Why Do We Need The Gospel?
Romans 3:9-20

I’ve been a fan of the Andy Griffith Show for a long time. One of the episodes takes place at their local church, the All Soul’s Church. The entire community is excited to have a visiting preacher from New York City, who interrupted his vacation to preach for the people of Mayberry. The Dr. Harrison Everett Breen preached an inspiring sermon entitled “What’s Your Hurry?” It was a message on the hustle and bustle of life, exhorting people to slow down, relax, and find meaning in the simple things of life. Barney yawned through part of the sermon and slept through the rest. Andy poked him a couple of times, but to no avail. On their way out of the worship service that day Andy, Aunt Bea and Barney were all introduced to the imminent preacher. They all felt obliged to say something good about the sermon. Bea said, “Oh, Dr. Breen your sermon has such a wonderful message for us.” Andy adds, “Yes, sir, you really hit the nail right on the head there.” Despite the fact that Barney had slept through the whole religious event and didn’t have a clue what the sermon was about, he chimed in, “Yes sir, that’s one subject you can’t talk about enough . . . Sin!”

I guess in the 1950’s if you slept through a sermon your best guess would be that it was one on sin. Sin was a hot subject. A sermon entitled “An Inconvenient Truth” would’ve been on the reality of sin, not the dangers of global warming. Today sin is not so hot. It’s a negative subject and we want to avoid negativity. As one prominent Texas preacher proclaimed, “People are hurting, beaten up by the world. They last thing they need on Sunday morning is a sermon on sin. They need to be encouraged.”

I would be happy to oblige such a philosophy of preaching if the Bible allowed it. But I can’t read the Bible and particularly Romans without encountering it most prominently. 48 times Paul uses the word sin in his letter to the church in Rome. In this sermon series I’m calling “Gospel 101” we come today to the subject of sin. In the first sermon we defined the Gospel as the good news that God had defeated evil through Jesus his Son, through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. Last
week we saw in chapter 2 that God was a true and impartial judge, and that both Jew and Gentile would be judged under the law.

Today we move from judgment to sin

**Today’s Culture**

Though many of us were raised in traditions that stressed the depth of our personal sin, we have generally allowed ourselves to be talked out of it. Modernity teaches us to see all our deeds -- even our most deviant criminal acts -- as psychological, sociological, economic or biological responses to environmental or genetic factors. Such determinisms preclude all genuine sin-talk.

This was most obvious in the Duke Lacrosse debacle that dominated the headline news for more than a year. I don’t normally quote myself (why quote yourself when you can just say what you want to say?!), but I want to read part of my article about this scandal long before anyone knew who had done what: “What is interesting to me is how the conversation has been framed to this point. Almost unconsciously, the conversations about the scandal have been grounded in sociological terms. The event has been cast in terms of white vs. black (racism), male vs. female (sexism), and rich vs. poor (social economics), and town vs. gown (academic relations). What is missing in the Duke lacrosse team scandal is any kind of discussion of sin, immorality, and evil.”

I concluded the newsletter article by saying, “Even if the charge of rape is dropped or we learn sexual assault did not happen, it is evident that a culture of sin has permeated our landscape. We need to bring back the language of sin, human depravity, and repentance. Without the language it will be hard for us to face the realities that are before us. They are realities of the sins of human exploitation, vulgarity, drunkenness, arrogance, and behavior intending to elicit lust, just to name a few.”

It was sinful for those lacrosse players to call a stripper and invite her to their party. It was sinful for these strippers to adopt this lifestyle and come to the party. And it was sinful for the DA to abuse the power of his office for political purposes. This whole sordid, incompetent affair was given birth from the womb of sin. When have
Paul’s words ever been more true, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). No one was innocent in this case, ourselves included, because we are part of a society that exploits women, tolerates airwaves saturated in carnality, excuses boorish behavior, and rewards manipulators of the political process.

