

September 29, 2013 - Sin 101

This morning, we're just going to dive right in. We're continuing our series called "101", where we're going to try and take a look at some of the fundamental, foundational, core, elements of the Christian faith. Those kinds of things that will colour and shape the rest of our beliefs. So this week, we are on to the topic of "Sin". As I have said, it's tough to just do that and not get to the grace and the dealing with sin, part. Just so you know, Jesus and salvation are right around the corner. So even if we're talking about sin this morning, do not fear, that's coming in the next couple of weeks.

This morning, that's what we're going to try and tackle, is this topic of "Sin". When we talk about sin, essentially what we are talking about is the rules that God makes. Technically, sin is the breaking of the rules that God makes. But we all really understand how that works. We 'get' that part of the situation that happens, the breaking of the rules we understand. The part that we sometimes question is: Why did he make those rules in the first place and why does he have to punish us for breaking them? That's partly what we're going to look at this morning.

I read a story a while ago by a man named John Orkburg. He was talking about trying to give his children a bath. I think he still had two in the tub but he had one out of the tub and he was trying to coax his daughter, Mallory, to come over to where he was so that he could get the towel on her and dry her off. Mallory was busy, cause she was running around in circles going "de da day, de da day..." and so John is trying to coax her to come and come over here and finally he kind of got frustrated and he said "Mallory, hurry!" And so she did, she ran faster, de da day, .....round and round and round. Finally, this is what John said happened next, he said "No Mallory! That's not what I meant. Stop with the de da day stuff, get over here so I can dry you off. Hurry!" And then she asked a profound question "Why?" I had no answer. I had nowhere to go. I had nothing to do; no meetings to attend; no sermons to write. And maybe you've found yourself in the same position that John was in at that moment. I know I have. I have issued instructions or made rules and I have enforced them with enthusiasm, and then eventually, I realize, or someone points out to me that that particular rule is really unnecessary; or over the top; or reactionary; or just simply out of date.

I think sometimes there's a lot of people who feel that way about God's rules. They often react to that reality in the same way that my kids do. A variety of ways: First is begrudging compliance; where they come "I'll do it, but I'm not going to like it". That's the first way my kids usually respond.

Secondly: Guilt-ridden non-compliance. Where they don't do it but they kind of feel bad about it and are feeling kind of crummy because they didn't follow the rule.

Thirdly. Outright defiance. I'm not going to do it and you can't make me. Or, quite

commonly I think, for most of us: A little bit of all of the above.

Every now and then I sometimes do manage to make a good rule with my kids and if I'm able to show them the logic and the value of that particular rule, they will usually, at least, attempt to follow the rule. And if I'm able to string together enough of those make-sense kind of rules, then maybe, just maybe, they will give me the benefit of the doubt when the time comes that I make a rule for them that doesn't entirely make sense from their perspective.

Now, that's going to be our goal this morning. Our goal this morning is not going to make a complete and universal list of all of God's rules, for all situations and debate and satisfactorily explain each and every one of them. But what we simply want to try and do this morning is see the motivation and the reasoning of the God who made these rules for us.

Now, so far, in this series, in the first three weeks that we've gone through, we have gone through some heavy slugging. We have had a lot of facts and data and numbers. We've gone through a lot of intangible and abstract and ethereal ideas that we've had to try and grasp. We've had a lot of different verses and texts in the Bible to read. We've had had lots of complex and complicated concepts to consider. But this week is going to be easy and straight forward. It's going to be easy and straight forward because of all the heavy lifting that we've done up to this point. So, if you haven't been here for the last couple of weeks, here's very quickly, the ground we've covered up to this point.

We started out talking about the Bible and when we looked at the Bible we basically asked these questions: Can we reasonably be confident that the Bible is authentic? That it is accurate? That it is trustworthy? And is it true? We kind of concluded at the end of our first week that, even though we can never know 100% for sure, unless we were actually there and witnessed things first-hand, there is exponentially greater, historical, evidence for the voracity of the Biblical text than there is for ANY OTHER TEXT, prior to the modern age.

