



I AM A SAINT

Part 3 of Ephesians

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Ephesians 1:1–2 | January 24, 2013

SINNERS AND GOD'S WRATH

Genesis 6:5–6: “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”

Leviticus 26:27–28: “If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over.”

Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Psalms 11:4–5: “The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.”

Romans 2:5: “Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”

Ephesians 2:3 says we are “by nature children of wrath.” Colossians 3:6 promises “the wrath of God is coming.” And in Revelation 14:10–11, we read of those who are unrepentant of their sin, “He also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.” There is Jesus. “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.”

More than three hundred times, the Bible speaks of people insofar as being sinners. Over six hundred times with a constellation of more than twenty words, the Bible speaks of the wrath of God burning against sinners. We hear language: greed, pain, anger, hostility, punishment, hatred, judgment, torment. Wrath from God is what befalls sinners who do not turn to God.

Some of you say, “I have never heard this.” It’s because people love lies and they pay well for professionals to proclaim them. And in a therapeutic culture where you are a good person, you need to love yourself, and esteem yourself, and embrace yourself so you can actualize your potential, and God exists to give you glory, it’s all nonsense and all burns in the end.

Morality is not determined by majority; it’s determined by the Lord. You will die and you will give an account, and it will not be to a mirror. It will be to the maker of all things, and he is holy and you are not. And it does not matter what the therapist tells you, what the professor tells you, what the philosopher tells you, what the spiritual leader tells you, what your mother tells you, what your friend tells you. It is what he declares that stands forever. Let God be true and every man a liar.

For those of you who are non-Christians, I warn you that you are living in the path of the wrath of God. You are a sinner by nature and choice. My job is to tell the truth, your job is to make a decision.

For those of you who are Christians, for those of you who are in Christ, here’s my question to you: is that how God primarily sees you? Is that how God primarily identifies you? Is that primarily how God relates to you, as sinner, yes or no? We’ll pick it up in a moment. That will be our discussion today. That will be our question today. How does God see the believer, and how should the believer see themselves?

PAUL WRITES TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS

We’re in the book of Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 1 and 2. “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” God picks the leaders, the true leaders. “To the saints.” We’re going to have to talk about that. “Who are in Ephesus,” an ancient city, “and are faithful.” Are you? “In Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace.” That sounds pretty good after what I just read, amen? The good news always sounds a little better after the bad news. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father,” not our enemy, “and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

As we examine the book of Ephesians, and we’ll be in it for quite a while, a few months, because we love going through books of the Bible, it starts off by telling us, as most letters do, who the author is: Paul. He’s one of the most important men in the history of the world. He’s one of the most brilliant men in the history of the world. He’s in the same category as a man like Moses. Presidents and politicians, they come and go, but a man like Paul, we’ve been talking about him for two thousand years.

He’s a man who is responsible for the majority of the New Testament. He wrote, perhaps, thirteen books of the New Testament. No one is sure who wrote Hebrews. Some would argue that perhaps he did, pushing that number to fourteen. Acts chapter 13 through 28 pretty much just focuses on his missionary journeys, so even though he didn’t write that, it’s in large part about him. He contributes the second most content, just by number of verses, in the New Testament after a man named Luke. Well, Luke was also his doctor, good friend, and traveling companion, and so the majority of the New Testament is inextricably connected directly to this man, Paul.

He is a man who was an unbeliever, and was a murderer of Christians, and a very devout religious man until he himself met the Lord Jesus. And as soon as he met the Lord Jesus, his life was forever altered and changed. He's a man who, over the course of his missionary journeys, he walked upwards of twenty miles every day. How committed are you to Jesus? If our parking was bad and we added a block to your walk, would it be over? Twenty miles a day over rugged, rough terrain.

He would preach, and teach, and he was often alone. We have no indication that, at least at that season of his life, he had a wife or children, so no one to comfort him. He was very lonely. He would pull into major urban cities and he would preach. And ultimately, because people violently defend their idols, he would preach against their sin and idolatry, and they would want to kill him. This man was responsible for a number of riots.

He was one who was beaten repeatedly, left for dead, shipwrecked, adrift on the open sea, and he says, quote, "I bear the marks of Jesus on my body," meaning if you saw him, you would see a man covered in scars from the beatings he endured for the Lord that he loved. Some of his letters, likely including Ephesians, were written while he was in jail. This man wouldn't even waste his jail time. He would invest it for the kingdom of God without complaining.

