

## Questions about Sin

Matt. 9:1-17

Sin has become more and more a pejorative in our culture. People seem to take the word personally. In one sense, this is logical in that if a behavior is called sin, and if I am guilty of such a behavior then I am required by the authority of the one who has named sin as sin to cease and desist from such a behavior. It is immoral to continue in a sinful behavior when I know that it is wrong. I would not have indulged in my irresponsible behavior if I had not wanted to do so and so if my behavior is challenged in such a way that I am put on the spot as either repentant or recalcitrant then I may very well be offended by this kind of intrusion into what I may consider to be my own business. Call someone a sinner and they may take it personally.

On the other hand, if you accept that God has the authority as our creator to define right and wrong and to hold His creation responsible for their choices, then sin becomes the forbidden. Becoming aware of a specific sin in one's behavior is an opportunity to reaffirm a commitment to comply with the will of God and to seek His blessing. Since we are all sinners and since we are constantly facing the challenge of staying faithful to God in all areas of our lives, we learn to take a redemptive view of sin. When I know that I have sinned then I know what needs to change so that I can again be right with God.

Now the difference between these two ways to hear the word sin is the difference between pride and humility. The competition for supremacy in your heart and life is between yourself and God. The essence of pride is in lifting yourself above God - becoming your own god. The essence of humility is in submitting yourself and your will to God. This issue of sin and our response to what God has defined as sin has not changed since the time when Jesus was here.

At the center of these issues is the question of trust. Do you trust God? Is His will for you best or is His goal to stand between you and the pleasures and achievements that you deserve? This goes back to the garden where the serpent

deceived Eve by convincing her that God had an agenda and intended to keep her in her place rather than to allow her to "become like Himself." Eve believed the serpent and doubted God and so she gave into the temptation. Her sin was an act of pride as she considered herself qualified to judge God's motives based on the words of the deceiver.

All of this to say that the question of sin runs deep and we are all in the midst of our own struggles in which we must choose again between pride and humility, between our own will and the will of God for us.

In our Scripture passage, we have three outsiders (rather than Jesus' own disciples) who are offended by how Jesus treated the issue of sin and who then ask Jesus a question about His position. The levels of offense range from outrage in the case of the forgiving of the paralytic, to disgust in the case of the many tax collectors and sinners who felt comfortable sitting down and eating with Jesus, and to condemnation in the case of the disciples of John the Baptist who could see that there was something "missing" from Jesus' ministry since His disciples never fasted. Jesus answered each question and by doing so He was teaching us about how to deal with the sin we will find in our own lives.

In the first story the paralytic's friends bring him to Jesus. It is notable that Jesus saw their faith and said to the man, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." What are the sins of a paralytic? Mostly sins of attitude? It could be that the man was not enthused about coming to see Jesus. His friends were assured that Jesus would heal him but he may not have thought that the trip was worth the effort. But, if you are a paralytic, how much input do you really get as to where you go and when you go there? So, Jesus saw their faith and the man's sin. The fact that he had sinned was not a problem for Jesus for He was more than willing to forgive. Have you ever hurt someone and then only discovered how much you had hurt them when they forgave you for what you had done? This may have happened with the paralytic. When Jesus forgave he saw clearly when and how that he had been wrong. But the Jews were outraged, they accused Jesus of blasphemy by claiming that it was His prerogative to forgive sin. Jesus answered, what is the difference if I say, "Your sins are forgiven you." or if I say,

"Arise and walk."? Then He commanded him to get up and walk and he did. He carried his own bed back to his house. The Jewish leaders saw sin as permanently attached to the person. The paralytic was obviously a sinner - why else would he be a paralytic? This guilt was a permanent state. It could not be removed. Jesus broke the link between the man's sin and his paralysis. In the eyes of the people, when the man walked he shed the presumption of guilt that had been his burden for as long as he was ill.

The Jewish leaders rejected this concept. To them, sin was the problem of others. Sinners experienced the curses of their handicaps, and the rejection of the community. Once a sinner, always a sinner but Jesus introduced the possibilities of forgiveness and new life.

The second story is the call of Matthew to a life of following Jesus as His disciple. Matthew responded immediately to the call. He left everything behind and followed Jesus. Soon after, there was a dinner party at which many who attended were like Matthew, tax collectors and sinners. They sat down with Jesus and the disciples and it was as if there were no difference between Jesus, His disciples, and these disgusting people. Clearly, everyone at the gathering was enjoying themselves. The Jewish leaders saw sin as a permanent condition and they also believed in guilt by association. If Jesus was with sinners then He must be a sinner. The fact that Matthew had been a tax collector but was now a disciple did not occur to these Jewish leaders. They did not have a concept of redemption. Jesus made that the issue, "I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

The third story is not about the continuing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders but instead, the disciples of John the Baptist saw that Jesus' disciples did not seem to practice fasting. This was a serious lapse, a sin, and needed to be addressed. John's disciples presumed that a spiritual life should be evidenced by certain self-sacrificial disciplines of which fasting was prominent. To leave this out would be to sin. The premise about sin was that spirituality was seen as that which could be observed through the practice of these outward disciplines. Your proximity to God was to be demonstrated for the community. It was not just

between yourself and God. Heartfelt experience did not apply. Jesus answered that though fasting is good (there is value in the self-sacrificial disciplines) it is not always appropriate. The deprivation of fasting should reflect the unease of the heart that seeks more from God than seems to be available. We wrestle with God when we are discontent and unsatisfied. In the case of the disciples of Jesus, this wasn't what was happening. Jesus radiated joy. There was an incredible awe attached to Him. The disciples felt all of this and they were full and overflowing spiritually and emotionally. It was spiritual for the disciples to not fast. Fasting would have dampened their spirits and diminished the work of God in their hearts.