The last two week we talked about God and we said: God is supernatural; He is unfathomable; He is just so much more than we can comprehend; so much more than we can wrap our minds around. He is eternal; He is present and everywhere; He is all-knowing; He is all powerful; and on top of all of that, He never changes. He has always been that way and He will always be that way. He is unlike anything we have ever seen; experienced; heard; or imagined.

Last week we built on that and we said that: The God of the Bible is relational. He is relational by nature, not by choice; which means, this is who He is not just what He does when He feels like it. And we said that, one other thing, if not the primary motivation for God to do anything, is His desire to create and nurture and restore relationships with others.

So, as we go through this series, all the lessons are going to come in a particular order and they are that way, on purpose. We're trying to cover the topics in a way, at least that I feel, is

kind of a logical progression of thought. However, these first two topics that we've covered in the past couple weeks are critical and foundational to everything else that follows. Without this basic grasp of God and the Bible, we will be bogged down; we will be spinning our wheels; we will be stuck in the theological mud. And what we'll be left doing, without a common understanding of God and the Bible, at least on a fundamental level, what will happen is that we are just going to be having a philosophical discussion with God, trying to convince Him of the logic of our position. But if we do have that common understanding, at least on some fundamental level, then the rest of these topics are going to kind of fit together with us, easily.

Now, what often happens is, we don't want to do the heavy lifting and slugging that we've done the last couple of weeks and we want to jump right to the big questions.

We want to ask questions like: How can a forgiving God punish people? Or how could a loving God send people to Hell? Or, does God really expect me to always do this? Or, never do that? Well, without these fundamentals, again we are left just trying to persuade God that our opinion is correct. Either that, or we just write the whole thing off and we declare that we simply cannot believe in a God who demands perfection and punishes people harshly for every little mistake. We simply cannot believe in a God who would send good people into eternal torment, simply because they didn't jump through the proper religious hoop. We simply cannot believe in a God who won't allow this! Or demands we do that! But, if we can begin with the reliability of the Bible and the true nature of who God is, then everything starts to fit together for us. Many of our questions get answered and the questions that don't get answered, we are more apt to be okay with because we have seen a glimpse of the bigger picture.

How many of you who are parents remember those moments in your pre-child years, where you saw someone else's kids misbehaving and you confidently declared to your spouse and hopefully, not too many other people, that 'When we have kids, I'm never going to...' or, 'When we have kids they will never be allowed to....' or, 'If my kid acted that way, I would....'. How many of you have had to recant all of those statements, once you realize that your little bundle of joy had a mind of his own. I think most of us have gone through that experience. Perhaps you've had this experience, where you've been talking and you had to stop mid-sentence and gasped and you say "Gasp! I sound just like my mother." Some of you may have had that pointed out to you by your spouse or people around you and they start calling you by your parents' name because you act so much like them. And I know that's true because I've actually heard some of you doing that to each other.

Sometimes that stuff happens. There are certain phrases or and habits that, despite our best intention always seem to come back and leap out of our mouths, when we least expect it. Things like: "Don't make me stop this car?" or "Money doesn't grow on trees you know." Or, "What part of 'No' do you not understand?" And there is a phrase that I am confident we have all vowed we would never use on our own kids, but when our child, perhaps for the hundredth time asks that most aggravating question 'But why?' in exasperation we have

responded: “Because I said so!” That’s right? My kids have not yet bought me a “Because I said so” tie for Father’s Day but if they did, I couldn’t really object because I do use that phrase on occasion with my children. I just can’t deny that. And sometimes I use it simply out of the frustration of the moment. In other words, I’m saying “I’m tired of debating this issue, so I’m putting an end to the discussion ‘because I said so’. But other times, it’s simply out of expedience. In other words I’m saying “I have a really good reason for this but I don’t have time to explain it to you in a way you’ll understand so: ‘Because I said so’. And sometimes, it’s simply because it’s the best answer. In other words, what I’m saying is: ‘I’m the parent and you’re the child and it’s my job to make these kinds of decisions so...because I said so.”

