

## **Yikes! Do We Have To Talk About This?**

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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**

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**Psalm 1**

Why must we make everything SO linear? SO polarized? SO precise?

Coke or Pepsi? Republican or Democrat? Pro-Life or Pro-Choice? Believer or Non-Believer? Fact or Myth? Right or Wrong? The list goes on.

In today's world, it seems one is forced to take a stand, and be labeled by finite poles or extremes, despite the fact that almost every issue, behavior, attitude, and even personhood is best defined by a broad, diverse, spectrum of possibilities.

Yet culture makes us choose. You are what your label says you are. But is it really so easy?

I like Coke, but that doesn't mean I necessarily hate Pepsi. (My wife does, but I don't consider it anathema, as long as it's cold, and the ice is shaved). Can I not identify as a Democrat, but still be able to admire the qualities of Republicans, and even occasionally vote for one? Can I not believe in a woman's right to choose what's best for her, and yet still believe that every life is precious, not only in the womb, but also as long as it has breath? Or does my concern for human life only extend as far as is politically expedient, or as far as legally-defined borders, both geographic and political? Can I not believe with all my heart in God's ability to ultimately affect good in our world, and yet still have the occasional doubt? Or does the humanness of doubt cancel out my faithfulness, no matter how sincere? Can I not find truth in the myths, powerful myths of our faith, and still also find truth in reason, and science, and history? Does someone else have to be wrong every time I'm right?

Culture says, "You are what you are labeled."

This summer, we're working through Marcus Borg's book *Speaking Christian*, in which he laments the restrictions and limitations on Christian language that have

developed from traditional American theology. Borg notes that an emphasis on Heaven and Hell (more specifically, are you going or not), the primary need of forgiveness from sin as a means to salvation, and a literal interpretation of scripture, have all distanced modern readers from the original intent of ancient texts. The result is that we are programmed to hear and respond to words and ideas that don't necessarily reflect what we've been programmed to hear.

In other words, culture holds Christian language to the same captivity, the same rigidness as it does to words like liberal, conservative, truth, fact, collusion, etc., such that these words are not only absent of their original meaning, but also immediately associated with specific behaviors and ideas, regardless of how accurate or inaccurate an association may be.

Scriptures, especially in the First Testament, do not obsess about Heaven, let alone an afterlife. Sin is pivotal, but it's not the primary or stand-alone issue in our relationship with God. Jesus isn't mentioned in Genesis, but don't tell that to Paul or St. Augustine. And even if you do choose to read every passage of scripture with laser-like literalism, you'll still find yourself stumped by contradictions. Of course, all of this assumes you've actually read some, let alone all of our sacred texts, which the majority of Americans, and especially church-goers have not.

So when you hear a word like *sin*, you aren't hearing it absent two millennia of baggage. Odds are, you are hearing this word in the context of fire and brimstone. Sin is an obstacle, or a virus, that needs to be removed, forcefully even, to free us from our ineptness, or incompleteness, or demise, or alienation from God, or even our ultimate doom.

And if you are hearing the word sin in this context, you are either gonna lean into that definition, and follow every procedure for inoculation – the most direct churches would call this the “turn or burn” approach. Or this concept may be so off-putting, and so at odds with the nature and character of the God you know, One who is loving, and has created a good creation, that every time you hear the word sin, and any passage detailing it, you choose to move along to the next topic.

Imagine if we renamed Genesis *Fox News*, Exodus *MSNBC*, Leviticus the *Wall Street Journal*, Numbers the *New York Times*, and Deuteronomy the *Atlantic*. Would anyone in this room be able to read those texts without bias? I think not. And I think the same is true of the word sin, and others like it.

Happy are those  
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;  
2 but their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law they meditate day and night.  
3 They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.

Yes!!!! Give me some of that. I do not want to be led astray. And I want to prosper. And I want to delight in God's goodness. And I want to stand tall like a mighty oak, fed by fertile streams, and ready to be one who bears the fruit of a good and decent creation. Give me some more Psalmist....

But...Oh no! A but... Here it comes:

The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.  
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
6 for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

I thought we weren't going to talk about sin, and its consequences, and I don't want to be chaff. Can I change the channel? Can we please talk about something else?

If Christianity is only a system built on Heaven/Hell, the forgiveness of sin, and a rigid literalism, then this text is a litmus test. There's a righteous, faithful, good

way. And it bears one fruit: heaven. And there's another way – the way of one who is sinful, unfaithful, evil even, and it bears no fruit: hell. And you've got a choice to make: the path that veers toward good, or the path that doesn't.

And Sardis Baptist Church, if that's the system that I've got choose, then I reject that system. This text is not a litmus test. And this text is not one that should be discarded and ignored, because our culture, with its misgivings and misinterpretations of sin, has corrupted it.

This text is an introduction to 150 Psalms, each of which detail the whole of the human experience.

And guess what?

To be human is to be a good, created, valued, loved, unique child of God. And to be human is to live among neighbors, sometimes, most of the time, doing what is righteous and good. But even the faithful have moments of doubt. Even those who are loving and decent, are prone to wound those whom they love the most. And in our lives, there will be times where God feels so close, and so present, and so full. And there will also be times when God feels distant – I emphasize that word feels. Because in exile, in heartbreak, in grief, in anger, in greed, in humanness, God can feel distant, even though She's always present. And in the feeling of that absence, we can tend to stray from love of God and neighbor as our primary concern, and instead focus too much on love of self. And when self rather than God is our focus, we move away from our created or intended purpose.

For too long, we've tried to make a sin a singular act, something you do once. I am a sinner because I forgot to send a thank you note, or I cut somebody off on I-485, or I wounded someone, intentionally or unintentionally. And we've tried to make sin something you catch like the Cooties. "Don't go down the path of sinners – we're gonna have to quarantine this whole place!"

I don't think today's passage is telling us we've got a path to walk that is as narrow as a tightrope. Nor do I think the text tells us that God scores our righteousness or faithfulness as if we were performers in a competition.

I think the text simply says we will find wholeness when we do those things that are attuned toward God's intention for creation: loving God and loving neighbor. And when we pursue other things, primarily those things not directed toward God's intention for creation, we can expect to find a hollowness or an emptiness, that's only as sturdy and as constant as chaff that blows in the wind.

I think it's also worth noting that the Psalms depict a God who is patient, and steadfast, and strong, and consistent, and forgiving, and ultimately present and loving, as, we, Her people, live the human experience and discern the way toward wholeness, regardless of whether we are succeeding or stumbling.

So I have a suggestion. What if every time we read, or sing, or hear the word *sin*, we take a deep breath? And we remember the God who has created us. And we remember the infinite grace afforded to us, not because of a complex, theological system developed and tweaked over two millennia, but because of our worth and value as created beings, made, held, and loved in the image of a good creator.

If we do this, it doesn't mean we won't still be human, or sin, or fall short of our purpose. But it may just give us the courage to work for our purpose, and indeed God's purpose, not for fear of retribution, not from the angle of overcoming our unworthiness, but rather because we understand that to be fully human is to live in God's presence, loving God and neighbor.

But, hey, today's a talk-back session, Sardis. So what do you wanna do with that word *sin*? Do you wanna let culture claim it? Or do you wanna just discard it, and move on to other topics? Or do you wanna reclaim it, and see if that reclamation makes God feel more present?

Tag, you're it!