

We've been talking about the basics of Christian theology—the nature of God, the nature of Jesus, and human nature. Last week, we thought about the church and its purpose. Today, I want to talk about sin. This has been a fun series for me. **When I was in seminary, I had to write a thesis outlining my theology.** Every year, they selected two papers to file in the library so future students could read them in preparation for writing their own thesis. **You can imagine how honored I felt when the professor of systematic theology told me they'd selected my thesis to place in the library.**

"It's that good?" I asked.

"Not so much good, as unusual," he told me. "It's the first paper on Christian theology we've read that never mentions sin."

A few months later, a man in my meeting came up to me after meeting for worship. **"Just once," he said, "just once, I'd like to hear you say the s word."** He was talking about the word *sin*, but I thought he meant the other s word, and was mystified why he wanted me to cuss in a sermon. **It took me a week to figure out what he meant.** He left a month or so later to attend a church that used the s word. I don't know where he is now, or I would have invited him to come this morning to hear me speak about sin.

The Jewish comedian Sam Levenson once told about his rabbi composing a list of every known sin. **He stopped when people began asking him for a copy to see what they'd been missing.** I guess that's why I haven't talked much about sin. Why give anyone ideas...

I'm going to be theological, so bear with me. The definition of sin is to knowingly and willfully choose to do evil. *Knowingly* and *willfully* are the key words. **Sin requires the mental, spiritual, and emotional capacity to make appropriate moral decisions.** If a three year-old killed someone, it would be evil, because it thwarted the hope and purpose of God. **But it would not be a sin, because the child lacked the capacity to make the intentional choice to do evil.** This is why we don't imprison toddlers, and why we limit the culpability of persons who are mentally disabled. **(Except in Texas.)** So sin has to do with intentionality and one's ability to choose between good and evil.

I've been thinking about Sam Levenson's rabbi and his list of sins. **We all have a list like that, don't we?** We began it when we were young, when our parents or pastor or Sunday school teacher said, "Don't do that. That's a sin." So that went on our mental list. **Over the years, we've added to the list.** Thou shalt not do this...thou shalt not do that...our list grew, and now we have this long mental list of behaviors and thoughts we believe are sinful.

Sometimes we feel no matter what we do, no matter how hard we try to do the right thing, we're going to do something on that list. A list that big, it almost can't be helped. Because we Quakers like simplifying things, let's take that long list of sins and collapse it down to just one sin. That one sin would be the root cause of all sin. **That sin is self-absorption: the tendency to care first and foremost about one's self with little regard for others.** All other sins have their beginning in that one sin—caring primarily about ourselves with little consideration for others.

My sixteenth summer, I moved away from home to work in a national park where no one knew me, which meant I could reinvent myself. **I could make up things about myself and the people I worked with would never know it wasn't true.** So I led them to believe I was a great outdoorsman who could live off the land. Isn't that stupid? I could have lied about skydiving or being rich or setting records in sports, but I lied about eating roots and bugs. **Halfway through the summer, we took four days off and went backpacking in the Smoky Mountains.** I took a wrong path, became separated from everyone, and was lost for most of a day. I had a one pound bag of M&M's with me, thought I was going to die, didn't want the M&M's to go to waste, so ate the entire pound. **When they finally found me, I was slumped at the base of a tree in a sugary coma.**

Out in the woods six hours by myself and I was nearly dead. **It was obvious I'd wasn't a great outdoorsman.** Oh, they teased me about that. It was so embarrassing. Why had I lied about that? **Because I was self-absorbed, because I cared more about what others thought of me than I cared about the truth.** Is it wrong to want a good reputation? Not at all. But when our desire to be thought well of is so strong we compromise our integrity, we have become too absorbed with the self. **In the Bible days, they called that vanity.**

Perhaps this is what Jesus was getting at when he was asked to boil the Jewish law down to its key components. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." **He wasn't telling people not to love themselves.** We've all met people who have a crushing self-hatred. I've often thought self-hatred must be the cause of many suicides. Think how painful it would be to live twenty-four hours a day, day after day, with someone you despise. It's important to love yourself. **Jesus wants us to love ourselves, but let that self-love be balanced by a love for others.** Let the love you have for yourself be balanced with a love for others, lest self-love descend into selfishness and then into sin. Love your neighbor like you love yourself. No more, no less. **Let the two balance one another out, so there will be a moral and spiritual equilibrium to your life.**

Is our self-love balanced by a love for others?

Can I be happy at the success of others, or can I only be happy when I do well, when I succeed?

Must I always get my way, or do I want others to also get their turn and have their say?

Must I always be right, or can others possess some wisdom I might not have?

Must my worldview always prevail, or can other perspectives be noticed and appreciated?

Must my religion be the one true faith, or can other religions also share in the Divine Truth?

Must I always speak, or can I also listen?

Must I always win, or can I let others know that joy?

Must I accrue great wealth, or can I share with others?

There have been periods in my life when I have suffered from this spiritual amnesia, when I have forgotten I share this world with others. I became very selfish and self-absorbed. Perhaps that's happened to you, too. **The antidote is that simple balance of love, that equilibrium of which Jesus spoke—to love yourself, then love others to the same degree.**