He's an amazing man, and he's writing to a church in Ephesus. And Ephesus is a city—you can read about it in Acts 19—that he pulled into on a missionary journey. It was a magnificent city, kind of like a Chicago or an L.A. in our day. Sometimes when you pick up the Bible, if you're not familiar with it, you think of the rural rhythms of the life and ministry of Jesus around Galilee, and think it's, oh, farmer, fishermen, and sheep.

Well, not by the time you get to Paul. He's moving into urban areas, and he's traveling through major urban centers as a missionary planting churches. He's doing the exact same thing that we're doing. We're trying to follow the missionary methods of the Apostle Paul: pull into a major urban center, see people meet Jesus, plant a church, and then from there, the gospel rings out into the suburban and rural areas.

And so Ephesus, at the time of Paul, was a city of about a quarter million people, so big city. It was on a harbor and it was the beginning of the equivalent of their highway system, the Roman roads. It was a major banking center with the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven great wonders of the world, a place of demonism, and divination, and paganism. It's why the book of Ephesians talks a lot about powers, principalities, spirits, and demons more than any other book of the New Testament. These were highly spiritual people, but they were not God's people.

When Paul showed up in that town and he preached, he literally did start a riot, and it moved into an enormous ancient amphitheater that seats upwards of twenty-five thousand people. It's a stadium. I've been to this city three times. It's no longer an inhabited city; it's now an archeological dig, and it's one of the most significant archeological digs, I believe, on the earth today. It gives us a lot of indication of how the church started, and what the original cities that God reached through men like Paul were like.

So, as he's writing to people in Ephesus, know that he's writing to people like us. We tend to be a church that is in more urban areas: Seattle, Bellevue, moving into Tacoma, Lord willing, high concentration of people in Orange County, Portland, Albuquerque. It's a city; there are a lot of people. There's density and diversity, and because it's on a trade route, there's people coming and going, so lots of cultures, lots of religions, lots of spirituality, lots of complexity.

I want you to know that the people he's writing to are a lot like us, and when Paul would pull into a city, sometimes he'd be there for minutes because they're trying to kill him and he'd be on the run, sometimes hours, days, weeks. In Ephesus, he was there for years. Three years he stayed in Ephesus. He set up a training center, and from there he sent out church planters and the church grew.

And so we've tried to, in as much as we're able, set up Mars Hill kind of like Paul set up Ephesus, and Seattle's kind of like our Ephesus. It's our headquarters and things go out from there, and we do teaching and training. And we do that formally with something called Re:Train, and he did that formally with something called the Hall of Tyrannus. And we send out church planters, and that's what he did. And it became the hub of early Christian mission. And I've got a list here, but we read that Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, Paul himself, Timothy, John, and Luke all worked there or resided there at some point. Luke's tomb is still there and John's tomb may be there. It was an epicenter for early Christianity.

Where Does Paul Start?

So, that's who Paul is and that's to whom he is writing. And he planted the church there, and in all likelihood, at this point he's in prison. He can't be with his church. Imagine me unable to be with you on a Sunday because I'm in jail again. I've never been in jail, but Paul was in jail frequently. Imagine your pastor is in jail again. Complex, right? Your leader, your writer, the one with the apostolic gifting. I'm not saying I'm equal to Paul in any way, but I have some similar functions. Imagine I was in jail again. Imagine that I was going to write you a letter, because they didn't have video cameras in that day. I think Paul would have used one had he had one. Nonetheless, I'm writing you a letter.

Now, imagine you're sitting in a city where you are a minority, an opposed, possibly even persecuted minority, and that the church is young and just kind of getting its feet under it, and there's opposition against it. Your preaching pastor, your founding pastor is in prison. You need to hear from him. How's he doing? What does he have to say? Imagine you heard a letter was written. My letter would just be a letter. His letter is divinely inspired Bible. It's perfect. It's not just a word from Paul, it's a word from God through Paul, so it's better than any letter I could ever write.

And imagine on a Sunday you gathered as the church. Attendance would probably be fairly high, you've got a letter from Paul. So, this Sunday, one of the other elders is going to read what the pastor has to say. It's an important day, right? And that's what would have happened. The church would have gathered, one of the elders would have stood up, probably the second in command, and he would have read this letter to the church.

