



Volume 8 Issue 3

West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Sin is Cosmic Treason

“*The sinfulness of sin*” sounds like a vacuous redundancy that adds no information to the subject under discussion. However, the necessity of speaking of the sinfulness of sin has been thrust upon us by a culture and even a church that has diminished the significance of sin itself. Sin is communicated in our day in terms of making mistakes or of making poor choices. When I take an examination or a spelling test, if I make a mistake, I miss a particular word. It is one thing to make a mistake. It is another to look at my neighbor’s paper and copy his answers in order to make a good grade. In this case, my mistake has risen to the level of a moral transgression. Though sin may be involved in making mistakes as a result of slothfulness in preparation, nevertheless, the act of cheating takes the exercise to a more serious level. Calling sin “making poor choices” is true, but it is also a euphemism that can discount the severity of the action. The decision to sin is indeed a poor one, but once again, it is more than a mistake. It is an act of moral transgression.

In my book *The Truth of the Cross* I spend an entire chapter discussing this notion of the sinfulness of sin. I begin that chapter by using the anecdote of my utter incredulity when I received a recent edition of *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*. Though I was happy to receive this free issue, I was puzzled as to why anyone would send it to me. As I leafed through the pages of quotations that included statements from Immanuel Kant, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and others, to my complete astonishment I came upon a quotation from me. That I was quoted in such a learned collection definitely surprised me. I was puzzled by what I could have said that merited inclusion in such an anthology, and the answer was found in a simple statement attributed to me: “Sin is cosmic treason.” What I meant by that statement was that even the slightest sin that a creature commits against his Creator does violence to the Creator’s holiness, His glory, and His righteousness. Every sin, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is an act of rebellion against the sovereign God who reigns and rules over us and as such is an act of treason against the cosmic King.

Cosmic treason is *one* way to characterize the notion of sin, but when we look at the ways in which the Scriptures describe sin, we see *three* that stand out in importance. **First**, sin is a debt; **second**, it is an expression of enmity; **third**, it is depicted as a crime. In the *first* instance, we who are sinners are described by Scripture as debtors who cannot pay their debts. In this sense, we are talking not about financial indebtedness but a moral indebtedness. God has the sovereign right to impose obligations upon His creatures. When we fail to keep these obligations, we are debtors to our Lord. This debt represents a failure to keep a moral obligation.

The *second* way in which sin is described biblically is as an expression of enmity. In this regard, sin is not restricted merely to an external action that transgresses a divine law. Rather, it represents an internal motive, a motive that is driven by an inherent hostility toward the God of the universe. It is rarely discussed in the church or in the world that the biblical description of human fallenness includes an indictment that we are by nature enemies of God. In our enmity toward Him, we do not want to have Him even in our thinking, and this attitude is one of hostility toward the very fact that God commands us to obey His will. It is because of this concept of enmity that the New Testament so often describes our redemption in terms of reconciliation. One of the necessary conditions for reconciliation is that there must be some previous enmity between at least two parties. This enmity is what is presupposed by the redeeming work of our Mediator, Jesus Christ, who overcomes this dimension of enmity.



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The *third* way in which the Bible speaks of sin is in terms of transgression of law. The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers the fourteenth question, “What is sin?” by the response, “Sin is any want of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God.” Here we see sin described both in terms of passive and active disobedience. We speak of sins of commission and sins of omission. When we fail to do what God requires, we see this lack of conformity to His will. But not only are we guilty of failing to do what God requires, we also actively do what God prohibits. Thus, sin is a transgression against the law of God.

When people violate the laws of men in a serious way, we speak of their actions not merely as misdemeanors but, in the final analysis, as crimes. In the same regard, our actions of rebellion and transgression of the law of God are not seen by Him as mere misdemeanors; rather, they are felonious. They are criminal in their impact. If we take the reality of sin seriously in our lives, we see that we commit crimes against a holy God and against His kingdom. Our crimes are not virtues; they are vices, and any transgression of a holy God is vicious by definition. It is not until we understand who God is that we gain any real understanding of the seriousness of our sin. Because we live in the midst of sinful people where the standards of human behavior are set by the patterns of the culture around us, we are not moved by the seriousness of our transgressions. We are indeed at ease in Zion. But when God’s character is made clear to us and we are able to measure our actions not in relative terms with respect to other humans but in absolute terms with respect to God, His character, and His law, then we begin to be awakened to the egregious character of our rebellion.

