

WHY IS THE PENALTY FOR SIN SO GREAT?

HOW CAN SIN BE MEASURED?

Presented by

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We continue our study of the general doctrine of sin. Our subject tonight is in the form of a question, and that question is, "Why is the penalty for sin so great?" Or to put the question in another form, we might ask, "How can sin be measured?" I want to read two passages of scripture, both from the Psalms, which set forth the general attitude of our Maker toward sin. First, Psalms 5:4,5. "For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness; neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight; thou hatest all workers of iniquity." And then the first four verses of the 36th Psalm, "The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful. The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit: he hath left off to be wise, and to do good. He deviseth mischief upon his bed; he setteth himself in a way that is not good; he abhorreth not evil."

I think we would do well to turn often to the prophets of old and read their messages as if they were written to our day. For if there is one stirring theme which rings throughout all of the prophets both major and minor, it is the stern denunciation of sin which these prophets make. It think it would be safe to say that we seldom hear sin spoken of today as it was spoken of by the prophets of old, and I think the reason that we do not hear sin spoken of today as it was spoken of by the prophets of old is simply that we do not look upon sin as being that which they looked upon it to be. When one reads the prophets, he realizes that they conceived sin as being disobedience to the law of God, as being opposition to the holiness of God, as being ingratitude to the goodness of God, as being a transgression of the covenant of God. In short, they conceived of sin's being an expression of the soul's hatred for the goodness of God and the directions that God had given wherein man was to walk.

Perhaps the reason that we do not see sin as those men saw it is to be found in the fact that we do not see God as they saw God. Perhaps the reason is that we do not live as close to God as those men lived. As we look back I think it is safe to say that there was then a day and there has since been a day when men loved to hear the thunders clash and when men loved to see the fires of Sinai flash. They loved to hear sin denounced for that which it was in reality, but such is not the case today. Such is not the case today because, among other things the love of God has been reduced by most individuals to a sort of apathetic tolerance which doesn't take notice of either good or evil. We have somehow gotten the idea that God looks upon evil as the sun looks upon it, and that is with the same face upon the evil and the good. Or we have assumed that God looks upon

evil like man looks upon evil - that God looks upon that which is evil with simply a less benevolent face than He looks upon that which is good. But if there is one message which rings throughout the word of God with the authority of God Himself, it is the fact that the opposition between good and evil is eternal and it is irreconcilable. If there is one message that rings from the beginning of the Word to the very end of the Word it is the fact that God does not look with equal eye upon the evil and the good, but that God is a discerner of character, and that God being a discerner of character is a lover of that which is right, that He is a hater of that which is wrong, that He is legislating to bless the good and He is working to overcome and destroy the forces of evil in the world. I think that a great many of our problems could be solved if we could develop an adequate understanding of the nature of sin, if we could see the nature of sin, if we could see sin as God sees it.

I am constrained to say that successful Christian living is dependent upon an adequate understanding of the nature of sin. For one thing, all of the great truths of the Bible depend upon such an adequate understanding. Take the great truths of the word of God, summarized in such words as redemption, sanctification, justification, atonement. Every one of those words speaks of sin and we cannot understand these doctrines unless we understand the nature of sin and why sin makes these things necessary. Now when we speak of redemption and atonement and sanctification and justification we are apt to think of them and discuss them as merely theological subjects of intellectual interest, but when we have an understanding of sin, when we know what sin is and what sin has done to God and God's only Son, then these things are not simply subjects of intellectual interest. These things become intensely real because we feel the avenger at our heels, we feel the breath of Satan, and we are made to think more of God and His work for us and His Son Jesus Christ.

We need to have an adequate understanding of the sins, because of the development of all of the graces of the Christian life depends upon such an understanding. When the apostle Peter penned the first chapter of his second letter, he listed there some of the Christian graces and said, "Now you who have faith, supply these things in your faith." We look around us and we see that, to a great extent at least, the things are not being supplied in the faith of the sons of God, and we ask the question, "Why?" The answer comes back, "Because the sons of God don't understand the nature of sin." When I understand the nature of sin, I want to develop these Christian graces in my heart and in my life in order that I may get just as far away from sin as I can possibly get. I will not be an individual who wants to stay as close to sin in this world as I can, but I will become an individual who, getting as far away from sin as he can, will get as close to heaven as he can in this life. And I am not going to do that until I understand how God looks upon sin.