Here's my question to you: in light of all these circumstances and the teaching of the Bible, where do you think Paul should start? Oftentimes, when it comes to a letter, we sort of blow through the beginning and move on. "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, next. To, from, yay, go." Slow down and ask: where should he start? Where would you start? Where would you hope that I would start?

And what he is seeking to do in his letter to the church at Ephesus and for us is establish an identity. See, you need to know who you are so that you'll know what to do with your whole life. And if you don't know who you are, you won't know what to do. So, more than thirty times in various ways, Paul uses, "in Christ, in him, in the Beloved," and he is establishing an identity for God's people. Well, if that's where Paul is going to start, that's where we need to start, that's where I need to start.

If you were going to explain yourself to someone—if someone came up to you and said, “Tell me about yourself,” you may start with aspects of your life. “Here’s what I do for a living. I’m married. I’m single. I have kids. I don’t. I’m retired. I’m just starting my career.” Whatever it is, those things may explain you, but they do not define you.

Let’s say that it was an unbeliever, or a friend, or family member, or coworker, and they were pressing you, “No, as a Christian, explain to me how you see yourself.” Where would you begin? Let’s say there was a friend who was living somewhere else and they wanted to know the answer to that question. Let’s say that you did something pretty old school and sat down to write them a letter. Where would you start your explanation of how God sees you in Christ and how you see yourself?

Let’s say you were talking to a new Christian that had come from a life of sincere, significant, serious sin and they knew they were a sinner and they were trying to figure out what the rest of their life means in Christ. How would you speak to them? What would you say to them? What would you e-mail them? What would you write to them? Where would you begin? It’s very important because where you start sets everything on a trajectory and on a course.

IS A CHRISTIAN’S IDENTITY AS SINNER OR SAINT?

So, let’s read it again. Here’s the question. The question is: Is a Christian’s identity as sinner or saint? Ephesians 1:1, “To the,” what? “Saints who are in . . . Christ Jesus.” Now, here’s our identity: “in Christ.” And because of our position in Christ, practically we are saints.

How many of you wouldn’t start there? “To the saints.” Do you think they had any bad people in their church? Do you think it’s just ours? Do you think there was anybody there that was annoying, a gossip, somebody showed up Sunday hung over again with their pregnant girlfriend? Do you think that never happened? Do you think these were all people who sort of had a radiation, nuclear glow around them because of the glory of God, with halos, sort of floating in on clouds, plinking harps, just quoting Deuteronomy from memory? I mean, were these all amazing people?

No, they were people like you, people like me. They’re people like us. Some of them are, you know, living a pretty decent life. Some of them need some real work. And he looks at the whole church, the good ones, the bad ones, the faithful Christians, the unfaithful Christians, the people who’ve tithed, and the people who tithed the casino, and he says, “You’re saints. You’re saints. To the saints who are in Christ Jesus.”

Here’s the question: Is a Christian’s identity primarily as sinner or saint? Where do you start? Where does he start? Saint. Saint. He doesn’t start off, “Dear guilty, vile kindling,” right? “To the saints who are in Christ.”

Now, let me explain this. We come from a theological tradition of Protestantism. We tend to be in the Reformed stream. If you don’t know what this means, just hang in there. And there’s something called the five points of Calvinism, and they’re a response to the five points of Arminianism. But it starts, the first point, it’s T-U-L-I-P, tulip. I don’t know why we picked a flower, but I wasn’t there, I didn’t vote, it’s not my fault.

Anyways, the T is total depravity, okay? Now, that doesn’t mean utter depravity. We’re not as bad as we could be. God has laws around us, and a conscience in us to restrain us to some degree. But total depravity means the totality of our being is infected and affected by sin, that we don’t think God’s thoughts, we don’t desire God’s will, we don’t speak God’s words, we don’t do what God would have us to do because we’re not who God made us to be.

But—and this is a major course correction I need to make today at Mars Hill Church—some of you who are Christians think that that’s where your identity begins as well. It doesn’t. It doesn’t. There’s even a bit of a debate right now among theologians, and scholars, and pastors, some of whom are friends of mine, genuinely people I really do appreciate and enjoy, and there’s a debate. Is a Christian’s primary identity as sinner or saint?

