**What We Believe…About Sin (and Hope)**
**Psalm 32:1-5**
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Continuing our series on "What We Believe" about various important issues related to our faith, we turn our attention from what we believe the Bible teaches about humankind to humanity's biggest problem – finding a solution to male pattern baldness! No, seriously, today we look at the subject of sin.

Now some people don't like to talk about sin, even in the church.  A minister in Australia preached on the subject of sin and one of his church officers came and talked to him about it.  He said, "Pastor, we don't want  you to talk so plainly about sin.  Call it a 'mistake' if you want, but not sin."  The minister went to a utility closet and brought back a bottle labeled "Rat Poison".  He said, "I see what you want me to do.  You wanted me to change the label.  Suppose I take off this label of "Poison" and put on some milder label, such as 'Essence of Peppermint'.  Don't you see what might happen?  The milder you make the label, the more dangerous you make the poison."

Much like that church officer, many today prefer to speak of error, poor judgment, lack of education, character flaws, economic disadvantages, and social maladjustments, etc. – in fact, almost anything else – but sin.  "Sin" is such an antiquated word, such a negative word, in their view.  We're far too advanced to hold onto such an outdated, harmful concept.  Talking about sin causes people to feel bad about themselves because it means that they've fallen short of some standard.  And, of course, there really is no higher standard, no unchanging rules, we each simply follow our own path.

All of that is completely contrary to what the Scriptures reveal.  Put simply, the biblical definition of sin is found in I John 3:4 "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness."  There are, in fact, higher standards, God's laws, which He as the Sovereign creator of the universe expects us to obey.  When we live contrary to God's moral laws, we break them and by ignoring them we show that we are law-less.  Lying, lusting, jealousy, envy, hatred, etc. may be character flaws.  They may be occasioned by many circumstances.  But first and foremost they are disobedience to God, and so they are sin.

Sin, though, isn't simply the breaking of God's rules, it's a disruption of our relationship with God.  You may recall Peter's words to Jesus after Christ had miraculously helped him catch a boatload of fish, "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8; Isaiah 6:5).

Now of course we didn't just invent sin in our day.  The book of Genesis records its entrance into the world through the disobedience of our representative head, the first man, Adam.  He and his wife, Eve, disobeyed God and ate the fruit of the one tree forbidden to them (Genesis 2:16,17).  The Apostle Paul explains the significance of that

first sin of Adam's in Romans 5:18,19 "[18] Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. [19] For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

All humanity, from Adam on down, inherited a sinful nature, which is ours right from birth.  Psalm 51:5 says "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."  We don't have to teach our kids how to be bad, they'll display it all on their own – selfishness, wanting what someone else has, lying, etc.  Each and every person not only is born with a sinful nature but will inevitably go on to commit acts of sin (Romans 3:23 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God").

And it gets worse.  Mankind's sinful nature means that we are totally unable to please God apart from faith in Christ.  The prophet Isaiah said that all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6) and the Apostle Paul said in Romans 14:23 "…everything that does not come from faith is sin."  Non-Christians may do good things but they cannot earn God's approval because they don't do those good things out of love for Him or a desire to glorify Him.  Think of it this way – if a son doesn't steal from his parents because he's afraid of being known as a thief, he's doing a good thing by not stealing but to his parents it's not really a good thing because he doesn't do it out of love and respect for them.  In the same way, we are lost in sin and can't truly please our Heavenly Father apart from faith in Christ as our Savior.

In Ephesians 2:1 the Bible teaches that we are "dead in our transgressions and sins".  Protestant reformer Martin Luther called it "the bondage of the will", we are naturally bound to sin.  This is why education, social programs, economic reforms, etc. will always fail to truly, deeply, comprehensively and lastingly change the moral behavior of people.  With the money we've spent on education and other programs, we ought to be living in a virtual "nirvana", an ideal world where selfishness, hatred, racism, etc. have been banished once and for all.  In fact, prior to WWII, many believed the world was about to enter a golden age and the inherent goodness of man would bring us peace and harmony.  WWII was a rude awakening – world-wide conflict, genocide, inhumanity on a scale never seen before.  And it's only continued to get worse.  Ethnic cleansing, beheadings, racial animosity, sex slavery – on and on we could go.

Our sin problem can't be solved from the outside, with education programs or social programs, because sin doesn't start with the mind, it starts in the heart.  The prophet Jeremiah said "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.  Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) and Jesus said, "[21] For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, [22] greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. [23] All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" (Mark 7:21-23).

It's clear, then, that no one 'makes' us sin.  In the early '70's a comedian named Flip Wilson used to have a character who would explain why he did something wrong by

saying, "The Devil made me do it." But neither the Devil, nor God Himself, makes anyone sin. James 1:13-15 says "[13] When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; [14] but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. [15] Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

It's easy to see how temptations lead us to sin when it comes to very obvious things like lust, greed, adultery, theft, and so on. We see things we want, things that aren't ours, and we sinfully act to get them. Or we feel we've been wronged and so we slander others, lying about them to get even. But sin can be much more subtle than that. Pastor Timothy Keller wrote in _The Reason for God_ that when we build our identity on things other than God, we essentially put other things before Him and so we sin. "If we take our meaning in life from our family, our work, a cause, or some achievement other than God, they enslave us," Keller says. He quotes theologian Jonathan Edwards, saying "If our highest goal in life is the good of our family, then, we will tend to care less for other families…If our highest goal is our own individual happiness, then we will put our own economic interests ahead of others." If our highest good isn't God then we become enslaved to a good that usurps God's place in our life, which is sin.

All this is bad enough but then comes the worst part of all – the consequences of sin. James 4:1-3 says that fights and quarrels come from selfish, sinful desires. So sin affects our relationships with others. And the entire Bible depicts our alienation from God because of disobedience to His commands. But then we find the ultimate consequence of sin in Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death…." There's no question that when sin entered the world, the goodness of creation ended. Imperfections of all kinds developed because of it and mankind became subject to death. But just as physical death is separation from life, so "death" as it relates to sin is separation, that is, separation from God. Our relationship with Him suffers a rupture and, left un-dealt with, we will be eternally separated from Him in hell.

All this has been a very disturbing picture – born with a sin nature, every one of us under sin's control, totally unable to do anything that pleases God, solely responsible for the sin that comes from within our hearts, facing the prospect of being eternally separated from God. No wonder the Apostle Paul said in Romans 7:24, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

It's certain that we can't save ourselves from sin. It's more than a matter of will power, of trying to be good, of "turning over a new leaf". The power of sin is too great, the stain of sin too deep for us to overcome in our own strength. The only hope we have, and this is an all-powerful hope, is the one Paul gave in answer to his question, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" He said, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:25).

Paul himself knew his salvation rested on Christ. He said in I Timothy 1:15 "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world

to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." Jesus was the atoning sacrifice who paid for all our sins (I John 2:2) so that we wouldn't have to. His power, and His alone, saves us as we place our faith in Him as Savior (John 3:16; Romans 10:9,13). We are promised a new heart when we come to Christ (Ezekiel 36:26) and a new nature, as Paul wrote in Romans 6:6 "For we know that our old self was crucified with him (*Jesus*) so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin".

If you haven't already, come to Jesus as your Savior, just as Paul did long ago. Ask His forgiveness and cleansing, turn from your sin with His help and know His blessings. If you've already placed your faith in Christ, do as Paul said long ago, allow Him to renew your mind (Romans 12:2) and set you free from sinful patterns by the power of His Spirit. You don't have to be the same old you forever. God wants us to be new creations in Him (II Corinthians 5:17). And He can do it if we turn our life over to Him.