

**Augusta FBC**  
**Romans 7:14-20**  
***I Believe...Sin – At Odds with Ourselves***  
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**Christian Doctrine Series**

Romans 7:14-20

*“For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. [15] I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [16] Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. [17] But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”*

Sin is a really ugly word. I do not know about you, but I am often uncomfortable using it. Sin. It sounds so judgmental. I remember when I was a kid in the first grade our school had a traveling evangelist – for some reason the public school ignored separation of church and state. I am not sure about all of what he said but I do remember him holding up a glass of water and then polluting it with ink stains and placing a white handkerchief inside. You can imagine the results – a nasty rag. He then launched into a tirade about this is how sin works and we were all full of it, doomed to go straight to hell where we will spend eternity. I am seven years old and I am thinking, “Gees, I don’t want God mad with me.” I don’t mind telling you that event scared me. For the longest time I could only think of God as an angry brute who was ready to throw me to the demons at the least infraction.

Is that how you see God? I hope you have a bigger picture of God. I hope you know that what God desires, what God wants, what God hopes for in your life and mine is a relationship, a connection. But I would be less than I honest if I did not go on to say that “Sin” is real, and sin does destroy a relationship.

Psychiatrist Karl Menniger wrote many years ago that as a society, we believe in failure, illness, bad luck and bad social environment and evil as a general result of circumstances, but not – evidently – in sin. In our therapeutic satiated culture, sin has been reduced to a malady or a disease that we just cannot help. A famous comedian use to quip: *the devil made me do it!* For many, sin is simply for someone else. We typically have two reactions to the word sin, we either a) domesticate it (i.e. dumb it down until it is irrelevant) or b) project it on to someone else.

Let’s be honest: something is wrong and has been wrong in this world. Sin is real. And we all know what it is when we see it. We read about it. We witness it in the lives of others. And if we slow down enough with our own business we see it in ourselves.

Every world religion has some understanding and doctrine of sin. We are familiar with the Catholic teaching of the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth. Did you know that Mohandas Gandhi had his own list of seven deadly sins?

- Wealth without Work
- Pleasure without Conscience
- Science without Humanity
- Knowledge without Character
- Politics without Principle
- Commerce without Morality
- Worship without Sacrifice

This morning’s message is the third in a five part series on Christian Doctrines titled *I Believe*. The doctrine we will explore is the Doctrine of Sin – At Odds with Ourselves.

**The Problem:** I am not going to bore you with all the Hebrew & Greek words on sin – trust me, there are many, but I do want to share with you some of the different ways the Bible speaks of sin.

**Sin is:**

Transgression, something like trespassing where you don’t belong; Crossing over God’s limits. Like a cow nibbling on a tuft of grass until it has nibbled its way into someone else’s pasture.

Missing the mark – as a javelin is to a target

Estrangement – such as with Cain and Abel

Alienation

Bondage

Unbelief

Distortion - A. J. Conyers appropriately defines, is “a distortion of the good... Evil consists of relationship gone wrong.” Sin is, in a word, a disorder in our love life (Conyers)

In the early minutes of some church histories, members were disciplined for perceived “sins”: dancing, missing church and playing cards. In one church history I read of a member who was chastised for being caught “spitting on the sidewalk.”

Often we narrow our understanding of sin as something that involves certain actions: Smoking, drinking alcohol, cursing, gambling. In other words, we commonly think of sin as something we do, or do not do. And so we figure if we could just get a list, sort of like a recipe, of what all we can do to make God happy then we will be okay.

But sin actually is simply the negating of a relationship with oneself, God or others. It is not the act in itself that is sinful. **It is the disregard for the relationship that is the sin.** That is the reason that at different points in Israel’s journey certain *actions* are forbidden, like dietary laws, or regulations of clothing and so on – regulations and prohibitions were given in order to maintain a relationship.

Theologian Paul Tillich writes: “Do they realize that sin does not mean an immoral act, that sin should never be used in the plural, and that not our sins, but that our sin is the great, all-pervading problem of our life? To be in the state of sin,” he writes, “is to be in the state of separation” (*Whatever Became of Sin*, Karl Menninger, p. 189-190).

Sin is choosing self over God or neighbor. “Me” first is in its essence sin. My theology professor wrote: “sin...has to do with being inclined in a direction other than what God intended.” Marketers, TV shows, and empty materialism, however, is the liturgical pronouncement of “it is all about me.”

This distortion of relationship means that sin is both individual and corporate, that is, collective or institutional (like slavery or racism).

In the doctrine of Sin we come to realize what deep down most of us have already known. “It is the profound sense that who we would want to be is not quite who we are” (Conyers). And at times that separation, that great chasm, that gap is painful. This is what Paul the Apostle anguished over when he said: “[19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Sin makes us strangers not only to others, but ourselves. It negates all relationships. Left unattended there will come a time when we look in the metaphorical mirror and say to ourselves, “I no longer know you.” So if sin destroys who we are, how can we reach our true identity?