But it’s very important. It’s very important. That’s why Paul puts it where? The first verse. He puts it all the way at the top. Let’s start here, because if you don’t know who you are, you won’t know what to do, and when you know who you are, then you know what to do.

So, we’re talking here about your identity. In secular culture, they’ll talk about your self-esteem, they’ll talk about your self-image, they’ll talk about your self-confidence. The problem is always self. It’s living not *coram deo*, which means in the face of God, it’s living *coram mirror*, in the face of me.

Catholic Sainthood

How many of you were raised Catholic? Okay, welcome to our mass. My name is Father Mark. We’ll have the Eucharist in a short while, okay? I can always tell the Catholic visitors. “Father Mark, that was a good mass.” Oh, you’re welcome, good to see you. I was raised Irish Catholic, long line of Irish Catholic. I’ve been back to Ireland to the old country, and we are Catholic as far back as we can trace. Irish, devout, O’Driscoll, Catholic, including my grandmother who, after my grandfather died, joined a lay order of Catholic nuns, and she spent her final years as a nun.

Very devout, Catholic family, so I was baptized as a little boy in the Catholic Church, and I grew up in the Catholic Church. I went to Catholic school for a few years. I was an altar boy assisting the priest with the mass every week, and we talked a lot about saints. Actually in our home, we had pictures of various saints.

And so for me, I thought saints were like superheroes. They’re normal people endowed with amazing, superhuman abilities, like Chastity Man, or Aquaman, or Superman. I mean, that’s what I thought. Like, Superman could fly, and Aquaman could breathe underwater, Chastity Man could keep his hands to himself. These are like superheroes. These are like superheroes. They’re like us, but they have special powers.

And then Paul throws this word out: “To the saints.” Wow. I don’t know about you. How many of you woke up today and felt like, “Saint”? How many of you now are going to make people at work start referring to you by that? “What’s your name?” “I’m Saint Jack.” “I’m Saint Hank.” “Really?” “Yes.”

There is a process in Catholicism—and I love Catholics, I don’t hate Catholics. And the sainthood in Catholicism, it started off, interestingly, where people who loved Jesus would get martyred, and then they would be honored. Well, that’s not necessarily bad, but then over time it got very political and very complicated, and so papal leadership put together sort of rules. Some guys in hats had a meeting, it was all very official, and somebody wrote it down, okay? And Father James Martin, he lays out a ten-step process to become a Catholic saint.

Number one: be Catholic. You're like, "I'm out. It didn't take long." Right? Like, "That's it."

Number two: die. Well, you can't really enjoy your sainthood then.

Number three: a local devotion grows up around your memory. So, you die, and then people make a memorial, and they talk about you, and think about you, and honor you, and maybe start to venerate you.

Number four: your life is investigated. So, guys in hats show up with clipboards. "What was his life like, or her life like? What did they do? What did they not do? What kind of person truly were they?" And then a case is made. So, somebody puts all of this in a folder.

Number five: it goes to the local bishop. The local bishop investigates the case for sainthood. And then it goes all the way to the Vatican. It's got to go to Rome. Guys with bigger hats. You can always tell who's in charge by the size of the hat.

Number six: then people start praying for a postmortem miracle, that you would heal somebody or do something miraculous from heaven, that you would show up on earth through the answering of a prayer. So, somebody gets healed in your name or some miracle happens in your honor.

Number seven: then the Vatican investigates the miracle. So, the guys with the big, big hats and the clipboards show up. They're trying to authenticate that a real miracle happened in your memory and honor after your death.

Now, if it all is confirmed, then the eighth step is they declare you blessed. We're going to look at this in verse 3 next week. Paul says we're saints and blessed, so it doesn't take a huge committee to figure out the blessing of God. But a committee comes together in the Catholic process and declares you blessed.

So, then people start praying for another miracle. You've gotta do a lot of miracles after you die, alright? So there's a lot to be done. And then if another miracle happens to confirm your sainthood, they take a vote, you're a saint. You're a saint!

Then you can be venerated, then schools can be named after you, and churches can be named after you. You might even get a festival day, like a Saint Patrick's Day. You may get one of those! And so whatever your name is, it becomes the name of a school or a church.

