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**Pentecost 07, July 16, 2023**

**“Dealing with Sin, Guilt and Shame”**

**Read: Romans 7: 15 – 25a Memorize: Romans 7:**

In their cartoon series “Better Half,” Bob Barnes pictures a husband and wife in their bedroom. The wife is combing her hair and “fixing her face.” Across the room, her husband, is struggling to get out of bed. He sits wearily on the side of the bed, bedraggled and moans, “I hope in my next reincarnation I come back as something easier to be than a human being.”

Perhaps, you feel similarly. Or maybe I should ask, “Is it easy for you to be human being?” If your answer is yes, you can take out your list for the grocery store or find your favorite book in the Bible on your app and read it while I preach. Maybe you can pray for the next twenty minutes, maybe a little less, that would also be helpful. Please, please pray for me and the rest of the congregation because we’re going to be thinking about one of the toughest struggles in life – dealing with sin, guilt and shame.

Before we go too far we have to get some perspective on these issues because they are all tied together. Here’s a perspective on sin. Augustine is one of the premier theologians of the Christian Church. In his classic book, “Confessions,” he told the story of his youthful escapades of stealing pears from a neighbor’s tree. He recorded that late one night a group of youngsters went out to “shake down and rob this tree.” They took loads of fruit from it, “not for eating,” he said, “but rather to throw to the pigs.”

He went on to berate himself for the depth of sin this revealed. Here’s how he describes this: “This fruit gathered, I threw away, devoured it only iniquity. There was no reason, but foul was the evil, and I loved it.”

By his own admission, he had taken a mistress, fathered a child out of wedlock and indulged in every fleshly passion. Surely any one of these would have been more serious than stealing pears. Yet, he felt, that incident revealed the true nature of all mankind: “Evil was there, and I loved it.” You might not have used those exact words, but I suspect you understand the feeling.

**The fact is, that since Adam and Eve, sin has been part of every human life.** We hear Paul struggling with as he says “I want to do good but I can’t. I don’t want to do evil but I find

myself doing it.” And here is his word on that, “Oh wretched man that I am – who will deliver me from this body-doomed to death?”

Just a few minutes ago we all confessed that we have committed sin in thought, word and deed. We have gone against God’s nature and will. There is sin, our rebellion against God’s nature and will; then there are the sins that are part of it.

Sin is the universal tendency of people to oppose God’s will. To order life on their own self-centered, self-directed terms, rather than on God’s. This inherent sinful disposition inclines people to sinful acts. The dynamic of Christians coming to maturity, is the discipline of bringing our nature, our total self, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, abiding in Him that we may be shaped by His Spirit into His likeness.

So now that we’re set on sin, let’s talk about guilt. What is guilt? Guilt focuses on an action that violates a law and involves a penalty: “I did bad.” Register this truth first: guilt is a necessary emotion and has a useful function. In the past few decades, there’s been a great movement towards guilt-free living. That works when we have the right perspective. The problem is that many have actually encouraged us to disregard guilt. They’ve done a good job of it. We certainly see a lot more people feeling less guilty and a lot more self-indulgent.

Now it’s easy to stand here and bemoan how things have changed. It’s sometimes one of our favorite pastimes. And we can point our fingers at various culprits. But the reality is that guilt-free isn’t always guilt free. It doesn’t mean the guilt is gone; we just convince ourselves that it doesn’t matter. We can see around us the impact of saying that guilt doesn’t matter.

Dr. Carl Mennenger in his book “Whatever Became of Sin?” observed that: “Does that mean that sin is no longer involved in all of our troubles – sin with an ‘l’ in the middle? Sin. Is no one any longer guilty of anything?” Sounds pretty relevant. Here's the dilemma. Dr. Mennenger wrote that book fifty years ago.

He accurately argues that a life that ignores the correcting influence of guilt is a life destined for misery. So, guilt is a necessary emotion that has useful function. The danger comes when we exaggerate it. We can beat ourselves about the past so that our present is drained of joy and we’re rendered impotent and ineffective in our relationships and in our life with Christ.

Finally, a perspective on shame. Shame is closely akin to guilt. Guilt focuses on the action. Shame focuses on the person: “I am bad.” While there is something healthy about guilt, there is little that is healthy about shame. There may be a proper response, but more often shame is devastating and destructive.

**Shame the trademark of dysfunctional families. It comes with addictive families, where one or more people are addicted to any variety of things, not just the ones we think of often. It comes with secrets that families keep for generations. It's used to protect those secrets and keep them in place. Sometimes, shame comes not from what we have done, but what others have done to us.**

**Sin, guilt and shame are all tied together. They drive us to groaning anguish with Paul, "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body doomed to death?"**

**So, the question is, how do we deal with sin, guilt and shame. For sin, one of the issues is we must not wallow in it. The remarkable Christian, Blaise Pascal, in the fifteenth century said, "We can only know God well when we know our own sin. And those who have known God without knowing their wretchedness have not glorified Him, but have glorified themselves." For it is in knowing our sin that healthy guilt and shame can lead us to constructive change.**

**The Psalmist prayed, "Examine me, oh Lord and try me; test my mind and my heart." If we do not allow the Lord to examine us, we become prisoners of this sin, but we also set ourselves up for parades of guilt and shame that will mar our lives.**

**What can we do instead: turn to the Lord and trust His promise. Accept for yourself, the gift of salvation; claim this promise: "If we confess our sins He (Jesus) is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That's the beginning point of overcoming guilt and shame – know our sin, but don't wallow in it. At that point when we hear those beautiful words of promise from God, we can embrace that forgiveness for it has no limitation. He is always faithful to His promises. God's promise is always to forgive.**

**Once we recognize and accept that forgiveness, we can seek to live as forgiven people, constantly appropriating that forgiveness, as we stay sensitive to all the reasons for guilt and shame that are legitimate. As we bring all those sins and failures humbly to Jesus, He reaffirms that forgiveness. With that experience, knowing that God loves and accepts us, we can build on that foundation.**

**Now here's the reality. If we're going to deal with guilt and shame, we're going to have to be patient. In Matthew 18 it talks about how to deal with sin in the Christian community. First, go to the one who hurt you. If they won't listen, bring a few faithful witnesses to help. If the person won't listen them, Jesus says to tell it to the church. If the appeal of the church fails, "treat them as a tax collector."**

**Sometimes, people think this is like baseball. Three strikes and you're out. I don't think that was Jesus' plan. Remember, we are all sinners. No one comes to another sinless.**

**Jesus is laying out a process, which may be repeated many times over out of concern for the lost one. The end goal of the process should be to win the person back to faith, not punish them.**

**What does it take to this? God's love and patience. Maybe, out of love, you go more than once. You want to be patient with yourself while you learn to trust that God is exactly who He says He is, your loving Father.**

**You want to be patient, patient with those you go to and patient with God. He has a timetable. The only way that patience can be kept alive and grown is to continue to believe that God is faithful. Paul held that promise out to the Philippians in chapter 1 verse 6: "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to perfection."**

**I doubt that there is any of us who would disagree with Paul as he speaks those immortal words, via Don Muller, "I want to do good, but I don't. I don't want to do bad, but I do. Who's going to rescue me from this body, doomed to death, this body of sin, guilt and shame?"**

**Here's the good news: Paul doesn't leave the Romans or us in the dark as to who's going to rescue us. As he speaks boldly, "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" God's kiss of grace makes us a Christian, but like the father in the story of the prodigal son, God keeps on kissing us. The grace of Jesus frees us from the bondage of sin, guilt and shame, pointing us to God's glory.**

**Count me in: Do you need to confess something that is keeping you in bondage to sin, guilt and shame?**