Not until we take God seriously will we ever take sin seriously. But if we acknowledge the righteous character of God, then we, like the saints of old, will cover our mouths with our hands and repent in dust and ashes before Him. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Above Reproach

The below article by Dr. John MacArthur was published in the West Suffolk Epistle on June 2015 and I find it very encouraging to all believers on the importance of integrity. Having said that I felt it appropriate to reproduce this article again for your edification. ~ Walt Lawrence

September 1, 2007—Tabletalk Magazine

A small item I read in the news twenty years ago has stuck in my mind ever since. The Rockdale County High School Bulldogs basketball team of Conyers, Georgia, won their first-ever state championship in March of 1987, rolling over all their opponents. After eighteen years of coaching the team without a championship, coach Cleveland Stroud was ecstatic.

But a few weeks after the championship game, Coach Stroud was doing a routine review of his players’ grades when he discovered that one of his third-string players had failed some courses, rendering the player academically ineligible for the basketball team.

The struggling student was by no means a factor in the team’s victory. He was an underclassman who suited up for games but hadn’t actually seen any playing time all season.



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During one of the semifinal matches, however, with the team leading by more than 20 points, Coach Stroud wanted to give every player an opportunity to participate. He had put that player in the game for less than 45 seconds. The ineligible man had scored no points. His participation had in no way affected the outcome of the game. But it was, technically, a violation of state eligibility standards.

Coach Stroud was in a distressing predicament. If he revealed the infraction, his team would be disqualified and stripped of their championship. If he kept quiet, it was highly unlikely anyone outside the school would ever discover the offense.

Yet the coach realized that at the very least, the player involved was aware of the breach of rules. It was also possible that other students on the team knew and thought their coach had purposely ignored the eligibility guidelines. But more important still, Coach Stroud himself knew, and if he deliberately tried to keep the facts from coming to light, his greatest coaching victory would be forever tainted with an ugly secret.

Coach Stroud said from the moment he discovered the violation, he knew what he had to do. He never even pondered any alternatives. His priorities had been set long before this. He realized that his team's championship was not as important as their character. "People forget the scores of basketball games," he said. "They don't ever forget what you're made of."

He reported the infraction and forfeited the only state championship his team had ever won.

But both coach and team won a far more important kind of honor than they forfeited. They kept their integrity intact and gained an immeasurable amount of trust and respect. The coach was recognized with numerous teacher-of-the-year, coach-of-the-year, and citizen-of-the-year awards, as well as a formal commendation from the Georgia State Legislature. A few years later he was elected to Conyers City council, where he still serves. He was right. People who would have long ago forgotten about the Bulldogs' victory in the state championship have never forgotten about this coach's integrity.

Ethical integrity is one of the indispensable attributes of Christlike character. As vital as it is to be sound in doctrine and faithful in teaching the truth of Scripture, it is by no means less crucial for Christians to be upright in heart and consistent in our obedience to the moral and ethical principles of God's law.

That is no simple duty, by the way. The moral standard God's people are supposed to live by far surpasses even the highest principles of normal human ethics.

This was one of the main points of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The whole sermon was an exposition of the Law's moral meaning. The heart of Jesus' message was an extended discourse against the notion that the Law's moral principles apply only to behavior that others can see.

Jesus taught, for example, that the sixth commandment forbids not only acts of killing, but a murderous heart as well (vv. 21–22). The seventh commandment, which forbids adultery, also implicitly condemns even adulterous desires (vv. 27–28). And the command to love our neighbors applies even to those who are our enemies (vv. 43–44).



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How high is the moral and ethical standard set by God’s law? Unimaginably high. Jesus equates it with God’s own perfection: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48).

That sets an unattainable standard, of course. But it is our duty to pursue integrity relentlessly nonetheless. Perfect ethical consistency is a vital aspect of that consummate goal — absolute Christlikeness — toward which every Christian should continually be striving (Philippians 3:12–14). No believer, therefore, should ever knowingly sacrifice his or her ethical integrity.

Here are *three* powerful reasons why:

First, for the sake of our reputation. Of course, Christians should not be concerned with issues like status, class, caste, or economic prestige. In that sense, we need to be like Christ, who made Himself of no reputation and took on the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7).