Well, when it comes to God, at least on some level, the answer is the same, ‘because I said so’. And unlike me, it’s never under frustration or aggravation; or irritation; or exasperation; sometimes God says that because He says ‘This is a little bit beyond you and I can’t really explain this whole thing in terms you’re going to understand.’ Sometimes it’s because God is God and I’m not, which means it’s His job, not mine, to decide what is best.

Last couple of weeks we looked at the God of the Bible and who He is and we said: He is supernatural; He’s eternal; He’s all powerful; He’s all-knowing; we didn’t even touch on things like: holy and pure and righteous, and if that is who God is, then ‘because I said so’ is a perfectly valid reason. Sin is sin, because God said so and as much as our compulsion to be in control, resist this, this makes complete and utter sense.

I remember as a child reading the ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ books. If you’ve never read one, it is exactly what it sounds like. You read through a couple of pages and then you get to the bottom of a page and it gives you a couple choices. It says: To go this way--go to page 50; to go that way--go to page 60. So you decide which of those options sounds best and you turn to that page. Then you read another page or two and get another choice, to go down this path, go to this page; to go down that path--go to that page. You kind of get to make up your own journey as you go through just based on the different choices that you make. If you are like me, you tried to always keep track of where you had gone so that when something went horribly wrong, you could go back to the last choice where everything went off the rails and start again, from there and continue on. But I’ve often thought, wouldn’t it have been wonderful if those kind of books had come with a little booklet, written by the author, that gave you some advice like: Don’t go down the dark tunnel; or, don’t battle the sibor; or perhaps, give money to the busker in the subway; or always eat the schnitzel. If it had that kind of advice in it and it said: “If you do these things you will have the optimum journey through this book.” Wouldn’t have that been helpful? Now, consider for a moment that the book is your life and the author is God. If God truly is all knowing, if He knows how your decisions will turn out; if He knows how your actions will impact your life; if He knows the consequences your choices are going to bring; if He knows who you are in your heart of hearts; if He knows your desires and your passions and your hopes and your dreams; and if He allows the same things about everyone else you will come in contact with during

the course of your story, then, who else would you want to instruct and guide you on the best path to take.

Little while back, we were changing out some plugs and light switches in our house and so, I had one apart and I realized that I know something about this process that my children do not. I know that sometimes some of these wires can be live with electricity and I know that if they touch a live wire it will hurt them. And so, because I knew some things that my kids did not, I made a rule: Don't touch the wires! Likewise, God knows what will work and what won't. He knows what will help and what will harm us. He knows what will be bad and what will be beneficial. He knows the short term; long term; any term; impact of any given action. He created us; He designed us; He understands us; He sees what we cannot; He knows what we do not, and if the God of the Bible is who He says He is; then who else do we want giving us instructions. And if God is truly all powerful, would we not expect Him to do all that he can to direct us on the right path. Would we not expect Him to go to great lengths to warn us of danger. Would we not expect Him to do whatever He can to protect us even from ourselves, if need be. Would we not expect Him to do whatever He could, even if that meant Him coming across as the bad guy for giving us rules and consequences.

My kids don't like bed time. Even when they're tired, they don't like bed time. Even when I try to logically explain to them that, if you don't go to sleep you'll be tired tomorrow. And if you're tired tomorrow you'll be grumpy and if you're grumpy and tired, you'll make bad choices; and if you make bad choices, you're going to get in trouble and if you get in trouble, there will be consequences; and if there is consequences, you're going to wish that you went to sleep tonight. But, despite my best logic, shockingly, that's not always as persuasive as I think it should be and they still don't want to go to bed. So, I do all that I can to help them go to sleep at a reasonable hour, including, making a rule: You must be in bed, by this time. And when need be, disciplining them for not following that rule. Sometimes they don't understand why the rule is necessary. Sometimes they don't like that the rule exists. Sometimes they fight the rule and get mad at me for making it. But because I want what is best for them, I do everything in my power to help them make good choices. Would we expect God to do anything less for us. Even when we don't like it or get or want it, even when we fight the rule or get mad at the One who made it; even when we think we know better or think we can handle it; God wants what's best for us and is compelled to do everything in His power to help us make those good choices.

