

LIKE SHEEP

Text: Isaiah 53:6

Readings: Romans 5:12-21; Isaiah 53

Belgic Confession Art 15

Theme: God the Father laid on Jesus the punishment for our sin and disobedience.

Purpose: To help us understand the seriousness of sin and appreciate the sacrifice of Christ.

One of the challenges of communicating the message of the Bible in our society is that most non-Christians in New Zealand do not understand many of the key terms of the Bible. This means that we need to explain these terms using other words, find synonyms, and put them more simply.

One of these words is “sin”. What does it mean? What is sin? How is sin related to *sins*? Are all of us sinners?

If you wanted to answer these questions you could get on your computer and google “sin” and you will find a number of references.

Or you could be more “old school” and read a book on this subject. But there are very few books written about sin. The Puritan Ralph Venning wrote such a book in 1669 which he titled, *The Plague of Plagues*. More recently Cornelius Plantinga has write a book on this subject titled, *Not the way it's supposed to be*.

But Christian books like this are uncommon; you will struggle to find them in the Koorong catalogue or the Christian Bestsellers list. The popular books are on *Developing a healthy self-image*, *Seven steps to a happy marriage*, or *How to raise great kids*. You have to search hard to find a Christian book on sin.

You have to search even harder to find a *secular* book on sin. This one-syllable word has all but disappeared from our vocab. Instead people talk about a person's crime, or sickness, or disease, or failing, or that their behaviour is not “pro-social”.

These secular descriptions of sin move the focus away from God to society, away from the church to the state, away from the pastor to the psychiatrist, away from the pew to the couch, away from confession to therapy, away from forgiveness to treatment.

Of course, the place to go for a detailed definition and description of sin is the Bible. Today we will analyse **our sin** so we can look to **our Saviour**.

We'll do that from the perspective of this "servant song" in Isaiah. Written some 700 years before Jesus died it gives us the clearest Old Testament prophecy of the suffering and death of Jesus. It is a profound, beautiful, moving description of the sacrifice of the Good Shepherd for his sheep, of the Lord Jesus for his people.

1. First we consider **OUR SIN**

"We all like sheep have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way."

a. Sin is disobedience

Isaiah described sin with these telling phrases; we have "gone astray"; each of us has "turned to his own way".

We have turned off the right path. Like stupid sheep who follow the leader we have followed the crowd and gone the way of the majority. We have ignored the voice of the Lord our Shepherd and have made up our own mind about where we want to go and how we want to live.

If people do think about sin they usually think of *sins*, which are the outward and visible evidence of sin, the *symptoms* of sin – gossip, slander, hatred, murder, pride, bitterness, envy, drunkenness, immorality, adultery.

Or people think of the *consequences* of our sins in our lives and in society - broken marriages, fractured relationships, neglect, loneliness, depression, sadness, sickness, pain.

But our most basic problem is sin itself.

The Shorter Catechism asks; “What is sin?” It answers; “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” Sin is disobedience to God, it is breaking God’s command, it is transgressing God’s law.

God calls you and me to love him with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, with our whole being, but we fail to do that. We refuse to acknowledge God. We do not give him what we owe him.

Instead, we choose to live independently of God; we want to be autonomous; “I will do what I want to do! I will find my own way!” Sin is being in-dependant rather than dependant on the Lord, following our own path rather than following the Lord Jesus Christ, being self-centred rather than God-centred.

Even more than that sin is *hostility* to God, rebellion against him. "Sin is defiance, arrogance, the desire to be equal with God..." (Emil Brunner).

Plantinga describes it like this: “Sin is deviant and perverse, an *injustice* or *iniquity* or *ingratitude*. Sin is *disorder* and *disobedience*. Sin is faithlessness, lawlessness, godlessness. Sin is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it – both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a missing of the mark, a spoiling of goods, a staining of garments, a hitch in one’s gait, a fragmenting of the whole.” (p 88) Sin is disobedience to God.

b. Sin is also universal: "We all like sheep have gone astray..."

All of us have done this - the whole world, every person, without exception. We are like sheep where the entire flock has wandered off the right path. Not one sheep has stayed in the paddock where it was supposed to be.

Psalm 53:3 – “Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

This sin is universal because it goes back to the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden.

God created Adam and Eve in his own image, holy, righteous and good and capable of obeying God's will. God gave them the free choice of obeying his command and living in dependence on him, or choosing to disobey him. They chose to "go astray", to "turn to their own way". By that sin they separated themselves from God.

God had made Adam the representative head of the whole human race; his decision became our decision; his sin became our sin. Because of the sin of Adam we all became sinners; we are sinners by nature. In theology we call this “original sin” – it is the sin we are born with. “It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother’s womb” (BC Art 15).