There is a true sense, however, in which we do need to be concerned about maintaining a good reputation — and that is especially true in the matter of ethical integrity. One of the basic requirements for an elder is this: “He must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:7 NASB).

Nothing will ruin a good reputation faster or more permanently than a deliberate breach of ethical integrity. People will forgive practically any other kind of error, negligence, or failure — but ethical bankruptcy carries a stigma that is almost impossible to rise above.

Several years ago, a parishioner told me something no pastor ever wants to hear. He had invited a business acquaintance to our church. The man replied, “You go to that church? I wouldn’t go to that church. The most corrupt lawyer in town goes to that church.”

I didn’t — and still don’t — have any idea whom he was talking about. There are dozens of attorneys in our church. My hope is that it was a case of mistaken identity and that the person he had in mind was not a member of our church. But the following Sunday I recounted the incident from the pulpit and said, “If the lawyer that man described is here this morning, please take a lesson from Zaccheus: repent and do whatever you can to restore your reputation in the community. In the meantime, stop representing yourself as a Christian. You’re destroying the whole church’s reputation.”

According to Proverbs 22:1, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” You don’t have a good name at all unless your ethical integrity is intact and above reproach.

Second, for the sake of our character. More important still is the issue of personal character. There’s a good reason why Jesus’ exposition of the moral law in Matthew 5 focused so much on uprightness of heart as opposed to external behavior. That’s because the real barometer of who we are is reflected in what we do when no one else is looking, how we think in the privacy of our own thoughts, and how we respond to the promptings of our own consciences. Those things are the true measure of your moral and ethical fiber.



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As important as it is to keep a good reputation in the community, it is a thousand times more important to safeguard our own personal character. That is why Jesus dealt with the issues of morality and ethics beginning with the innermost thoughts of our hearts. “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

It’s probably not overstating the case at all to say that the single most important battlefield in the struggle for integrity is your own mind. That’s where everything will actually be won or lost. And if you lose there, you have already ruined your character. A corrupt character inevitably spoils the reputation, too, because a bad tree can’t bring forth good fruit (Matthew 7:18).

That brings to mind a *third* reason why it is so vital to guard our moral and ethical integrity: for the sake of our testimony. Your reputation reflects what people say about you. Your testimony is what your character, your behavior, and your words say about God.

Consider what is being communicated when a Christian lacks ethical integrity. That person is saying he doesn’t truly believe what Scripture plainly says is true of God: That “to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3). That “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him” (15:8). And that God “delight[s] in truth in the inward being” (Psalm 51:6).

In other words, the person who neglects ethical integrity is telling a lie about God with his life and his attitude. If he calls himself a Christian and professes to be a child of God, he is in fact taking God’s name in vain at the most fundamental level. That puts the issue of ethical integrity in perspective, doesn’t it?

That’s what we need to call to mind whenever we are tempted to adapt our ethical principles for convenience’s sake. It isn’t worth the high cost to our reputation, our character, or our testimony. ~ *Dr. John MacArthur*

Blessed are the Meek

It is not uncommon for commentators and Bible teachers to interpret the “blesseds” in the Beatitudes as meaning “to be happy.” The Greek work translated as “blessed” is *makarios*, and while “happy” is one of the ways it can be interpreted, in the broader context of the Beatitudes, happy seems to miss the mark. For one thing, being happy is a subjective emotional state, and surely in verse 11 being reviled and persecuted do not jibe with such a state. Furthermore, interpreting *makarios* as happy leads to the mistake of seeing the Beatitudes as a series of exhortations on how to be happy, which does not seem to be what Jesus is doing here. On the contrary, the Beatitudes are a series of prophetic declarations of what God bestows on those whom He receives into His kingdom.

The reason these characteristics and virtues are bestowed or given is because they are not naturally possessed by the recipients, nor are their recipients in themselves able to produce these qualities. To take it one step further, the character traits set forth in the Beatitudes are not what we in our fallen state aspire to. This certainly is the case with Matthew 5:5: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”



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Blessed are the Meek

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The idea of gaining the world, whether as individuals or as a nation, is as old as human history, and the spirit of the builders of the tower of Babel reverberates through all such efforts: “Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4). This seems to be the goal of fallen humanity, both individually and collectively: to make a name for ourselves through accumulation, accomplishment, or through expanding our borders. And when these things are the defining pursuits of a person or a people, the defining character of that person or people will lean in the direction of avarice and arrogance.