I was watching *Moonshiners* recently, and there's like, Tickle, and Popcorn, and Jim Bob. Very rural. Any time you get two first names, you know it's very rural. So you could have, like, the Tickle Tabernacle. You could have Popcorn Parish. You could have Jim Bob Junior High. They'd name things after you if you made it to sainthood. You made it!

Biblical Sainthood

Now, Paul makes it really simple, doesn't he? One step, no money, no committee, nobody with a clipboard, nobody with a hat, you don't have to die, you don't have to do a miracle. One thing, what is it? To be a saint, what's required, Mars Hill? In Christ Jesus. Are you in Christ Jesus? If so, you're a saint. You're a saint.

Now, I know for some of you right now, your mind just exploded, okay, because you have thought, "The more sinful I think I am, the closer to God I am. The more I focus on my sin, the more pleased God is with me." God is not honored by self-esteem in the secular world and God is not honored with self-condemnation in the spiritual world. God is honored when our thoughts and our focuses are primarily on Jesus Christ, that our identity is not in how much we love ourselves or how much we hate ourselves, but who he is, and what he's done, and what it means to be in Christ.

See, some of you think that the best sermons are the ones where I beat you up. You think that the best Bible studies are where others beat you up. Jesus already took the beating. There's no need for you to add to what he has done. In fact, it would be wrong of you to do so.

Some of you are confused, as I am, and you would ask, "Pastor Mark, should we not see ourselves as a sinner?" You should, but your primary focus should not be on the fact that you are sinner, but that you have a Savior. See, over three hundred times, the Bible speaks of people as sinners. As I told you, more than six hundred times it speaks of the wrath of God, and the wrath of God is for sinners.

And some would say, "I'm not experiencing the wrath of God in my life. It's all going well." I read the verse where he says that you are, in Romans 2, "storing up wrath." It's like there is a dam, and behind it the wrath of God is backing up, and on the day of your death, you will be flooded with the wrath of God in the conscious, eternal torments of hell forever. You're getting away with nothing. You're just stacking up everything.

However, when it comes to the Christian, when it comes to the believer, when it comes to the one who is positionally in Christ, only maybe three times does the Bible refer to us, insofar as our identity goes, as sinner. And those three occasions are debated, highly debated, and it is entirely possible that those three occasions are referring not even to a Christian but to a non-Christian.

My point: the Bible does not primarily speak of you, if you are a Christian, with an identity as sinner. The Bible sees those who are not in Christ positionally as sinner, and for those who are in Christ positionally as saint, because when you meet Jesus, everything changes. You receive a new nature. Paul says elsewhere to the Corinthians, "You become a new creation in Christ," that "old things have passed away and all things have become new."

Here's the good news, friend: if you are in Christ, you're not just a guilty, wicked, vile sinner who's forgiven. You're a new creation in Christ with a new identity, and a new biography, and a new eternity. All things have become new. Some of you say, "I don't feel that." That's why you have to believe that. See, once we believe what God has said, we start to feel as God feels toward us.

I'll give you some ways of seeing this. Sin may explain some of your activity, but does not define your entire identity in Christ. You will sin some of the time, but you are a saint all of the time in Christ. Sin is some of what you do, but not the totality of who you are in Christ. There is a difference between being sin and having sin in Christ. Because you have a new identity as a saint, you can have a new victory over sin in Christ. As a sinner, you have a dark past, but as a saint, you have a bright future in Christ.

Some of you are stuck because your primary identity is in your sin and not in your Savior. You're unable to move beyond your past because of shame, and guilt, and conviction, and condemnation. God has forgiven you, if you are in Christ, for things that you would say to this point, "I just can't forgive myself," which sounds cute, but it's blasphemous. Because if what you're saying is, "God forgives me but I can't forgive myself," what you're saying is, "There's a God above Jesus with my name, and though the lesser, lower God named Jesus forgives me, the higher, greater God with my last name cannot."

Some of you have wrongly thought that if you will obsess over your sin more, God will be more pleased with you. Some of you have taken your sin on as your primary identity, and the only difference you would see between a Christian and a non-Christian is a non-Christian is a guilty, evil, vile, wicked sinner, and a Christian is a guilty, evil, vile, wicked sinner who's forgiven. No difference in who you are, no change in your nature, no alternation in your identity whatsoever, that the Christian and the non-Christian are the same, and the only difference is one is forgiven, the other is not, but neither are changed.

