

Sunday, 16 October 2016

[Christian Caregiving 4- caring for those who sin](#)



[Gen 3:1-13; Ps 51 ;1 Jn 1:5-2:6 9; Jn 4:3-30, 39-42](#)

Today we are continuing with our sermon series on Christian caregiving. Last time we spoke about caring for those who are suffering. This week we are talking about caring for people who sin.

We'll start by looking at what sin is. If we look at the interaction between Eve and the serpent we will see an archetype of how sin works. Eve knew the commandment. They could eat from every other tree in the garden, just not that one tree. The serpent, who we know to be the Devil, the tempter, planted seeds of doubt in her. He suggested that maybe God isn't really all that good. Maybe God is actually keeping something good away from her. That is the way we often look at sin- it would be a lot of fun if God just didn't have a thing about it (Dallas Willard).

When Eve was convinced that God was not to be trusted in this

matter, the first human couple decided that they would make their own decision about what was right and wrong, rather than trust what God has to say. And we read, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

What we often don't realize is that God tells us about sin for *our* benefit, not for God's benefit. The only effect God feels from our sin is the hurt of watching us walk away from him and walk towards destruction. Letting us know the commandments and the consequences of sin is all for our benefit.

Notice too that Eve isn't wanting to do something bad. She sees it as good. The fruit looks good for food. It was beautiful. And she believed it would make her wise. Sin works that way. We aren't tempted to do evil as much as we are tempted to something good, but the way of getting it is wrong. Take stealing, for example. Nothing is wrong with having money, but robbing a bank to get it is where it becomes sin. When we sin we will be drawn by something good. In CS Lewis' book the *Screwtape Letters*, a more experienced demon is mentoring a lesser demon on how to lead human beings astray. Screwtape bemoans the fact that demons have not found a way to produce a pleasure. The craft of the demons is to twist the good pleasures and place them out of context and towards false goals.

After eating the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and bad Adam and Eve feel the consequences of their sin. They gain knowledge of “bad”. We read, “Then the eyes of both were

opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” It says they knew they were naked and covered themselves. They felt shame. They felt vulnerable. Suddenly the world doesn’t seem very friendly. You have to protect yourself. They even try to hide from God. So there is suddenly a division between human beings caused by shame and fear of being hurt, and there is also a division between human beings and God- there is a desire to hide from God.

When Adam finally comes out from hiding he speaks to God and we see another aspect of sin. “[God] said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.’ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’” None of them was willing to accept their sin. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. But there is actually a subtle blaming of God if we read carefully. Adam says, “The woman whom you gave to be with me”. It wasn’t just Eve he blamed. He was basically saying if you didn’t create Eve I wouldn’t have done it. Instead of accepting their sin and asking forgiveness they pass the blame off to someone else.

Sin is what causes us to be separated from God. It is understood in a number of ways in Christianity. It can be willful disobedience to the command of God. Sin is sometimes

understood as a twisted part of the human condition which is a state into which we are born because of the brokenness of the world. Sin can be understood as anything that violates God's will for the way the world should be- a peaceful, joyful, and holy place.

Ultimately, sin is personal. We damage our relationship with God. We do what the Prodigal Son does. He basically wished his father was dead so he could have his inheritance and then leave. Our sin is not impersonal to God. It is spitting in His face.

It is more than just an action. The action is an expression of what is in our heart. Jesus says, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person" (Matt 15:18-20). A wise person once said, "We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners". We sin because our heart is inclined that direction. So to adequately deal with sin, we have to deal with more than the action. We have to deal with the motivation and lies that gave rise to the action. If we were counselling Eve we wouldn't just look at the act of eating the fruit, we would look at what she came to believe about God that made eating the fruit a possibility.

God isn't about just following the rules. If we take someone full of murderous rage and lock them away in prison so they couldn't hurt anyone that person is not pleasing God. Their heart isn't right, and that is what matters. The heart is what has to be dealt with. God wants humble hearts, which means we see ourselves clearly. He also wants us to have obedient hearts,

which means we trust that what God says is good and isn't trying to keep something good away from us. Oswald Chambers taught that the source of sinful thought lies in the incurable suspicion that God is not good. We sin out of self-protection. We have to look out for ourselves because God won't.

