If you're a believer, and the Spirit testifies to you that you're regenerated, the only way you can not sin is by knowingly, deliberately and intentionally obeying God's Word. We must know the Word, love it, and allow it to control our entire being all the time. "Salvation" without obedience to God's Word is an oxymoron. The indwelling Spirit will incline us to want to obey, but that's contingent on our actually wanting to obey; we cooperate with the Spirit by yielding to Him and doing what the Spirit has commanded or instructed in His Word. If we've so grieved the Spirit with our careless attitude toward sin or by indifference to the Word, that inclination to obey will never materialize. So we've essentially committed to dishonoring God. May God have mercy on us.

2. Even atheists know that the God of the Bible is **holy**. But what does "holy" mean? It means infinitely perfect moral purity, so much so that God is dangerous for any being not equally holy. Maybe "dangerous" is too mild a term; *deadly* is more accurate. Holiness also means "otherness," or transcendence. God is sacred, so much so that He cannot be identified with anything common or profane; He is necessarily opposed to such. Holiness is God's character, His nature, His essence. His holiness probably gives rise to His goodness, justice, love, truthfulness, righteousness and peace. All these attributes express God's holiness. We need to think about holiness because God demands holiness of us. **"He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and be unblemished before Him"** (Ephesians 1:4; see also 1 Thessalonians 4:3). This is not a forensic or legal holiness, a fiction that God imagines to be true based on Christ's atonement, even though it's not really true. Nor is it something that will occur in the future when we're glorified. Rather, it's a real holy character and walk in the here-and-now of this life. Think about that! God actually expects us to be holy, like He is.

The demand for us to be holy is precisely because we belong to God. Anyone -- whether an Israelite in the Old Testament era or a Christian today -- anyone who is in relationship with God must mirror God's beautiful and perfect Being. We live in His presence, so we must be holy as He is holy. Or we cannot live in His presence. The Gospel invites us into a relationship with the living, holy Creator God. It's that relationship with Him that necessitates holiness of character. In all Paul's letters, he gave instructions in holiness because he really expected his readers to obey those instructions and thereby be holy. God demanded holiness of His Israelite people, **"You shall be holy for I the Lord God am holy"** (Leviticus 19:2). It's why God gave them the Law, so they would know what a holy walk is like and then pursue it. They had to reflect their God's character in their own character. It was so that God could reside in their midst without destroying them. We err in assuming that Exodus is all about the deliverance from Egypt. We're not reading that book correctly. The Book of Exodus is really all about the Tabernacle! Same with how we read the Gospel. We wrongly suppose it's all about forgiveness of sins and being in heaven when we die. No. The New Testament Gospel is really about God residing in us, His new sanctuary.

It was God's intent at Creation to dwell physically with His human creatures in the Garden. That ended in failure, so God took the Nation of Israel to start anew. That ended in failure so God in Christ took the Church to start anew. We now are the tabernacle. We're the sanctuary and God dwells in us. So we have to be holy, or God cannot reside in us. And if God is not in us, we're not saved at all. Dear reader, *you must get this*. Sanctification is not an option as the Free Grace people falsely allege (and as some Gospel invitations unintentionally suggest). Sanctification is our actually becoming holy in real life. The very reason we're saved is for this, so that God may dwell in us who reflect His perfect character. The atoning work of Christ made it possible; the indwelling Spirit makes it possible. God has great purposes for His people to participate in, and holiness is needed for those purposes to be fulfilled. It is our choice, though; sanctification doesn't occur automatically.

More. If we love God, we'll want to be holy. To love God with all our being, as commanded, we will want to serve Him, trust Him, be loyal to Him, be submitted and obedient to Him, and we'll want to be like Him. That message of Deuteronomy is brought into the four Gospels, except that since Christ has now come, we love God by loving Christ. To be like God is now, in this era, being like Christ. The Gospels don't merely narrate events leading up to and then the atoning work on the cross and the subsequent resurrection, as we usually read them. The Gospels reveal the Person of the Son. We're to read them with awe and love, with the desire to be like Him, with the desire to be with Him.