Sunday after Sunday we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ – good news. The gospel offers us a way to find reconciliation and relationship not only with ourselves, but with others. And of course, to find relationship with God.

### 1) Recognize

We begin dealing with sin by recognizing our estrangement in our thoughts and behaviors. This is not about simplistic moralisms of “dos and don’ts.” Rather, it is a cognizance that God created us to be in relationship and when we do or think in ways that negate the relationship we are in sin.

Three sins are listed in the Talmud (a Jewish commentary on parts of the Old Testament) as capital offenses deserving the death penalty: murder, adultery and idolatry. Of these, idolatry was the most heinous because it worships the means toward fulfillment as if it were the end. We might phrase it something like this: worshipping the creation instead of the creator.

Sin disregards the proper relationship. So we drive cars that pollute our environments – what is that to me? So we throw out more food in our garbage disposal or trashcans while a hungry world looks on, what is that to me? So we demand clothes that are inexpensive even though children are exploited in producing them, what is that to me? So we yell and honk horns at inconsiderate drivers while commuting to work, what is that to me? So we treat our bodies harshly with over-indulgence, what is that to me? So what if we are more concerned with checking account balances and the rise of our stocks than the biggest actions or “harmless” jokes, what is that to me? What is it to me? Well “It” is sin. And “the wages of sin is death.” (Rom. 6:23)

The first step towards dealing with sin is to recognize, be aware, the Buddhist would phrase it as “mindfulness.” Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

**2) Confess** - 1 John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

I grew up understanding confession as the liturgical rite of Catholicism. The penitent sits in a lonely closet sharing his or her moral failures to the indulgent ear of a priest – that is what is in many of our minds when we think of confession.

Here is the important key to all of this: *only when we recognize sin, can we truly experience restoration of relationship.* Confession takes sin seriously by being responsible enough to name our disorder and disequilibrium. In confession, we are allowed to breathe in grace that has not been cheapened.

Some of us here this morning need to deal honestly with the sin that is in our lives. Some of us have treated it with only a mild sense of guilt and an inflated sense of grace. Sin kills. It kills our ability to relate with everyone else. The death of relationships is not always quick and sudden. More often it is subtle. *Like high blood pressure*, we hardly pay attention to it until it ultimately suffocates our system - with our friends, church, family and God. It kills. It separates. And in sin we have no hope.

I encourage you to find someone who will listen to you and be a priest to you. That is, who will help you identify and give voice to whatever it is that is distorting your relationships...And if you happen to be that priest to another, be careful to not too quickly smooth over the guilt and pain this person is expressing in order to make them “feel better.” Narcotizing sin does not bring wholeness to a relationship. It only further distorts.

We recognize, or see the sin within us. Secondly we confess that which is negating our relationships, destroying our life. Thirdly, we

### 3) Change paths

In sin there is no hope. But there is another way. We can chose this day to live in the direction of death or we can chose to live in the direction of life. We are afforded these choices each day, indeed, each moment. Like the recovering alcoholic, it is not just in the past tense, but a daily journey.

The word in the Bible for this is “repentance.” I am afraid we have dumbed the word down into meaning “feeling sorry.” Repentance is not necessarily about feeling sorry – although feelings of guilt and shame can have their place. Repentance is about changing direction. And repentance, changing paths, leads us to redemption. Jesus uses the term “born again.” Jesus spent his life with people who felt far away from God and shared with them that they were invited to enter into a new and renewing relationship with God. Not only is this a new relationship with God, but when we receive Christ we also receive a new family of sisters and brothers “whose destiny is bound with ours.” (Molly Marshall, *What It Means to be Human*, p. 70)

We become, as Paul the Apostle writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “a new creation.” We don’t have to fight for God’s approval or be paralyzed with the fear of death. We are liberated from sin’s death to live in generative ways where our lives have enduring significance.

God does not desire that we go our own way towards a destructive, separating, relationship-negating life. In the opening pages of Holy Scripture there is the saga of Adam and Eve who willfully transgressed God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their sin had consequences in that they were banished from this place of bliss and would enter a world of good and evil, hardship and mortality. But the story provides us with important details. God provided for them clothing to shelter them for the harsher life ahead. God’s providing for covering for Adam and Eve is a summary of God’s continued divine action for our redemption. God’s final word is not judgment, but mercy. God will not leave us abandoned on the other side of this great gulf of sin. Sin does not have to have the final word: recognize, confess it, and change paths. ***Go where God wants you to go.***

Whatever you may be dealing with today that needs to be resolved, whatever accounts need to be settled, whatever relationships need to be restored, whatever wrongs need to be made right – get on with it, and come home to the cross. Beneath the cross that tops our church is where we find that God has made a way, a provision for the problem of sin.

Romans 7:25

*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*