So, we have our work cut out for us don’t we. The world in its worldliness can’t see that sin-talk explains anything. Freudian, Jungian, or feminist methods are much more likely to be seen as the pathway to wholeness. This is yet another way for the world to claim it doesn’t need the work of Christ. The church’s task is to proclaim the power of sin can be overcome by the power of the cross. But unless we recognize the reality and danger of sin, we won’t see the need for the cross. Here’s Gospel 101, lesson 3: Why do we need the Gospel? The answer is sin. We need the good news of Jesus Christ because of the bad news of sin in our lives and our world.

Equally Guilty

One of the realities of sin is equality of it. In Rom. 3:9 Paul asks rhetorically, “What shall we conclude? Are we any better?” Then he emphatically answers, “No not at all!” He reminds us again, “We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin” (Rom 3:9). Those who lived under the Mosaic law and those who lived outside the Mosaic law were equally guilty before a holy God. The mosaic law condemned them explicitly, while the Gentiles were condemned in their consciences.

What I’m saying is that before God, Mike Nifong, the Duke Lacrosse players, the female strippers, and Don Gordon are equally guilty before God. I have no room for moral superiority because my own sins put an equally unsurpassable breech between God and me. I recall this point being made in Will Campbell’s autobiography Brother to a Dragonfly. Campbell is a cantankerous Baptist preacher who pulls no punches and was active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. One of his best friends, Jonathan Daniels, who had been working to register voters in segregated places, was killed by Thomas Coleman, a special deputy in Lowndes County, Alabama. Years earlier, Will
Campbell had been asked to provide a simple definition of Christianity. Campbell had replied, “We’re all sons of _______ (boys), but God loves us anyway.

Now on hearing of the murder of his good friend Jonathan Daniels, he was asked if he still stood by his definition. He said, “Yes.” He was questioned further, “Was your friend Jonathan Daniels a son of a _______?” Campbell reluctantly replied in the affirmative. Campbell was then asked, “Is Thomas Coleman a son of a _____.” Campbell answered, “Yes. Thomas Coleman is a son of a _______” The questioner was unrelenting: “Which one of these two sons of _____ do you think God loves the most?” Campbell writes in his autobiography, “Suddenly everything became clear”: Coleman and Daniels were both sinners, and both were loved by God.” Campbell went on to say that questioner had made a Christian out of him, and he wasn’t sure if he liked it. It gave me the intolerable thought –my sin equals everyone’s sin. My need for love, forgiveness, reconciliation is no less and no greater than anyone else’s.”

Now understand I’m speaking about our status before God, not our need for earthly judgment based on our actions. Equally guilty in the eyes of God, doesn’t mean we are equally guilt in the eyes of worldly authorities. For instance, there is a huge difference between clergy abusing helpless children and a teenager lusting in his mind for one of the cheerleaders from his school. The long-term destruction of the first is more cruel than the inner turmoil of the latter. A man who gets drunk, drives a car, and kills a mother with her child is deserving of greater punishment than a woman dealing with depression who gets drunk in her home and goes to bed. Both are wrong, but the drunken driver deserves greater punishment on earth because he has caused more noticeable harm. Even the Mosaic law calls for different punishments for different crimes. What Paul is saying is that in the presence of a holy, pure God, none of us are clean. We can’t claim superiority over others, for that only breeds a sense of spiritual pride.

**Power of Sin**

The problem with our world and the reason we need the gospel is because of the power of sin. Notice that Paul says in verse 9 that “Jews and Gentiles alike are under
The word sin comes from the Greek word *harmatia*. There are a couple of things we must understand about this word if we’re to understand our problem and the problems of the world. First, the word *harmatia* is a noun, not a verb. We most often think of sin as something we do. We steal, we cheat, we covet, we sit on the couch and eat a bag of potato chips rather than take a walk around the block. Our normal concept of sin is doing bad things. Paul is not talking about that at all. It’s more infectious, more insidious, more entrenched in the human condition than mere activities. That’s why the NRSV translates the Greek word *harmatia* as the “power of sin.” It’s in our DNA, in the air we breathe. In his letter to the Ephesians, for example, Paul talked about “the powers of this dark world” and “spiritual forces of evil.” He wasn’t talking about something silly like goblins and goblins floating around the air on Halloween. He was speaking metaphorically about the power of sin which has infected the world.