Sin is not something we learn merely by imitating the evil behaviour of sinful people. This is what Pelagius taught in the 4th century. No, sin is deeply rooted in our nature and it has infected everyone in the world; it is a universal human condition. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom 6:23).

c. Sin is universal and it is personal

"...*each of us* has turned to his own way."

This is not how most people see themselves. Most people have a pretty positive assessment of how good they are. If they believe in heaven they give themselves a good chance of getting there. That is because they have a generous view of God's love and a generous view of themselves. "After all," he will say, "most of the time I am a decent sort of a guy and generally law-abiding. Yes, I occasionally drink a bit much and, yes, my first marriage didn't go too well, and no, I don't declare all my income to the IRD; but looking at the big picture, and comparing myself to others who much worse than me, I am doing okay!

But the assessment of the Bible is more sober and more accurate: sin is personal; "...each of us has turned to his own way." Sin has infected every person in the world. Everything we said earlier about the disobedience of all of humanity is true of every person in the world, you and me included.

Perhaps you are beginning to see why the word "sin" has dropped out of people's vocab, why so few books are written about this subject, perhaps even why so few sermons are preached about sin; it is hard to swallow, it is unpopular; it is not the "feel-good" message we would like to hear; it does not seem very up-building; it doesn't lift your self-esteem or polish your self-image.

d. Yet it is vital that you and I understand our sin; we need **an accurate diagnosis** of our sinful condition.

Say you are going to buy a second hand car. To be safe you decide to take it in for an AA check. You want to know if there is anything wrong with it. You want the mechanic to do a thorough check. If there is a problem you want him to pinpoint that accurately and tell you what it will cost to fix it. You don't want him to pretend all is well when it is not.

Or say you are experiencing pains in your chest, or regular head-aches, or you often have a stomach ache; so you decide to go and see your doctor. You ask him to check you over thoroughly and tell you what is wrong with you. You want a clear diagnosis of the disease. You want him to pinpoint the problem so he can prescribe a cure; you want him to identify the disease so you can receive treatment and be made well again.

It is the same with our spiritual condition. There is something wrong with all of us. We need to understand it and realise just how serious it is. Our sin, both our original sin and our actual sins, will result in death – eternal death! Our condition is so serious the Bible describes us as being "dead in our transgressions and sins" (Eph 2:1). We are guilty before God and face the eternal punishment of hell.

2. It is this clear understanding our sin that makes us look to Jesus as **OUR SAVIOUR**; it is understanding our spiritual disease that makes us look to God for the cure. And in his Son, the Lord Jesus, God the Father has provided the solution, the cure, the road home.

a. What Jesus did

God sent his Son, Jesus, to bear the sin of his people. "...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

This does not mean that Jesus became a sinner. The Bible tells us that he was like us in every way except for sin; he had no sin. Rather God laid our sin on Jesus; our sin was imputed or credited to Jesus.

Jesus took our punishment on himself. He died in our place. In those three hours of darkness on the cross he went through the agony and suffering of hell so that you and I would not have to go through that. He was forsaken by God so that we would never be forsaken by God.

You might ask; "Why did God do that?
Why couldn't God just overlook our sin?
Why couldn't he forgive us without the death of Jesus?"

The answer is that God is just and holy and righteous. Sin is an offence against his character. He must punish sin to be true to who he is and what he has said. He cannot simply overlook sin but must satisfy his justice.

This is a broad and deep subject. It is a central theme in the Bible. The Scriptures describe this as the atoning work of Christ: Jesus made atonement for sin, he paid the debt we owed, he covered it with his blood.

The Old Testament pictured this work of Jesus in the animal sacrifices that were offered for sin and guilt. Those sacrifices could not pay for sin but they anticipated the full and complete payment Jesus would make in his death on the cross.

The New Testament pictures this death of Jesus in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This is a remembrance of what Jesus did. The bread and the wine are symbols of his body and blood which he gave for us. This is what Jesus has done.

b. But we must not only consider what Jesus did but also what **we must do**.

i. You and I must *recognise our own sin*. All that we have considered today about sin is true of all of us. You need to accept this, to admit that you are a sinner, that you have broken God's law, that you are guilty before God.

ii. You then need to *repent of your sin*. This means you need to turn away from it. You need a change of mind and a change of life. You need to recognise that you have been going in the wrong direction and you need to turn around and get on that narrow path that leads to God.

iii. And you need to *respond to God in faith*.

Have you done that? Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay for *your sins*? That he died in *your place*? That he bore *your iniquity*? Do you trust in Jesus for your salvation? Do you rely on him take you home to heaven?

The word sin has all but gone from our present day speech and vocab; hardly anyone uses this anymore.

But to truly recognise your own situation you must understand this word and your own sin.

And in order to be saved from this terminal condition you must know and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour.

Amen