I must be clear: The atoning work of Christ is absolutely necessary for us to be holy. In love, Jesus dealt with all sin for us. As deity, He's the only one able to deal with sin, to annul it, to overcome it. Without His shed blood purifying us, there's no point even talking about holiness. His perfect obedience made sending the Spirit into our lives possible so as to enable holiness. His selfless sacrifice for us motivates us (or it should anyway) to want to pursue holiness. His present intercessory session makes it possible for fallible believers still harboring a sin nature to be God's sanctuary. My point in this discussion is this: The work of the Incarnate Son was *so that* we might be holy *so that* God might dwell in us to carry out His purposes now and that we might dwell with and enjoy God forever.

3. It seems that God created humans so that they might have intimate **fellowship** with Him and be blessed by His Being. That's between the lines of the first two chapters of the Bible and is strongly suggested by the Bible's ending chapters. It's explicit, though, in John Chapter 17. We were made as His image to make such a relationship possible. Jesus said He came to take us to the Father, "**I am the true and living Way. No one comes to the Father except through Me**" (John 14:6). God's purposes in creating this cosmos included at least this, the blessing of sharing Himself with created, glorified beings. It expresses His infinitely perfect goodness. We believe in Jesus so that we get to be *in Christ*. And to be *in Christ* means we share in the communion of the Godhead. The Trinity is an eternal loving communion of three distinct, equal Persons who are at peace and rejoice in their relationship. It's to this we're invited to (somehow) participate. Not that we become deity, rather that we participate in some yet to be revealed way in that relationship. The Greek word *koinonia* ("fellowship") refers to this ultimate blessing that evidently is at least one of the reasons for creation and for redemption. Marriage is introduced in the opening pages of the Bible to prefigure the kind of relationship that's anticipated in the future. "Salvation" is all about being in relationship with Jesus. If there's no relationship, there's no salvation (see Matthew 7:23). The Gospel is "good news" because it really is, in essence, an invitation into this blessed relationship.

Jesus' command to His followers to be united is to reflect the future fellowship with the Son in God's presence. Our lives of self-sacrificing love for others reveals that we're the kind of person who cherishes loving fellowship with God. The intense self-love so characteristic of modern Americans voids the possibility of being in fellowship with God. Yes, Scripture proclaims, "Whosoever will, may come." But we need to demonstrate by our attitudes, thoughts, and values, indeed by our behavior, what the desire of our heart really is. Do we desire God as the deer longs for water (Psalm 42:1), or not really. How we live shows the inclination of our heart far more accurately than words, which can be empty or false, and God knows our heart (better even than we do ourselves). One more item: Jesus expects us to serve Him. He's revealed how we're to do that. Our obedient service according to His will reveals whether we're one with God in His purposes, as we should be to be in fellowship with Him.

To dishonor God, for example by stubborn disobedience, says, "No. I'm not interested in You." To become a Christian merely so as to escape hell says, "No. I'm not interested in You." To be indifferent to sanctification says, "No. I'm not interested in You." To reject Christ, who takes us into that blessed communion, says, "No. I'm not interested in You." To be absorbed with oneself in self-love says the same thing. The Word of God starkly reveals the issue (it's explicit in Deuteronomy 30), we choose life or death. Life is participating in that blessed eternal *koinonia*. Death is forever not part of it. Everything about Christianity, about all that's biblical, is toward the hope of participating in that eternal communion with God. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in this existence is proleptic of that desired future intimate and loving fellowship. "**The Kingdom of God is . . . righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**" (Romans 15:17, but many other verses as well) also anticipates that ultimate communion of unworthy creatures with God Himself. Wanting to be holy now, in this existence, and actively pursuing it, recognizing what sin is and repenting of it, says to God, "Yes! I want to be with You."