If God is who the Bible says He is then how can He do anything other than give us rules to follow to help us navigate this life. Because God is all-knowing and all-powerful, He has the right and the authority and we could argue, the responsibility to give us rules as He sees fit. Sin is sin, because God said so.

But sin is also sin because it destroys relationships. If God is by His very nature relational; if God's desire is to create and nurture and restore and protect relationships, then it's obvious that He's going to create rules to protect these relationships. The Apostle Paul describes the

destructive nature of sin this way in Romans 6:23 he says: “The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

The things that God has named sin are the things that destroy life and destroy relationships. The things that disrupt our relationship with God are the things that disgruntle our relationship with one another and they are things that can even damage ourselves. God’s rules are set in place to specifically guard against these very things.

Last week we took a quick look at what Jesus calls the two greatest commands. In Matthew 22:34-40 he says: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest command. The second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Jesus says “Love God with every fibre of your being, care for others as much as you would care for yourself” and Jesus says “All the rest of God’s rules are based on these two.”

We also mentioned last week briefly, the Ten Commandments were basically the core of God’s rules for the Israelite people and they are all based on protecting relationship. Generally, here is what they are: The first four are all about protecting your relationship with God. The first two “Have no other Gods and make no idols.” God is saying, don’t have anything that’s going to interfere, that’s going to take my place in my relationship with you. “Do not misuse the Lord’s name.” God is saying when you misuse my name it distracts; it warps your perception of who I am and that causes strife in our relationship between each other. “Keep the Sabbath holy.” Set aside a whole day just to spend with God and your relationship with Him.

The last six are all about relationships with other people and about protecting those relationships. “Honour your parents; don’t murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet.” And again, God’s rules are all designed with a very specific purpose in mind. God’s rules either preserve or promote activities that create, nurture, or restore, relationship or they deter and defend against activities that would threaten and diminish and destroy relationship. God doesn’t just arbitrarily make rules. God doesn’t just randomly choose what’s going to be okay and what is not. Sometimes we think that God must have just put everything on a big roulette wheel and given it a bit of a spin to decide what He would call sin and what He would not. Murder’s out; stealing is out and...chocolate is out? No wait! Lying is out. That was a close call for some of you. But that’s not how God made His rules. That’s not how it works. God’s rules are intentional; they’re specific; they’re particular; they are not made on a whim or by chance; they are made for a very good reason that is very thoroughly thought out. They exist to protect and preserve relationship.

Here is the rule of thumb for God’s rules. If an action creates or nurtures or restores a healthy relationship, odds are God wants you to do it. If an action prevents or destroys healthy relationships, odds are God wants you to avoid it. Sin is sin because it destroys relationship.

Of course, all this is predicated on our earlier discussion of who God is. Because it's not always clear to us how our actions will affect our relationships. Have you ever said or done something that you thought was going to be received gratefully, and instead it just caused more turmoil to your relationship? Have you ever said or done something that you thought was not big deal at the time but maybe weeks or months down the road that, that one thing was the seed of discontent that was planted and grew and by the time you noticed it, significant damage had been done? Has anyone ever said or done something to you that, at the time, you just ignored or laughed off but it became an open wound and festered and infected your whole relationship with that person. Sin is subtle; sin is corrosive; sin is corrupting; sin is kind of like driving down a gravel road and the little stones get thrown up and they chip the paint and there's little tiny chips of paint off of your car they maybe just at a broad glance you wouldn't even notice are there. Sin is kind of like the salt that gets spread on our roads in the winter time and the salt stays on the road and then it gets kicked up on the sides of your car and when it sits there, it starts to eat away at the metal in your car, especially at the spots that have been chipped away by the rocks. By the time you notice it, the damage has been done. Sin often goes unrecognized until it becomes firmly rooted in our lives. Which is why we need an eternal, knowing, all powerful, God who protects and preserves relationships, to help us see what we should and should not do.