We need to have an adequate understanding of sin because all of the earnestness and all of the zeal of the Christian life depends upon our understanding sin, in seeing what sin has done to ourselves and to humanity. I suppose if there is one pervasive theme of preaching in the church today, it is bemoaning the fact that people just don't seem to get excited about preaching the gospel. We don't get

excited about that grand task that God through Christ has given to the church, to carry the gospel into all of the world. Do you know why we don't? Because we don't understand what sin has done to mankind. If I really believed tonight that sin had consigned me to torment prior to my coming into grace, and if I really believed that sin had consigned men and women throughout the world to torment unless they came to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, I could not keep it to myself. The apostles of old said, "We cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard." Today those of us who are Christians seem to be able to do everything else. Where they could not help but speak, we can help it and so often we do help it and let those who are our friends and our neighbors depart into eternity without ever having heard the simple New Testament gospel. Now we couldn't do that if we really understood the nature of sin and what sin has done to us before Christ and what it is doing to those who are without Jesus Christ. Thus it is important that we understand sin and its nature.

Now how can sin be measured? What are the measurers that give us an insight into the nature of sin? In the first place, may I suggest that sin may be measured by the light that is sinned against. There are some who sin against greater light, or if you please, greater knowledge than that which is possessed by others. I think this principle is evident as one turns through the pages of the Bible and investigates the dealing of God with man. For instance in Numbers 11:1-3 we read, "And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord; and the Lord heard it; and His anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp. And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the Lord, the fire was quenched. And He called the name of the place Taberah: because the fire of the Lord burnt among them." Here God's anger is hot and God's punishment is more severe than God's dealings with His people had been before. What is the difference? The difference is that in this context God's people had come to Sinai. The difference is that in this context God's people had greater knowledge than they had had before. And when they sinned against greater knowledge the punishment of God upon them was correspondingly greater. Jesus taught the same thing in Matt. 12:41. He said, "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgement with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here." In the very next verse he said, "The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, a greater than Solomon is here." Therefore, if we sin against Him who is greater than Solomon, if we sin against Him who is greater than Jonah, if we sin against Him who is greater than Moses, if we sin against Him who is greater than Elijah, then what shall we say, tonight, brethren, of our sins? What shall we say tonight of our rejection of the Son of God? We are sinning against the greatest light that this world has ever seen. We are sinning against the greatest knowledge that this world has ever possessed, and if these principles that we have read from the book of Numbers and from the lips of Jesus in the book of Matthew mean anything, they

mean that the most severe punishment that God has ever dealt to anybody is reserved for those who reject His only begotten Son. I believe that the New Testament teaches that the most severe punishment of all is reserved for those who say on the one hand, "I am receiving Jesus Christ," who are saying, "I am a part of His blood-bought body," and then live a life of indifference and coldness and callousness to the commands of our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Sin is measured by the light that we sin against, and we are sinning against the greatest light the world has possessed.