See, in Christ, one theologian says, "We are genuinely new though not completely new." You are genuinely new, and through the course of your life, there's something called progressive sanctification where, in Christ, you're growing, and learning, and changing by the power of the Holy Spirit. Until one day, you're in the eternal resurrected state, sin is gone, and you are with Jesus, and then you will be totally new. But let me say, the moment you receive Christ is the moment you become genuinely new and you're on the path to becoming totally new forever.

And I tell you this, Mars Hill, because if you don't understand this, you will have a false view of the good news of the gospel of Jesus, and that is: give your sin to Jesus and you go to heaven when you die, and there's no help in the meantime. Give your sin to Jesus, receive a new identity in Christ, and start to live a new life in Christ, and then enjoy a new eternity with Christ.

This also changes the way we interact with one another. If you are dealing with a brother and sister in Christ, you need to remind them of who they are. When they're sinning, you need to say, "You do not have to continue to choose sin. In Christ, you're a saint."

I can't get into this in great detail, but as a tangential study in the Scriptures recently, I was looking at what Jesus did when he was tempted. See, the Bible says in Hebrews 4 that he was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Well, how did the Lord Jesus resist all sin and temptation? How did he say no every time? You look at places like Luke 4 and Matthew 4 where Satan comes, and let's just say that our temptation is not as severe as Jesus', that he was in the wilderness fasting for forty days and forty nights, he is hungry, he's isolated, he's tired, and let me say that the enemy will hit you when you're hungry, isolated, and tired.

And that's when he comes to Jesus, and what's interesting is when he tempts the Lord Jesus, he speaks to his identity. He says this: "If you are the Son of God." That's a question. See, under all temptation is a question of identity. "If you are the Son of God." What does Jesus say? "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Satan comes to Jesus and the temptation is, "I want to question your identity." Jesus says, "I will not give into sin because I know who I am. I am the Lord your God."

Jesus knows who he is. Because Jesus knows who he is, he knows what to do. Once you know who you are in Christ, you'll know what to do for Christ. Once you know who you are in Christ, you'll know what to do with Christ. Once you know who you are, you'll know what life looks like in Christ. Do you see that? Does that make sense?

See, if your primary identity is as sinner, and then you are tempted to sin, your identity will determine your activity. "I'm a sinner, I guess I'm going to sin." No! "I'm a saint, I don't have to. I'm a new creation, I don't have to go back to old ways. I'm genuinely new and that means that the decisions that I make and the ways that I live, they're new in Christ." Amen?

So, this is what I want you to know, Mars Hill. I don't want you to get stuck in the trap of "I can't change" or "I can change myself." Instead, I want you to know, "I can change in Christ. I can resist temptation in Christ. I can be obedient in Christ. Because I am positionally righteous in Christ, I can start to live more practically righteous out of the righteousness that I find in Christ."

I love you. This is one thing that can change everything for you. And for those of you who are navel-gazers, and self-condemners, and those who think that the worse you feel the holier you are, it's time to look up and out, and to not just see your sin but see your Savior, and to see yourself as a saint in Christ.

A SAINT IS REMORSEFUL OVER SIN

And let me say this: a saint is remorseful over sin. I want to unpack this for you. Paul elsewhere talks about his own sin. He does. Philippians 2, he talks about his own sin, he talks about the things that he has remorse for in his life, chief of sinners, persecutor of the church. He's remorseful.

But let me say, because I want to speak now for a moment—see, when I started, I wanted to speak to those of you who don't have much of a conscience. I started real strong for those of you who don't have a really well-functioning conscience, try to get your attention. Now, for those of you with a tender conscience, maybe you're more like my daughters.

I have two daughters that are more tender-conscienced. I don't need to say a lot to get a response, alright? They want—because of the Holy Spirit in them, they want to know the truth and they want to do what's right. I wasn't a kid like that, so I can't use myself as an illustration. I didn't know the Lord, and I had a hard heart and a stiff neck, and the whole of Scripture is true about me as well, until I met Christ and he gave me a new heart.

Some of you are like that though, you're tender-conscienced. If somebody points out sin in your life, you receive it, you're devastated by it, you grieve it, and you hate it, and you want to change it. You're tender-conscienced. Some of you are like that. The Lord doesn't need to yell at you; he whispers and that's good. He doesn't need to push you; he just needs to show you the direction to go and that's where you want to go.