When we care for people who come to us with their sin it is important to have an understanding of how sin works. There is an internal logic to it. It is usually a desire for something good, but it is the wrong way to get it. With stealing, it is the wrong way to get a good thing. With pornography, it is the wrong way to look for intimacy. With gossip, it is the wrong way to seek excitement and build community. Sin is usually seeking a good that we believe God's ways deny us.

We should also be aware of our own tendencies to sin. Our impulses will be different, but should be careful about looking down on another person's sin as nastier than our own. We might not understand their temptation because we have different temptations, but we all have temptations. And if you don't think you have any temptations to sin, then you probably have to deal with your pride, which the saints tell us is actually the root of all sin.

The way Christians are to deal with sin is to confess it and then to receive God's forgiveness. We read in John's first letter, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9); "if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and

not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2). Our overall tendency in our Christian life should be towards less and less sin as we grow in the wisdom and likeness of God. But we do sin, and we need to deal with it.

Sometimes confession can take place in church on Sunday as we confess and receive absolution. Sometimes we confess alone to God when we say our daily prayers. But sometimes we need to actually speak our sin to another person. This is important to do and it can be very powerful and transforming when done with care and wisdom.

When people come to us with their sin, they might be doing so for a couple reasons. They might be wanting to confess it, which is a healthy way to deal with it.

Or, they might also be wanting to justify it. They might be feeling guilty but aren't ready to deal with it and so are rationalizing their action. Or someone might have confronted them about something they did and they are trying to get you on their side.

Someone can come to us ready to confess or not, either way it is a delicate situation. We can listen to them and ask questions, but we have to be careful of two different tendencies in us- and it's important to know which way you lean.

One way you might lean is towards rationalizing their sin. You try to justify what they've done. You minimize the damage of the sin by talking about how what they did makes sense and they are really in the right. If they have sinned, but are trying to rationalize it, and you help them do this, then you have dug them

further into their sin. If they have come to you ready to confess, then you have taken their confession away from them by making it's "not really so bad"; "they are just being too hard on themselves".

The other way you might lean is towards being too harsh. They come to us with their sin and we condemn them as if we aren't sinners ourselves- we are happy to help pluck the sliver from their eye, ignorant of the log in our own (Matt 7:1-5). When we are harsh we also often deal with the sin on a superficial level. We look at merely the outward action and not the inward motivations of the heart. Coming to us with sin can be incredibly difficult. It can be easy to hurt them or offend them if we are harsh. Either way we could do significant enough damage to the relationship that the opportunity for them to confess has been lost. And we might be the only person they felt comfortable bringing this too.

Avoiding both rationalizing their sin, and being too harsh, we want to help them confess. We do this mainly by listening well. We can ask questions, but only to help them talk. We don't want to pry or embarrass them. We want to respect their privacy, but sometimes people need help talking about their sin. Sometimes when they come to us they want help understanding why they did it, or why they are stuck in a cycle of sin. Our questions might be used by the Holy Spirit to help them reflect and gain more understanding of the motivations behind their sin, or the lies they didn't realize they believed. We can learn a lot about this by looking at Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. He is not harsh with her, but he doesn't pretend she doesn't sin.

When someone confesses truly, we should be able to see that it has been bothering them. There should be regret and a desire to not do the sin in the future. Then, as Christians, we get to be messengers of God's forgiveness. We get to share with them God's love for them. Just as the prodigal son was accepted by his father with open arms, so they are accepted and forgiven by their heavenly Father (Luke 15). Through the work of Christ on the cross, their sins are forgiven. You are a messenger of the loving and merciful Father in that moment. You can share that reality with them and pray with them.

To conclude, we want to have an understanding of how sin works. There is a certain logic to it, but it comes down to a distrust in God- trying to get something we think we deserve that God is denying us. When someone comes to us with their sin we should avoid both the tendency to minimize and rationalize the sin, and we should also avoid being overly harsh. Rather, we should adopt a position of prayerful listening and once the issue has been explored and the person recognizes the wrong they have done and expresses regret, then we have the privilege of speaking God's message of forgiveness through the cross. AMEN