So in looking at Matthew 5:5, we note that this verse is connected to texts such as Psalm 37, where the ruthless ambition of evildoers to gain the things of the world is contrasted against the righteous who commit their way to the Lord and trust in Him (Psalm 37:5). In verses 9–10, we are told that the evildoers will be cut off. Moreover, the earth will not be earned but will rather be inherited (vv. 9, 11, 22, and 34). And here’s the kicker: the ones who will gain the earth by inheritance are the meek.

Contrary to what many may think, meekness is not weakness. Both in Psalm 37 and in the Beatitudes, meekness is humility and submission to God. Again, with Psalm 37 in view, the wicked seek gain at all cost. In verse 14, they “draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy,” and while they gain things that will bring temporary pleasure, only the meek, those who delight in the Lord (v. 4), will inherit the earth.

But this raises the question of how one becomes meek. I indicated earlier that the Beatitudes are a series of declarations of what God bestows on those whom He receives into His kingdom. So, in light of Matthew 5:5, God gives the earth as an inheritance. But He also gives meekness. I say this based on *two* things. On the *one* hand, meekness is a virtue possessed by Christ in His humanity (Matthew 11:29), which means that it is part of His active righteousness that is credited to us for our justification.

But on the *other* hand, meekness is a fruit of the Spirit that the Spirit causes us to manifest in our sanctification, as Galatians 5:23 tells us. Some translations begin that verse with “gentleness,” whereas the King James Version renders it “meekness.” But on the whole, the description of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 describes meekness.

The point is that meekness is not native to our fallen state. So, in our justification, the meekness of Christ is credited to us by faith alone, and in our sanctification, the Holy Spirit is conforming us into the image of Christ, which includes His meekness. So the blessing of this beatitude is that those who look to Christ in faith will inherit the earth because they have been credited with His meekness and have been given the gift of the Spirit, who connects us to Christ and conforms us to His likeness. ~ *Reverend Ken Jones - Pastor of Glendale Missionary Baptist Church in Miami, Florida, and co-host of The White Horse Inn*

By What Authority?

Can this be it? Centuries earlier the prophet Zechariah had declared, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (9:9).



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By What Authority? *Continued from Page 6*

Now the prophecy had been fulfilled. The One who had proclaimed good news throughout Israel, the One who had healed the sick and cast out demons, the One who had raised the dead, had entered Jerusalem on a donkey and cleansed the temple. The people cried out, “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*” The chief priests and scribes, on the other hand, were indignant. They would not say, “*Hosanna!*” They said, “*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*” (Matthew 21:15, 23). The irony is tragic. Those who supposedly knew the Scriptures better than any others could not recognize the arrival of the Messiah promised in those very Scriptures.

The novelist Flannery O’Connor wrote, “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.” The priests and scribes could not stomach the truth about Jesus. Their hearts were too hardened. But none of this changed the fact that the One whose authority they were questioning was the incarnate Son. By what authority was Jesus doing these things? By the very authority of God. And who gave Him this authority? His Father in heaven. They were arrogantly interrogating the Son of God. But on the last day, these men will once again stand before Jesus, and this time He will be the one passing judgment. It is not difficult to imagine these men being asked by Jesus, “By what authority did you reject the promises of Almighty God? By what authority did you reject His Messiah?” They will be without excuse. So will any who have rejected the Messiah.

The rejection of God’s authority began with Satan, the original rebel. From what we can discern in Scripture, Satan’s rebellion was rooted in his intense pride. The first man and his wife, too, rejected God’s authority. Placed in a perfect garden environment, they were given permission to eat of every tree but one. Tempted by Satan, they refused to submit to God’s authority, ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, and plunged themselves and their posterity into sin and death. God, however, graciously promised redemption, and this redemption would come through the seed of the woman. The rejection of God’s authority continued throughout the history of Israel. Despite God’s warnings, His people repeatedly rejected His authority, falling deeper and deeper into idolatry until eventually, they were exiled from their land. Restoration after exile did not change their hardened hearts. When God finally sent the promised Messiah, they rejected Him as well, putting Him to death on a cross.