Conviction vs. Condemnation

My fear is for those of you who have a tender conscience, you will not understand what it means that a saint is remorseful, and so I want to show you the difference between conviction and condemnation. Conviction is from God, but condemnation is from Satan. Conviction leads to life, but condemnation leads to despair. Conviction ends in joy, condemnation ends in sorrow.

Conviction makes us want to change, condemnation makes us believe we can't change. Conviction leads to a new identity in Christ, condemnation leads to an old identity in sin. Conviction brings specific awareness of a sin, condemnation brings vague uncertainty about sin. Conviction looks to Jesus, condemnation looks to self. And conviction is a blessing, condemnation is a burden.

He starts by saying this: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father." I want you to see the difference between conviction and condemnation is really the difference between the character of God the Father and the character of Satan, his enemy and our adversary. Satan wants your identity to be in your sin. He wants you to never be able to leave it or escape it. He wants you to have no hope for your future. He wants to shame you, he wants to remind you, he wants to condemn you, he wants to destroy you. He wants the worst day of life to be the defining aspect of every day of life.

Sometimes, if you've not done anything wrong, he'll just want to give you general, vague, uncertain conviction. It's really condemnation masquerading as conviction. Some of you will feel that God is far, and he's angry against you, and he hates you, and he's mad at you, and he's just waiting to drop a hammer on your head, and you're not sure what you've done so you become obsessed, and you start investigating your life. "Where are my idols?" and "Where is my sin?" and "What have I done wrong?" and "What are my motives?" and "I can't find anything big. Maybe it's something small."

And you obsess, and you become worried, and you become anxious, and you become discouraged, and God seems far, and you seem hopeless. And for those of you with tender consciences, you know exactly what I'm talking about. You become like the Old Testament Jews who are trying to cleanse their house, and they're looking under the rug, and they're looking under the lamp, and they're looking under the bed, and they're dusting out the corners, and they're trying to get it all clean. You're like that with your life.

And it seems holy, it seems righteous because you'll talk about your sin, and how awful you are, and how evil you are, and all the bad things you've done. And you'll share your story, and you'll talk about how terrible you feel, and others will applaud you and how brave and authentic you are, but it's still all the attention to you, all of the focus to you, and everybody's looking at you, nobody's looking at him.

God is a Father. He's a Father who comes up to his kid who's in sin and says, "Okay, first, let me specifically name the sin, so you know exactly what I'm talking about. Just not going to yell at you in general and make you figure it out." And he'd put an arm around you. "I love you. You're my child. This, this is not acceptable. So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to help you. We're going to stop this, okay? We're going to do it together." This is the dad who smiles at you, gives you a kiss on the head, and keeps his arm around you as he's helping walk you away from the sin and temptation.

God's a Father like that. When he points out sin, it's conviction. Like, "Really, Dad? Thanks. I appreciate the help. You love me, so that doesn't cause me to be kicked out of the family? Oh. And you're not done with me? You love me, and you're going to help me, and you're here for me, and you see that who I am going to be is not who I've been, and you're going to help me get there? Wow! What a Dad! What a Dad!" That's your Father.

Conviction is different than condemnation. Do you understand that? Conviction is different than condemnation. Jesus said he would send the Holy Spirit to convict God's people of sin. Paul says in Romans 8:1, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ." Jesus tells us that believers will get conviction, and Paul tells us that believers will not get condemnation.

So, a saint is remorseful over sin. You can look back and say, "Boy, that was sin and I'm really grieved that that was what I said, or did, or failed to say or do." Paul does. He says he's the chief of sinners, and a hypocrite, and he's very clear elsewhere about his own sin. It may explain some of what he does, but it doesn't define who he is.

A SAINT IS POWERFUL OVER SIN

A saint is powerful over sin. I know we're only hammering two verses today, but they're good verses, amen? "To the saints." Now, when you are dealing with a believer, remind them of who they are. "To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus."

How many of you would not say that? Faithful. How many of you would not say, "Hi! I'm a saint and faithful." Because immediately, people would start asking questions. "How much do you tithe?" "Oh, not enough." "How many verses have you memorized?" "Very few." "How many sandwiches have you made for the poor?" "I ate all the sandwiches." Not been super faithful. Not been super faithful.

