

Lent 1

2020

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 - Psalm 32 - Romans 5:12-19 - Matthew 4:1-11

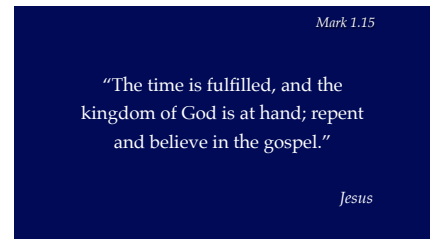


Introduction:

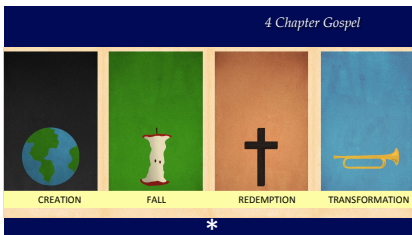
When Jesus came preaching the Good News of God's Kingdom he made a very simple appeal for response at the end of his preaching: (Mark 1:15)

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Those last few words are the gateway into the Kingdom of God: “Repent and believe in this good news.”



So turn away from what ever distances you from God –sin in all its forms- and trust in God as King. The good news was that because of Jesus, this was now possible. The way was open so take hold of this.

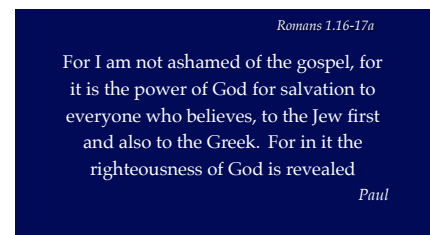


If you are here regularly you will know I commend a four chapter view of the Gospel, what I think of as the ‘Whole Gospel’. This involves seeing the gospel story of salvation history as Creation, Fall, Redemption and Transformation.

The call of Jesus to those who would follow him -that is to you and me- sits in the middle of this four chapter gospel story. Repentance and faith come at the point between Fall and Redemption. This is the grace point where we may personally engage the power and the beauty of this gospel.

I hear St Paul referring to this in Romans 1.16-17a when he says:

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed ...



If we miss this we miss the heart and the power of what God has given us in the Gospel of Jesus redeeming sinful people as children of God, God restoring his kingdom reign within us.

When we repent and believe, the saving power of God works to make right what was wrong. When we repent and believe in God's saving goodness and love -whoever we are and wherever we are from- God's saving power is released within us. I have experienced this and I have seen this in others many times. It is a beautiful and humbling thing.

For this to happen there are two essential requirements.

Two Essential Gospel Requirements:

- Take God seriously.
- Take sin seriously

1. You must take God seriously.
God needs to be held in due regard or, 'fearfully' as the Old Testament says.
2. You need to take sin seriously to the point where you cannot live with it.

If either: God is not a big issue or sin is not taken seriously repentance will not happen and without repentance the power of the gospel of grace does not flow.

Repentance and Faith are serious responses to the gravity of sin and the grace of God.

Meanwhile our lives are busy and the attention of our hearts and mind is limited.

So for nearly all of Christian history there has been a season set aside to promote what makes for repentance towards faith. That season commenced on Wednesday and is known as 'Lent'. It is the 40 days plus Sundays in the 6 weeks before Easter. Today is the first Sunday of 6 in that season.

The purpose of this season is to slow down so we have time and space to reflect. Where am I? How am I living? A few prayers from the Psalms express this well. We could start with:

Psalm 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!

Which leads to:

Psalm 51:3-4a For I know my transgressions, and my sin is
ever before me.
⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and
done what is evil in your sight,

Psalm Prayers

Psalm 139:23
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ever before me.
⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done
what is evil in your sight,

This can be intense as we recited today!

Psalm Prayers

Psalm 32:3-5

³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

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the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

But it leads to grace:

Psalm 32:1-2 ¹ Blessed is the one whose transgression is
forgiven, whose sin is covered.
² Blessed is the one against whom
the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Psalm Prayers

Psalm 32:1-2

¹ Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
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iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

This is the joy of salvation, renewal and restoration in God.