In the second place, sin is measured by what it does to others. We talk about our sins and say, "Well, it is nobody's business but my own." Just recently we had a vote in this state where the liquor-by-the-drink issue was being voted upon. It was not uncommon to look in the newspaper and read the arguments that were being presented. "If a fellow wants to drink it by the drink, it is nobody's business but his own." I deny that. If he were going to go and sit in a closet, not get in an automobile and drive on the streets, not walk down the sidewalk, if he were going to get in the closet while he was drinking and stay there until he sobered up, then maybe it would be nobody's business but his own. But such is not the case. No man sins alone. My sins affect others and other people's sins affect me. Go back into the opening of the book of Joshua and there, you will remember, the children of Israel went up against Ai and were sent back home in defeat. They discovered that Achan had taken of the spoil of the city of Jerico and in Joshua 22:20 we read, "Did not Achan the son of Zerah commit trespass in the accursed thing, and wrath fell on all the congregation of Israel? and that man perished not alone in his iniquity." From that day to this and in days preceeding it no man perished alone in his iniquity, but every man's sins affect those who are in the general perimeter of his life. We can look and see that this is true because every day, everywhere we look, we find a harvest of broken hearts and ruined lives and blasted hopes and wasted powers and desolate homes. We see disease and agony and despair and death that is reaped every day, even with the innocent, because of the sins of others. No man sins alone and no man perishes alone in his iniquity. What we seem to be unable to learn in the perversity of our beings is the fact that sin and the sinner is everybody's worst enemy. Somehow we seem to think that sin and the sinner are everybody's good friends, so we have derived a vocabulary whereby we gloss sin over and try to paint it very prettily so men will not recognize it for what it is. We take the term "gay" and use it as a perfume to drown the stench of the vilest sins. We say, "He is just being gay, he is just a happy fellow, he is just a happy-go-lucky individual." What we mean to say is he is just downright unholy in his life, but we don't like to use that. We use the euphemism. We look at those who are young, and sometimes those who are older, as they go wild and live unholy lives. "He is just sowing his wild oats." Really? Are they really his? Where did he get them? From what home did he steal them? And where is the harvest going to be? And who is going to reap that harvest? We look at that individual

and we say, "He is going to come out all right after awhile." That may very well be true. He may come out all right after awhile, but will all of those whom he has influenced and will all of those whom he has led astray during the time that he was sowing his wild oats, will they come out all right after awhile? The sinner doesn't perish alone. Sin is measured by what it does to others, and make no mistake about it, Your sin does affect others.

Sin is measured by the character of the one sinned against. What shall we say then of sin which is committed against God and all sin is committed against God though we don't like to think of it. Read Psalm 51:4. This is one of David's Psalms of penitence. In this Psalm of penitence, David is talking about the transgression which he committed with Bathsheba. We look at that transgression and its context and we can say that David sinned against Bathsheba, he sinned against himself, He sinned against his wife, he sinned against his throne, and he sinned against the people over whom he was ruling. But David just brushed all of that aside, and in the fourth verse he said, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned. Now David realized that he had sinned against these other beings, these other souls, but David realized that compared with his sin against God these things were as nothing. This is one of the realizations to which the prodigal son came when he was off yonder in the far country in Luke 15:18. He said, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee." In other words, "My sin is before you, Father." This is something that we as Christians need to realize. I think that we realize the principle involved when we come to understand that the more benevolent anyone is the more hateful cruelty is in his sight, that the more truthful an individual is the more he hates lying and perverse lips, that the more generous an individual is the more he scorns those who are stingy and mean, that the more just he is the more indignant he becomes at the injustice of man. Realizing, then, this principle, what shall we think of God and how He must feel about the sins that we commit? I think there is only one expression that can be used to describe them and that is the expression of God Himself when He would have stayed his people from sinning and when He plead with them through the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 44:4, "Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate." There is God's attitude toward sin.

We read in our text Psalm 5:4,5, that God hates evil is not in keeping with His character, but really God's hatred of evil is inseparable from His holiness. Not to hate sin is a characteristic of those who are evil (Psalm 36:4). The psalmist said, as we read a moment ago, "He abhorreth not evil." In Psalm 97:10 the Psalmist said, "Ye that love the Lord, hate evil." If we are to be like God, then we must hate that which is evil. Think what this world would be if we had an omnipotent God who did not hate evil. What kind of world would this be if we had an omnipotent God who loved evil? We would have not a God to whom we would turn. We would have not a God upon whom we could depend and upon whom we would wish to rely,

but an omnipotent fiend, and we would seek to flee from His presence. Hatred of evil not incompatible with the love of God. Hatred of evil is a necessary part of the love of God. After all, God's creation was made to be happy through holiness. When God looks down and He sees what sin had done to His creation, He sees that man who was created to be happy is sad. He sees that man who was created pure is stained. He sees that man who was created in a very close relationship with God is in that relationship no more. What would we think of God if God were indifferent to sin and the ruin that it has wrought upon His creation? Sin is measured by the character of the one sinned against, and so what shall we think of sin in the sight of God?