A second thing to note about this word is that it means “miss the mark.” We have a tendency to divide people between saints and sinners, good people and bad people. There’s Adolph Hitler and Mother Teresa. There’s Mohandas Ghandi and Saddam Hussein. There’s Billy Graham and windbag evangelists. Paul isn’t using the word “sin” to refer to the bad things we do. By sin, Paul means, “we’re not as good as God intended for us to be.” We have missed the mark. We are off-center. We’re pushed by a force that has altered our direction and we’re ultimately going to miss the mark, unless something happens and we are redirected. This is the status of all people, Jew and Gentile, American and Iraqi, British and Philippino.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian dissident and philosopher spent many years in a Siberian prison for his prophetic utterances against the government. He became haunted by the awareness of the power of sin in individuals, in entire societies, and in his own heart while in a Soviet prison. He carefully noted that, “good and evil passes passes through every human heart -- and even the best of hearts, there remains . . . an unuprooted small corner of evil.”

Our sin problem is exacerbated by our inability or unwillingness to see this. Just recently I was confronted with an evil spirit, not a spooky Harry Potter kind of evil, just
a spirit I knew was not of Christ. It was outside of me, not directly controlled by me. It was a part of the world we all live in and it’s accepted by most people as normal. Most people would not have condemned me for it. “It wasn’t your fault. That’s just the world we live in,” people might say. What God revealed to me, however, was my own culpability in that evil. Through small actions and even smaller inactions I had contributed to the evil. And what I saw brought horror to my soul. I had to confess my complicity in the evil and do penance before God. It would’ve been useless to simply condemn the “ways of the world.” I was in that world, and unintentionally I had contributed to the forces of evil.

You see sin, harmatia, the “power of sin” is both personal and social. It has to do with our personal falling short of God’s intention for us, but it is also social, a part of the fabric of our world. Karl Rahner, the imminent Catholic theologian, wrote that not only are human beings sinners, but “actual social conditions and institutions are also marked by sin.” The church, he said, “should not debase Christianity by confining the struggle with sin to the whole private sphere.” That’s why the Bible tells us God destroyed “Sodom and Gommorah.” If it was just a matter of a few bad people, doing a few bad or perverted things, God could’ve taken out those bad people. But the entire structure of society had become corrupted and therefore the whole thing had to been cleansed. The same thing happened in the days of Noah. It wasn’t that every single person in the world was bad, with the exception of Noah. The entire structure of society had become so polluted with evil, that God determined, he needed to start over. The power of sin was personal and social.

One of the clearest illustrations of this took place with one winter's night in 1935. Fiorello LaGuardia, the irrepressible mayor of New York, showed up at a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench. That night a tattered old woman, charged with stealing a loaf of bread, was brought before him. She defended herself by saying, "My daughter's husband has deserted her. She is sick, and her children are starving."
The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges, saying, "It's a bad neighborhood, your honor, and she's got to be punished to teach other people a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the old woman and said, "I've got to punish you; the law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail."

However, even while pronouncing sentence, LaGuardia reached into his pocket, took out a ten-dollar bill, and threw it into his hat with these famous words: "Here's the ten-dollar fine, which I now remit, and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." The following day, a New York newspaper reported: "Forty-seven dollars and fifty cents was turned over to a bewildered old grandmother who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Making forced donations were a red-faced storekeeper, seventy petty criminals, and a few New York policemen."

LaGuardia was on to something. He recognized that the power of sin was personal and social. This grandmother was guilty but so was the entire social network. That’s why Paul goes to such great length to prove his point from the OT. In verses 10-18 he explodes with a volcano of OT quotes describing the sinful nature and history of humankind. We won’t look at each of these verses, but I would point out that if we were to read all of them in their OT contexts, we would see that some are addresses to the people of Israel, the Jews, and others are addressed to Gentiles and Gentile nations. All the Jews, the entire nation of Israel, all the Gentiles, and all the Gentile nations were under the power of sin.