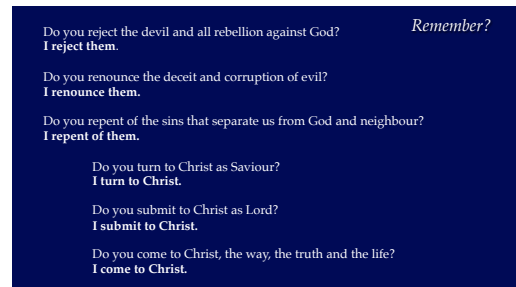
It involves being released from the delusion of denial pretending there is no issue.

To make space and time for reflection Lent is observed in a sober way. There are times to party such as Christmas and Easter. Lent is a time to not party and live simply with less excitement so that the serious Christian takes time to reflect. It's like a voluntary winter quiet season of stock-taking. It's our attempt to answer the question God asked Adam: "Where are you?"

I say it is for the serious Christian because the non-serious Christian doesn't want to take stock and prefers to follow their nose without ever reflecting on the deeper matters of life and faith. Self reflection can lead to challenging awareness and not everyone wants that. Thinking deeply can lead to personal conviction and repentance involves change, even personal change which sounds like work.

A way to think of this is as a 'Baptism Boost'. Those who have been baptized or been close to baptism here will have seen these questions which are the essence of commitment to repent and believe:

- Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?
I reject them.
- Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?
I renounce them.
- Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?
I repent of them.
- Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?
I turn to Christ.
- Do you submit to Christ as Lord?
I submit to Christ.
- Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life?
I come to Christ.



Sin

So with that by way of introduction my main topic today is 'sin.'

In New Zealand I occasionally heard people saying how rare it was to have teaching on sin. Older people seemed to remember a time when it was common and then it seemed to go out of fashion. As I have said, the Gospel can only be appreciated if we understand sin and take it seriously in relation to taking God seriously.

Now immediately we need to be careful to maintain a distinctively Christian vision of what sin is. Hinduism, Communism, Secular Humanism and now Woke Culture all have their versions of sin. So what are we talking about? What is the biblical picture of sin that we need to work with?



The Greek word ἁμαρτία / *hamartia* hits the nail cleanly. This is an archery term that was cried out when the target was missed. The English word 'Missed' might be a parallel today? It was the opposite of calling 'Bull's-eye!' or 'Goal!'

We can hear this sense in the parallel clarification in Romans 3:23

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

All have missed the target of being a creature made for the purpose of reflecting and re-presenting God's glory.

Some simple examples:

- When we are less than loving, we are less than what God made us to be and fall short of his glory: That is sin.
- When we turn our back on the One who makes us to be human in his image: That is sin.
- When we live a half life: That is sin.
- When we live falsely: That falls short of the glory and constitutes sin.

This sin is both individual and corporate.

Adam and Even did not only sin as individuals but as a society of persons. There is individual sin and sin we work together. Adam and Eve represent both and why sin is a universal human reality.

As I shared last month, the consequences of sin are typically fear, guilt and shame which all drive people apart and away from God. That is why a gospel ministry is a ministry of reconciliation.

Practice in Discernment

That's all background, let's now move to application. How do we do this reflection towards repenting and believing in Lent?

I suggest it comes down to recognizing what is sin. So I drive to a verse in Romans 12:1-2.

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2 *Discerning*

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Paul

So 'by the renewal of our mind, that by testing we may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul is advocating developing an awareness of what the bull's-eye looks like so we recognize what sin is. This is the way the US treasury used to train detectives to spot forged money. They would spend a lot of time noting every detail and quality of real money to the point they could spot a forgery at once.

So avoid the models of life and morality offered by the world that does not respect God so that you might recognize what is good and holy and thereby spot sin as falling short of this.