Sin is sin because God said so. Sin is sin because it destroys healthy relationship. That's basically it. But I couldn't leave the subject without adding a couple of provisos. These are issues that need to be discussed in much more length than we have a chance to do this morning but I need to, at least, address them in a small way before we wind up.

Many people will ask the question: If God loves us, why does He punish us? And to think of punishment for sin is God hurting you because you didn't do what He told you to do, is a warped view of both sin and of God. Our problem is that we tend to think of God acting the way people act. The way people punish, we give out some unpleasant and painful consequence that's externally forced upon the person who broke the rule. We give them a ticket; or we throw them in jail; or we sent them to bed without supper; or we take away their allowance; some negative consequence externally forced upon them. And we're hoping that this negative enforcement will somehow, deter repeat behaviour. Or we're hoping that the threat of that consequence, that punishment, will deter people from breaking the rules in the first place. Although God does have the right and the ability to discipline His people as a good parent would discipline a child, most of what we can construe as punishment from God is more accurately viewed as the natural consequences of our actions. Sometimes, likely more often than we realize, God's love shields us from some, if not much, of our actions. However there are times where we do not experience the full measure of God's protection and thus, we are left to bear more of the brunt of our action's consequence. Imagine it this way. Consider the analogy of walking in a heavy rain. You're out walking in this heavy rain and God comes alongside you with an umbrella. The umbrella shields you from most of the rain although, some of it may splash up against you or blow in against you, that's just the

inevitability of walking in the rain. Now, this works well as long as you are walking right beside God. However, if you choose to step away from God to walk a different path or a different direction than He is leading, you will get wet. The farther away you walk the more wet you will get. The longer it takes you to return, the more wet you will get. Now God is not punishing you by making you wet because He's mad that you went in a different direction than He was leading; it is simply the natural consequence of walking a different direction than God. And that's how God's discipline works. If I walk with Him, if I follow His instructions, I am, for the most part, protected by the shelter of His love. I may still have challenges and difficulties, and some of that is just the inevitable reality of living in a fallen and broken world, but when I step away from God or choose to go in a different direction than God is leading, I'm taking myself out from under that protection. The farther away from God I go, the more I have to bear the full brunt of the consequences of my action. The longer it takes me to return to God, return to living according to God's instructions and God's rules, the more damage will be done in my life.

The Apostle John explains it this way in 1John 1:7: "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purified us from all sins."

You know, one of the reasons that Jesus and the Pharisees were at odds with each other so much, is because Jesus insisted that everyone follow God's rules. However, he made it very clear that he and his disciples were under no compulsion to follow all the additional laws that other people had written and the Pharisees were so determined to enforce. Now, distinguishing between God's rules and all the other rules that people had picked up along the way is not an easy thing. Exactly how that works can be challenging and I imagine people have been wrestling with that since time began. It involves more than we can cover at this time and it's not something that I have all the answers to, but here is what I am thoroughly convinced of: It is dependent on all of us extending a measure of grace to one another as we constantly search God's word for a better a full understanding of His will as we do our best to live out our faith day by day.

In the end, what we can be certain of is this: God makes His rules based on what He knows is best for us, just like we do for our own family or in our own society but with much greater wisdom and foresight. God makes rules to protect healthy relationships. To protect us from things that would damage our relationship with Him; our relationship with others; And even those things that would inflict damage upon ourselves. And it's that kind of understanding that allows the Apostle John to pen these words: "This is love for God. To obey His commands and His commands are not burdensome. For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith." 1John 5:3-4.