**Observing the Law?**

So what’s the answer? How do we overcome this insidious power in our lives and the world? Paul asks the same question. He wonders if the law is the answer. If Jews were to obey the Law of Moses would that kill or at least subdue the power of sin? If Gentiles were to obey their consciences, doing good and not doing bad, would that solve the problem?
Paul’s answer is “No.” That may not surprise most of you since you are good Protestant Christians. But if you were a 1st century Jew you would be astonished that the Law was not the answer. Even Paul had lived most of his life believing the Law was the answer to the world’s problems. He had lived by the law. He had obeyed the law. In Philippians 3:6 he described himself by saying, “As to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Paul wasn’t saying he was perfect. He was saying he was “blameless under the law.” AND HE WAS !! He lived according to the rituals provided in the Mosaic Law. He attended the temple feasts. He observed Sabbath. He was circumcised. He observed the Day of Atonement when the sins of the people were forgiven. He wasn’t sinless, but he was blameless according to the law, because he followed the teachings and cleansing rituals.

Despite all of that, Paul knew that observing the law had not made him righteous. In verse 20 he said, “Therefore no one will be declared righteousness in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin.” Paul was blameless and the Jews were God’s special people. But all of this was of no special value. The law could not make his righteous, it could only point out his sin. The law could not overcome the power of sin in his life; it could only expose the darkness of sin in his life.

Many people have tried to become righteous through obedience to some kind of law or code. It could be a religious law or secular law. Benjamin Franklin, a noted deist created his own list of virtues. He settled on 13 virtues, wrote them down in a small notebook and kept it in his pocket throughout the day. Choosing a different virtue to work on each week, he noted every mistake on a daily basis. As he made progress in keeping these virtues he noticed that progress was accompanied by pride. He struggled with this system until he determined it could not lead to the virtuous life he had hoped for. All his list of 13 virtues could do was reveal where he had fallen short and if, he achieved a little success, he suffered from a case of unconquerable pride.

This is the kind of thing Paul is pointing out.
Conclusion

Sin is the fatal flaw of humanity. We cannot begin to address the problems in the world, our community, and our hearts without coming to grips with this truth. Sin is the reason we need the Gospel. As Martin Luther put it, “The recognition of sin is the beginning of salvation.” The inconvenient truth in our world and lives isn’t that we need more money or a better job or lower cholesterol, as nice as each of those would be. Our problems are deeper and thus the solutions must be more radical.

I have a minister friend who told me about a family vacation experience he would never forget. His older daughter Karen got a little ornery one day and pushed her little sister down hard on the floor. The father confronted her about this and asked, “Karen, why did you push down Lacy?”

“I didn’t,” she flatly denied. Since he saw it, and this was becoming a growing pattern for Karen, he decided to take a walk with her and get to the bottom of things. “Karen, I’m really disappointed in your behavior. What do you think you need to do about it?”

He expected Karen to either keep denying a problem or admit she needed to stop lying or apologize to her little sister or something of the sort. Instead, with tears in her eyes, she said, “I need to ask Jesus to come into my heart.”

Although he was a minister of the gospel, he was caught off guard by her answer. He was prepared to deal with behavior modification and his child was dealing with the bigger issues of sin, forgiveness, and cleansing. He was focused on morality and she on the spiritual foundations that make wholeness and salvation possible.

We will deal with Jesus as the answer to the problem of sin in more detail next week, but let’s just say for now sin is fatally serious business. And we need a mature, realistic understanding of sin, our own personal sin as well as the sinful forces that infect our world. If we’re going to receive Jesus’ remedy, we’ve got to understand the problem. Sin is the real problem. Jesus is the real solution. God’s answer to the problem of sin is the greater power of sacrificial love revealed in Jesus Christ. In Christ our personal sins can be forgiven and principalities of evil have been defeated. They
are still active, but the end game has been revealed. Sin will be cast away and God’s love and justice will reign supreme. The kingdom of God will triumph. That is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.