This, however, was part of the definite plan of God (Acts 2:23). Just as God brought good out of the evil actions of Joseph’s brothers (Genesis 50:20), He will bring the ultimate good out of the most evil action imaginable. Israel had rejected and crucified the promised Messiah, the very Son of God, but on the cross, Jesus accomplished the redemption of His people, providing Himself as a substitute for them, taking upon Himself their transgressions and iniquities (Isaiah 52:13–53:12). Three days later, He was raised from the grave, victorious over death. On the cross His heel had been bruised by the serpent. But the head of the serpent was crushed by the stone that was rolled away from the tomb.

Although God took the evil of men who rejected His authority and used it for good, the acts of these men remained evil (Acts 2:23). To reject the authority of God is the height of arrogant wickedness. To do so is to imitate the works of Satan, and there is no excuse for it. God is holy and just. His word is true and trustworthy. He does not deceive or speak with a forked tongue. What He commands us He commands us for our good and His glory. As His adopted children and subjects, we are called to submit to Him. We are called to trust Him and obey Him.



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By What Authority?

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Submission and obedience do not come easily to sinful creatures. Our fallen nature is inherently rebellious. Apart from God's grace, we are of our father the Devil, and as it does with him, our pride blinds us. Rather than submit to God's authority, we hold on with all of our might to our autonomy. We will not be told what to do, so we devise excuse after excuse. Like the wicked kings spoken of in Psalm 2, we burst our bonds. Those who do this, however, will be judged.

Submission to the rightful authority of God cannot be done in our own power. This is one of the lessons to be learned from the history of Israel. It requires a new heart, a new birth. It requires the Holy Spirit. In short, it requires the grace of God, turning our hearts to Jesus. But those who do come to Him, He will in no way cast out. ~ *Dr. Keith A. Mathison*

Providence

God has revealed the goal and nature and extent of his providence. He has not been silent. He has shown us these things in the Bible. This is one of the reasons that the apostle Paul says, "All Scripture is ... profitable" (2 Timothy 3:16). The profit lies not mainly in the validation of a theological viewpoint but in the revelation of a great God, the exaltation of his invincible grace, and the liberation of his undeserving people. God has revealed his purposeful sovereignty over good and evil in order to humble human pride, intensify human worship, shatter human hopelessness, and put ballast in the battered boat of human faith, steel in the spine of human courage, gladness in the groans of affliction, and love in the heart that sees no way forward.

What we find in the Bible is real and raw. The prizing and proclaiming of God's pervasive providence was forged in flames of hatred and love, deceit and truth, murder and mercy, carnage and kindness, cursing and blessing, mystery and revelation, and, finally, crucifixion and resurrection.

I think we can affirm the below mentioned truths.

1. We believe that God, from all eternity, in order to display the full extent of His glory for the eternal and ever-increasing enjoyment of all who love Him, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his will, freely and unchangeably ordain and foreknow whatever comes to pass.
2. We believe that God upholds and governs all things—from galaxies to subatomic particles, from the forces of nature to the movements of nations, and from the public plans of politicians to the secret acts of solitary persons—all in accord with his eternal, all-wise purposes to glorify Himself, yet in such a way that He never sins, nor ever condemns a person unjustly; but that his ordaining and governing all things is compatible with the moral accountability of all persons created in his image. ~ *Dr. John Piper*



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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

If you have a March birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt (gwlcfl0415@gmail.com).

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner March 2021

Birthdays

Rory Alexander H. (4)
Marlow S. (12)
Haddon W. (13)
Rose M. (15)
Les T. (19)
Hannah L. (20)

Lydia H. (22)
Daniel K. (23)
Peggy G. (25)
Jonathan F. (26)
Tom S. (29)

Anniversaries

Marlow and Wilma S. (15)
Lorraine and Tony H. (22)
Rick and Peggy G. (31)

Because we have received the undeserved gift of God's grace in Christ, we who believe in Jesus ought to be the most grateful of all people. This means that we should thank our Creator regularly, both as private individuals and as a body during worship. Thanking God for who He is and what He has done expresses our awareness of who the Lord is—our sovereign, gracious Maker—and who we are—undeserving creatures who have been brought into a saving relationship with Him.

Most of our regular worship services include expressions of thanksgiving to God for His redemption. We should participate in these wholeheartedly and also thank God during any periods of silent prayer that occur before, during, or after worship. Cultivating thankful hearts will help us remember who God is and why He is worthy of our praise.



***West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership***

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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or its leadership.