Finally, sin is measured by the price that was paid to redeem us from that sin. Many things show the wrath of God against evil. In the very beginning of the bible you read of the flood which wiped out all men upon the face of the earth save Noah and his family. Come a little bit further in the word of God and you read of the fire and brimstone that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah and the ashes of the cities of the plains have but one message and that is that God hates evil. Look about you in the world and you see a scattered race which stood before Pontius Pilot on one occasion and cried, "His blood be upon us and our descendents." Here you see the hatred of God against evil. Look into the New Testament and see there the dark abode where the angels who transgressed and kept not their high estate are kept, and you see God's hatred of evil. Look into the Bible and through it into the future state and see the despair and torment of those whose smoke shall ascend forever and forever where their worm dieth not, that is reserved for the finally impenitent, and you see God's hatred against evil. But nowhere is God's hatred of evil sketched so indelibly as it is on the cross. Nowhere is God's hatred of evil sketched so indelibly as when is written in the blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. What must sin be in the sight of God if this was the thing which was needed for its cleansing? Turn through the pages of the New Testament and everywhere, side by side, with the invitation that is extended unto "whosoever will, let him come," there stands also the awful truth that Him who knew no sin was made to be sin for us. Look at the gracious invitations of scripture and standing there side by side is the eternal truth that by His stripes we are healed, and tonight the cross of Jesus Christ stands as the greatest persuasive, in the language of the Psalmist, to "stand in awe and sin not."

What I would impress upon you and me tonight is the fact that sin is far greater than we imagine it. In Luke 23:34, the context of the crucifixion, Jesus looked at those who were nailing Him to the tree and He said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Oh, we think we know exactly what we are doing when we sin, but Jesus says that we don't. Those men around the cross that day didn't know what they were doing. They thought they were crucifying a malefactor, but they were murdering a messiah. Each and every day we engage in sins that we look upon as being small. We do things which we consider as being really beneath the notice of God's all seeing eye. But God, who is above all, and who sees all, and our God who knows the issue and the consequences of every deed, sees in

those little things that we are doing and those little words that we are saying and those little thoughts that we are thinking far more than we can ever see in them.

Therefore, God must deal with our sin. God must deal with sin in order to banish it and those who cling to their sin, those who chose to remain in their sin, must likewise suffer the banishment of God. Let me ask you a question. Do you believe that you could have gone on sinning beneath the very cross of Jesus Christ? Do you believe, tonight, that you could have knelt before the cross and cast lots for the garments of Jesus? Do you believe, tonight, that you could have walked by the foot of that cross and heaped railing accusations upon the Lord? You say, "Surely not! Had I been there, my heart would have been broken. Had I been there, I would have been among the loving disciples." But may I ask another question? Are you sure? For if you say tonight that you could not have sinned beneath the cross of Jesus Christ, then I ask you, in the name of heaven, how can you go on sinning beneath the shadow of the cross that stretches across nineteen centuries to us tonight? How can you go on doing the things you are doing? How can you go on being what you are being and not being what you ought to be?

But thanks be unto God that the shadow of the cross is not so much shadow as it is a rainbow of God's love. A rainbow which shines unto us only through the tears of repentance. Thanks be unto God that the message of that cross is one that has come across the years, and that the message of that cross is not saying to you tonight that God is simply going to overlook your sins and forget about them, but it says that God paid for your sins and He is willing to forgive them. What must be the final issue for those who can go on tonight sinning beneath the cross of Jesus Christ. Surely that final issue, that final end, must be the doom unimaginable. It is the terrible coming of the day of God. But it need not be so for you because tonight God comes not in wrath but in mercy. God comes not to punish sin tonight, but to forgive sin, and God is willing to forgive your sin now if you are willing to come to Him through His Son Jesus Christ, if tonight you are willing to bow humbly in His presence with a heart filled with faith, sorry for what you have done against Christ and against the Father, confessing the name of Jesus, and going through the water of baptism to leave the old man buried there and come forth a new creature in Jesus Christ. There are some of God's sons who have wandered away from the cross who are living in darkness, who are living in sin, and Jesus still pleads with you to return tonight, for you to take your stand again as one of His faithful disciples. Are you willing? Christ will receive you. You come.