

**SERMON: "WHAT IS SIN AND HOW DO WE TURN FROM IT?"**  
**TEXTS: NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 22:34-40**  
**OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 51**

**April 21, 2024**  
**Churchwide Confirmation – Lesson Three**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Let's talk multiple choice – Presbyterian style.

Here is what I have noticed. Given three choices, say cheapest, most expensive and somewhere in between, Presbyterians usually go with somewhere in between  
Or it could be some other range – small, medium, large  
Seems like the Presbyterians usually go with medium, flaming moderates.

So here are the choices today ... about the sermon.

Long (say 5 minutes longer than usual), Short (less than 5 minutes, much less)  
Or in the middle (the usual length). Okay. All those who want a longer sermon?  
And those who want the usual? And those who want a much shorter sermon?

Looks like we have a clear third place finisher.

It's closer between the top two vote getters – the usual middle and the shorter.  
Seeking to be a place for everyone (most everyone), I'll go with the shorter one  
... And then keep going through the middle one.

Here is the shorter sermon, an answer to the confirmation question

What is sin and how do we turn from it? It's a two part question, so a two point sermon  
What is sin? Answer – most anything and everything can be sinful

And how do we turn from sin? Answer - we can turn from it, but we cannot avoid it  
Sin is always there in us and around us. We cannot completely turn away from it,  
But God can make that turn. God has made that turn ... from sin, by way of grace.  
We cannot save ourselves ... but Jesus Christ has saved us

That's the short sermon. We could say a prayer. Take up an offering and go ...

But let's go on just a bit longer (not too long) and let me build on what I just said  
We will stick with those two questions and those two points  
We begin with the first one – What is sin?  
And the short answer ... Most anything and everything can be sinful

Let's consider the scripture lessons, Psalm 51 and Matthew 22

Psalm 51 is an honest prayer about the reality of our sinfulness

## AN HONEST PRAYER

**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.**

The psalmist doesn't make comparisons or explanations.

The psalmist doesn't try to argue about how good he is, how innocent  
The psalmist begins (and ends) with God's mercy ... **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.**

The psalmist recognizes the reality of his sin, asks to be washed thoroughly  
Then in a key couple of sentences, tells us two things about sin we need to hear.  
The first is that sin is ever before us (it is in and around us)  
You can retreat to a retreat, just sing and pray and journal  
But still even there your sin is present, even in the good. More about that later.

The second thing is that sin is against God. That is how it is measured  
It is not about comparisons and explanations (about other people)  
You may have heard the origin of the word 'sin.' It is archery term  
It means to 'miss the mark.' Think of an arrow (or dart) falling short  
Sin is falling short of what God calls us to be and do.

This is where we should also consider the passage from Matthew  
when Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment. Jesus said to him ...

**“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”**

Pretty clear what God asks and expects of us. Straightforward enough  
The word 'all' really drives the point home ... 'with all my heart, all my soul and all my mind.' And though the word isn't there in the passage ...  
all my neighbors. The follow up to this same Q & A in Luke with the story of the Good Samaritan emphasizes the 'all' as it applies to neighbor.  
No exceptions. All means all!

## WHAT IS 'A' SIN?

To answer this question we need to ask it the right way, "what is sin?"

The question is not "what is A sin?" That gets too nit picky and misses the big picture which is falling short of what God calls us to be and do

Understanding that the question is not "what is A sin?"

moves us away from thinking of sin as individual acts – bad things, bad decisions, bad deeds, bad words. Defining sin that way is dangling the tips of our skis over the slippery slope that is self-righteousness.

Too easy to fall into comparisons and explanations thinking that way

One last thing about sin. Yes, doing what we think is good can be sinful

An example from right here, this week. Big storm expected on Wednesday I arrive here that morning to find a bag of cans and bottles in the parking lot for the Boy Scout recycling they do on the first Sunday of each month

Guess someone thought they were doing the right thing dropping them off two weeks early. This happens rather frequently. We find drop offs by the garage, by the front door and tucked into the bushes

The first wedding I performed here ... it was a windy day

Lots of empty Busch Light cans rolling around the parking lot beforehand  
Guess we could have tied them to the car after the service.

I took a snow shovel and shoveled them into the garage instead  
Nice of someone to leave those for us. They did "good."

That true story is meant to be playful. But the supposed good we sometimes do can also be quite painful. When our doing right wrongs someone else

When our doing right insists that someone else is wrong. When the freedoms we demand for ourselves mean taking them away from someone else  
When we tell ourselves that the ends justify the means ... That is sin

Sin is both individual and corporate ... including our silence and complicity.

You may know the quote from 1930's Germany. I hear it as a prayer of confession

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out - because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.*

## SUMMARY

Before I go pass that medium sermon length,  
I need to stop talking about that first question “What is sin?”  
and pivot to the second question “And how do we turn from it?”

To do so, I want to follow the wisdom of the Apostle Paul  
Can you please reach for the pew bible in front of you and find Romans?  
Romans is after the gospels and after Acts. Please find chapter one, verse 18  
It is page 152 in the pew bibles. Please read the heading over that section  
It says “The Guilt of Humankind.”

Paul begins his argument there. He is not pointing the finger at a particular practice  
or person or people. He is not ranking one person’s sin against another’s.  
He is letting us know what we already know ... that we are all sinners,  
every last one of us ... even though we may at times pretend we are not  
He is letting us know the truth. We need grace! We all do!

Now please take that same pew bible and flip the page to chapter 3  
Yes, he is still talking about how sinful we all are ... until he gets to  
the key turning point in his argument. Let me ask you to read out loud  
You don’t have to be loud enough for the whole room to hear  
just loud enough for those right around you

Please start reading under the heading “Righteousness through Faith”  
Start at verse 21 and read halfway through verse 25, the end of the sentence  
(chapter and verse markings were added later, sometimes in odd places)  
The key sentence here begins toward the end of verse 22 through 24

**For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short  
of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift,  
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**

**“Now justified by God’s grace as a gift ...”**

There is our answer to the question about how we turn from sin  
Like how we receive a gift. Think about being a kid and receiving a gift  
Think about Christmas morning (whose birthday is that?)  
Think about the big gift, the one that may not even be wrapped

How do we turn from sin?

By running toward that gift, by receiving that gift  
By playing with that gift ... the free gift of grace  
And then if you were raised by folks like Ann and Jerry Kivett  
Write a thank you note! Good way to think about life - as a thank you note to God