

A Distorted Image

Living Faith 2.5: Sin Separates us from God.

Key Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 3:21-26

Last week we talked a lot about how creation reflects the glory of God in the world. And that humanity specifically bears the image of God and mirrors it back into the world as the evidence of God and God's glory. We were created to be the mirrors of God's "wow-ness" in the world.

But today we need to back up a little bit because clearly what is reflected in the world isn't a very good representation of God's image. Creation is falling apart. We don't need to look very far to see that human beings throughout history have been more interested in power, control, self-service, greed, and idolatry than we have been about being God's holy people, set apart for his glory and his purposes. And this leads us to our topic today: Sin.

Sin is one of those subjects that churches tend to approach in one of two ways. Our individual sins can be shoved down our throats hoping that enough guilt will lead us to repent and so escape the unquenchable fires of hell. Or it's something churches avoid talking about because it makes us uncomfortable, and we come to church to feel better, not worse about ourselves. But the fact remains that sin is still very much in evidence in the world. So, what are we to do with it?

There a number of ways that scriptures talks about sin. It can refer to inner thoughts, action, or even the consequences of an action. Some of the words that the bible uses to describe sin include transgression, rebellion, guilt, missing the mark, falling into error, etc.

Throughout scripture, the religious or spiritual life is ordered, just like the civil life is ordered – with specific laws and expectations that allow people to live together in good relationships and with peace and justice. Our dealings with God likewise are supposed to follow a particular pattern so that we can live in right relationship with him, so that we can accurately reflect his glory in the world and so fulfill his purposes for us. Deviation from the pattern (individually, collectively, and as a state of being) is what we call sin. Paul states it plainly when he says that "all are sinning and falling short (or missing the mark) of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

What is important to point out is that this failure is both intentional as well as a state of being. There are things that we do and think that willfully reject God's good purposes for us in the world: greed, laziness, selfish anger, gluttony, envy, dishonesty, lust, the list goes on. We choose to be greedy, we choose to be envious, we choose to lie. But on a deeper level, our rebellion from God is a reality of the core of our being. We get a sense of the way this existential sin plays out in our lives when we resonate with Paul's inner struggle with his inability to choose properly. He laments the fact that he knows what he ought to do and be, he tries to fulfill those expectations but consistently fails. And he ends up doing the very things he knows he shouldn't. How many of us have tried to stop

doing something that we really know is wrong, but go ahead and do it anyway? Paul cries out in frustration and shame: “wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death” (Romans 7:24).

Paul articulates one of the most profound realities of our existence. Our turning away from God and the resulting separation from him, distorts the image of God in us and warps what is reflected to the world. And no matter how hard we try to clean the mirror, the image is still distorted. The image of self-giving love gets distorted into one of self-centred greed. Righteousness is distorted into brokenness. Justice and peace are distorted into envy and the struggle for power.

The passage we read from Isaiah spells this out a little more clearly. Isaiah laments being confronted with the chasm between the holy and the unholy: “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5). What did Isaiah mean by a people of unclean lips? He describes them in the previous chapter. The people are more interested in bloodshed than in justice, they are greedy for more and more land, displacing others so they can have more. They pursue wealth for the sake of personal gain, they are idle and spend their days partying instead of working for justice. They eat and drink until they are full (and then some more) while the hungry and thirsty beg for relief outside their doors. They think they are wise, but really they are narrow-minded and corrupt: they deprive the innocent of justice and accept bribes. They have rejected the instruction of the Lord, and have despised the Holy One of Israel. It’s a pretty bleak picture of what their world had come to.

We here in the West are really good at looking at other parts of the world, the corruption, injustice, bloodshed, and greed that exists there, and making judgments about their sin. I would suggest that we don’t need to look that far abroad to be confronted with the marred and distorted image of God. We can look at politicians and make accusations about bribery and corruption and self-interest. We can point to bloodshed in schools and bullying in the schoolyard (or in the workplace or in the church or on social media). We can see where laziness has led to a sense of entitlement and self-righteousness. We can look at ourselves and ask whether our angry outbursts are over things that concern God or ourselves. Have we lied because we are ashamed of the truth? We could even ask ourselves whether we had accepted subversive bribes from an economic system that says we will let you buy these clothes or bananas or fuel for this low price if you will keep your mouth shut about where it came from and the conditions under which it was acquired.