So for Lenten reflection don't just go looking for sin like a blood-hound looking for a buried bone. First study the goodness and holy beauty of God. Consider the glory of Jesus as preached last week and in the light of that we will become aware of sin.

Sounds simple? Did you hear the stern warning in Paul's exhortation?

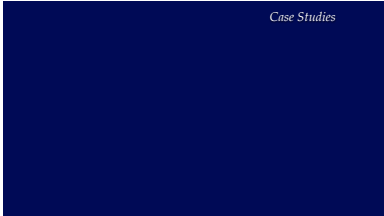
² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,

The person who thinks in tune with the world with an un-renewed mind cannot do this.

The worldly person with a dead mind cannot recognize sin for what it is. Falling short of the glory of God. If you do not love God or Fear the Lord you will not have any real idea of what his glory looks like in human being and living. That is where most people are. The worldly economy doesn't understand God's economy.

Our calling is to view ourselves and each other as persons made and called to reflect the glory of God as demonstrated and made possible by Jesus.

Case Studies



To get us into this I'd like to run two actual case studies past you. I'll tell you a story and ask you to discuss in pairs or triplets whether sin might have been involved and why?

Case 1.

A long time ago a couple came to Barbara and I for marriage preparation. The woman had an obvious baby bump and so that was talked about. The bride-to-be was mildly ashamed and explained as she put it that: 'they had been human'. The groom-to-be said he was pleased about the pregnancy and saw it as God's blessing.

Discuss: Is there sin here and an opportunity for repent and believe?
If so, what would a serious Christian response be?

My answer: Jesus followed the Jewish teaching since then also held by the historic church, that the glory of sex is between a man and a woman within a marriage covenant. That is the 'gold standard.' Anything less than that is sin, a falling short.

When the serious Christian falls short of that we have '*harmartia*' / sin. As with all sin the right response is to confess, repent and believe through renewed thinking and reformed behavior. That is the way to find God's grace over our failings. The complication here was that one party recognized this and the other did not.

Note: The issue is not what I or you might think about this. The issue is how does the gospel apply? How can repent and believe happen in the messiness of life? Most people seem to roll over and wait for the issue to go away which is not 'repent and believe'.

Case 2.

This is a corporate example considering a social context: A few years ago Barbara and I walked over to a bus stop on Karel de Grootlaan to catch a bus into the city. Standing there already was a short elderly lady with her handbag. A few minutes after we arrived about a dozen teenagers came from across the road and stood along side us and the elderly lady. They chatted among themselves as teenagers do.

When the bus came the teenagers pushed ahead and swarmed onto the bus. I looked at the elderly lady who had been there the longest of all. She stood still and watched. We followed her onto the bus and the moment passed.

My question is: Would you recognize sin there? Did this situation fall short of the glory of God? Why?

Extra question: What if that were to happen here in this church space, say on the way to the cookie plate? Would that be something for corporate repentance and faith towards cultural change?

My answer: God intends his glory to be seen in youth honouring age and age honouring youth. When that is not happening it falls short and constitutes sin.

Conclusion:

I want to encourage us to enter into Lent as the time of reflection it was intended. Being ascetic by giving up chocolates or alcohol or taking extra time to pray and read scripture is all good but it is not what makes heaven rejoice! These practices are meant to be in support of the central purpose which is to boost your baptism commitment to repenting and believing. When hearts turn in repentance and faith Heaven does rejoice.

Lent is a time for weeding the garden to make room for more of God and the life he has for us in Christ.

Prayers.

In Gospel terms: No repentance = no faith.
Let us come to the Lord, who is full of compassion, and acknowledge our transgressions in penitence and faith.

Lead us into repentance,

Psalm 51.17

The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart God will not despise.

Psalm 139:23

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!

Show us the sin that is part of us yet hidden may we may seek you
to repent and believe afresh.

Prayers

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