

PASTOR'S NOTES. Thoughts on the nature of Sin, part 4.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

(Romans 13:8-10 NRSV)

In the previous article I offered this definition of **SIN: the fracturing or breaking of a relationship**. I also mentioned that I believe this probably refers mostly to humans and God, possibly to our pets. I could say further that it would not refer to wild animals, demons, or Satan. My reason for limiting it this way is because the Bible does so: Jesus says all the law and the prophets (the Old Testament of His day) depend on the command to love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31). But Jesus also says that “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12) – what we call the Golden Rule. Paul also suggests above that the one command, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18b) captures the essence of God’s commands.

So we could look at this way: if I murder my brother, I have broken the relationship; I have no opportunity to repair it. I also have severely fractured my relationship with his family, friends, and with God. It is possible that some of these relationships could be repaired. If I steal from my brother, cheat him or lie to him, I have fractured that relationship as well, and also my relationship with God. But possibly these too can be repaired. Remember Jesus’ words here:

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

(Matthew 5:23-24 NRSV)

This tells me that our relationship with God and our relationships with others are closely bound together. Remember back in part 2 when I mentioned that during Eve’s thought process where the SIN began, God was no longer real to her, nor was Adam, even if he was standing right next to her. It is like she was in a dream world where everything and everyone were just objects. On the other hand, God sees each of us individually, and is like a parent of multiple children whose greatest wish is that the children will get along and support each other.

I am convinced that the depth of our relationship with God parallels the growth in relationships with others. The more we are able to be honest and vulnerable with others, the more we can open up to God, and also the reverse.

So how do we fracture or break relationships? The ten commandments in Exodus 20:3-17 and Deuteronomy 5:7-21 are a good place to start. The first three commandments: to put God first, to not use images, to not take the name in vain, all have to do with maintaining and growing a healthy relationship with God. The last six: honor your parents, do not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, covet all have to do with maintaining and growing healthy relationships with others, and by extension, to God. The Sabbath command does both: honors God and honors others (by not

overworking them). So we can see how the commandments play a key role in identifying SIN. Doing any of those things is committing SIN against another and against God. But just avoiding them is not enough. You might recall in the case of the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-21; Mark 10:17-21; Luke 18:18-22), he knew that there was still something lacking. By themselves, the commandments do not make a healthy relationship with God. If they could do that, then Jesus died for nothing (Galatians 2:21).

I see Jesus taking us even further in our interpersonal relationships in three ways: First, Jesus exemplifies and preaches being a servant: *“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:43b-45)

Second, Jesus makes this strange statement:

“But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.”

(Matthew 23:8-10 NKJV)

This passage is talking about the religious leaders, who people address as Rabbi, Father, Teacher or Master. There is a lot more I could say about the passage, but it seems to me that what ties these titles together is a sense of temporary inequality. Teachers – whether seen as rabbi, Father, or Master – are at a higher place than their students, but their job is to help the students become like them. So the inequality is meant to be only temporary. But the society of Jesus’ time (and in slightly different ways, our time) has cemented this hierarchy of persons where some are more important than others. We see in Jesus almost a complete reversal of who is more important – the last become first.

Third, Jesus calls Himself the “Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11), and then goes on to say:

“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

(John 15:12-13 NRSV)

Think about the best relationships in your life. For those of you with some great ones, my suspicion is that they have grown from basic respect to full investment in your success. I believe this is the same kind of thing God wants for us in our relationship with Him – it might start with fear and respect, the desire to escape His wrath, but moves on to genuine affection and the desire to please Him with no thought of reward. That kind of relationship makes no room for SIN.

Yours in Christ,

