

PASTOR'S NOTES. Thoughts on the nature of Sin, part 3.

“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or His ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your INIQUITIES have made a separation between you and your God, and your SINS have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.” (Isaiah 59:1-2 ESV)

In this series of notes I first brought up the idea of solipsism, and then tried to relate that to the story of sin we find in Genesis 3, what we call the first or original sin. Now we may be ready to answer the question, “What is SIN?” When I’ve asked this question to people over the years, I received such answers as “going off your diet,” and “breaking one of the commandments.” The first might be, the second would definitely qualify, and that at least partially describes what Eve (and then Adam) did in the Garden. But I think the scriptures themselves point to a deeper sense of what is the essence of SIN.

For one thing, in the Bible SIN is not always about God (at least not directly). Consider that we can also SIN against other persons:

“If your brother SINS against you...” (Matthew 18:15a ESV)

“Lord, how often will my brother SIN against me, and I forgive...” (Matthew 18:21b ESV)

“If your brother SINS, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he SINS against you seven times...” (Luke 17:3b-4a ESV)

“For if you forgive others their TRESPASSES, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your TRESPASSES.”

(Matthew 6:14-15 NRSV)

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone INDEBTED to us...”

(Luke 11:4a NRSV)

For another, the Bible in a few places gives us clues on how to think about SIN, in addition to the Isaiah 59 passage above:

“Everyone who commits SIN is guilty of lawlessness; SIN is lawlessness. You know that He was revealed to take away SINS, and in Him there is no SIN. No one who abides in Him SINS; no one who SINS has either seen Him or known Him.”

(1 John 3:4-6 NRSV)

“Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits SIN.”

(James 4:17 NRSV)

“...For whatever does not proceed from faith is SIN.”

(Romans 14:21-23b ESV)

After I asked people, “What is SIN?”, and if they asked me back, I would say that SIN is whatever separates us from God. This is still a pretty good definition; it draws from Isaiah 59 above, and it describes what happened in the Garden of Eden, or to us anytime we break a commandment. Also, the moment of solipsism I tried to describe earlier – that when I am about to do something SINFUL, my mind reduces the world to just me and the objects of my world – there is no relationship to God. It seems to fit well with the other scriptures I listed, which also assume a relationship with God. Because Jesus is not only God, but throughout His human life was connected with God, He could not

SIN, and while I used to struggle with the verse in 1 John 3:6, I think now that it is logically true that if we are abiding in Him, we cannot SIN either.

But at this time I think I need to amend that definition. **SIN is the fracturing or breaking of a relationship.** I think this is better definition because it recognizes the Biblical truth that SIN is not just about our relationship with God, but our relationship with others. And when I say “others,” I believe I am referring mostly to humans, though I suppose that if we understand that we can sin against another person, we can also sin against our dog, and perhaps even nature.

So I am convinced that SIN needs to be understood as a relational term (or perhaps an anti-relational term). For me, this leads to two thoughts: God’s ultimate desire for us is to be in relationship with us, and our relationships with others are directly linked to our relationship with God. To spell out these two will take more pages, so I’ll need to continue this next month. But perhaps I can make the first more clear by pointing to a couple more scriptures:

As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow Me.”

(Mark 10:17-21, also Matthew 19:16-21, Luke 18:18-22 NRSV)

When I first heard this story, I got hung up on the idea of giving away all my stuff, that I just assumed I was a failure as a Christian and let it go at that. But notice that Jesus is really calling this man to follow Him – it just happens that to be one of His disciples, he can’t have another life somewhere else. Jesus Himself brings up the commandments, but both of them know that there is something more. What Jesus is calling the young man to is something similar to God in the Garden of Eden, where He could walk with His people at any time and they could enjoy being together. This is what John describes in his vision of the new Heaven and new Earth at the end of the Bible:

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’”

(Revelation 21:3-4 NRSV)

He wants a relationship with you. Have we considered how ridiculous that sounds?

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.