If we were asked to come up with a list of the sin in ourselves and in our world, none of us would have much trouble. But here is the hard part. All of us sitting here *want* to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls and our neighbours as ourselves. We long to be in fellowship with the God of the universe, to experience his love and acceptance and forgiveness. We *want* to be who God created us to be, and to have that God shaped whole in ourselves filled by him. I suspect that all of us here want the world to be as God intended it. Most of us, like Paul, know what is good and right and true and are frustrated

that we never seem to achieve it. And most of us here are painfully aware of our failures and bear enough guilt and shame for our shortcomings.

So, let's get back to that image of God's glory. Let's get back to reflecting the wow-ness of God in the world.

The most fundamental claim of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that in Christ, God restored the fallen image to the proper one. It's an image that is made clear in the context of the loving, mutually outpouring relationship shared between the Father and the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It's an image where the relationship between them is so interwoven, that they have the same will, the same love, and pour all of it out into each other and it overflows into world. In Jesus Christ – fully God and fully and perfectly human, God re-created humanity – he healed the distorted image and remade it as he had intended. The image of glory that has been restored in Jesus Christ is an image of relationship. The glory of God is seen in the stars and galaxies and flowers and birds. But it is most profoundly witnessed to in the relationship that God invites us to share with him. When we are face to face with God, in loving relationship with him, then we can reflect him more completely. And we are face to face with God as we are in Jesus Christ, who has drawn us into his Father's presence when he destroyed the power of sin, death, and rebellion, on the cross.

In Jesus Christ, that chasm between the holy and the unholy is overcome by the outpouring of God's love. Paul tells us that God doesn't hold our rebellion against us, but freely forgives us instead, and invites us into this new life, this new creation.

Last week I invited you to look in a mirror and see the wow-ness of God as you have been fearfully and wonderfully made. Earlier in this sermon I asked you to see the distorted image that actually gets reflected into the world, no matter how hard we try to clean the mirror.

When I have asked you to look in the mirror I have wanted you to see that you, personally, are a part of God's good creation, and that you personally have been fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. And that God claims you personally as his child. But I didn't tell you something important, which is this. Remember the passage from Isaiah where God says, "you are the witnesses that I am God" (Isa 43:12)? And remember the passage from Ephesians where Paul says "you were saved by grace" (Eph 2:8)? In just about every case in both the Old Testament and the New, when God talks about his salvation, about being restored to fellowship with him – the pronouns used are plural. Isaiah wasn't talking to an individual person as the witnesses of God's glory. Isaiah was talking to God's chosen and set apart nation – Israel. Paul was speaking directly to the church collectively. It is the church that is the body of Christ in the world – not individuals, though we are personally a part of that collective. Christ, in his body, is the restored humanity. It is in Christ, his body, that the distorted image is being remade in the world.

Look in the mirror now and broaden your peripheral vision. You, collectively are the evidence that God's image is being restored, that the power of sin is being wiped out, that God is remaking the world to fulfill the purposes he had planned for it.

For whatever reason, God has chosen, called, and equipped his church with the power of the Holy Spirit to be the means by which he is working out this new creation. The church is called to be the evidence of God's image being restored.

And if that image has to do with relationships – with the outpouring of God's love in Christ, with our participating in a loving relationship with him together, then the image of God's glory in the church is an image of relationship. When we love God and each other there is generosity instead of greed – generosity of time, talents, treasures. Instead of envy there is genuine encouragement of one another. Instead of lust there is mutual affection. Instead of selfish anger there is grace and forgiveness.

I am so honoured to be a part of a community that is trying to faithfully participate in the restoration of the image of God's glory. This is a community where the hungry really are fed. This is a community that is looking into what it looks like to adopt a refugee family, mirroring the way that God has adopted us to be his children. This is a community where life is given in the context of the fellowship experienced here. We saw the evidence of that on Friday at our annual Wheels to Meals event.

Friends, hear the word of God to us today. It is in the context of the church that the image of God is being restored. It is in the body of Christ that the image of God is being restored to us, his people. So, let us with the courage and power given to us by the Holy Spirit, continue to bear witness to God's glory – to his power, his majesty, his salvation, his goodness, his love, so that the world would know the power of God to save and restore everything that is lost and broken. It may be that we cry out with Isaiah – woe is me. Or with Paul 'wretched person that I am'. But as the image is being restored, the Holy Spirit completes Paul's sentence in us – wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death – but thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 7:24-25)!