Do you want to be faithful? Do you want to be faithful? Saints want to be faithful. Because God is faithful to us, we want to be faithful to him. It's why the Bible says, "Even when we're faithless, he's faithful."

How are you going to be faithful to the God who's faithful to you? Are you going to try harder? Are you going to feel worse? No. He tells us: grace. Ah! There it is. My wife's name, one of the best words ever, grace. Oh! "Grace to you and peace."

Now, if you're not a Christian, let me be clear: you have no peace with God. You are a sinner, you need a Savior. You're living in the path of the wrath of God. You're storing up wrath for the day of judgment. You may not believe in hell, but you will. Let me be clear. Let me not preach peace where there is no peace. You need Jesus and you need him right now.

For those of you who are in Christ: peace. Doesn't that sound good? Because all of the wrath was poured out on Jesus, and all of the blessings poured out on us. God is not angry for those who are in Christ. He's very loving and compassionate. In fact, not only does he have peace with us, he gives grace to us, grace to forgive us when we sin, grace to change who we are, and grace to empower us to live a new life.

Do you know how you could be faithful? By the grace of God. See, Christians tend to think of the saving grace of God. There's also the empowering grace of God. The saving grace of God forgives all the sins that we have committed. The empowering grace of God helps us to stop committing those sins. It's wonderful. That's the presence, and the person, and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the believer. Deep down, they say, "I want to be faithful."

And here's how theologians would explain all of this: they would say that the indicatives precede the imperatives. Here's how I would simplify it: who you are determines what you do. See, Mars Hill, we don't start with: read your Bible, pray, serve, give. We start with Jesus. Jesus. He's perfect for those who are imperfect. He's faithful for those who are unfaithful.

He's righteous for those who are unrighteous. Do you see who he is? Do you see what he's done? Do you see who he has made you to be in Christ and the grace that he's given you to live out of that new identity?

So, Mars Hill, the reason we give is because God so loved the world he gave his only Son. The reason we serve is because God serves us. The reason that we forgive others is because in Christ, God has forgiven us. The reason that we pour ourselves out is because our great God and Savior poured himself out.

So, what we do is not so that God would love us, but because in Christ he has. It's not so that we would achieve an identity, but because we've received one in Christ. It's not so that God would be pleased with us, it's because we're so pleased to be in Christ. This makes life a blessing and not a burden. This is life lived in light of our identity in Christ, and that means that we get the joy, and he gets the glory, and others get the good.

HOW'S YOUR FAITHFULNESS?

That being said, let me close with a bit of a summary. How's our faithfulness? How's your faithfulness? When we talk "our faithfulness," you can hide. When we talk "your faithfulness," you've got to think about that. We just finished a year and started a new one, so I want to give a brief report on the faithfulness of God to Mars Hill and the faithfulness of Mars Hill in Christ. We had our biggest year ever. More people, more baptisms than ever. Lots of people to love and to serve, and we rejoice in that.

Insofar as financial giving goes, about one-third of our church last year gave nothing, the largest category was \$500 or less for the year. The vast majority was \$1500 for the year or less. And as you can see, \$100,000 or more, just three people. We don't have a lot of very wealthy givers in our church. We have a heavy load to bear financially, and so everybody needs to carry their portion. We don't have anyone who's able to carry a very large portion. I don't know of a church of our size, personally, that doesn't have someone giving a million dollars plus a year, and we're just not there, so everybody's in it together, and there's no large-giving person to make up the difference for those who aren't faithful. That's where we find ourselves.

The good news is this: we didn't quite meet our budget expectation for the year, we fell short about \$500,000. That's not the good news. The good news is we also, in the grace of God, stewarded the resources well and we spent \$700,000 less than we projected, so we ended the year about even. About even. And I would say right now, in this fiscal climate, even feels pretty good, amen? If the government could get to broke, it'd be pretty fantastic. So that's where we are. We're even, okay?

As well, we have three major projects I want to set before you this year. We were hoping to end the year very strong financially with a bit of excess so that we could then open Mars Hill Downtown, Mars Hill Everett, and Mars Hill Tacoma. We didn't receive that excess. Now, let me say this as well: in the grace of God, we missed our own fiscal cliff this year. We had, in years past, financially budgeted per an annual budget, but a lot of our money came in in December, which means we'd run a cash deficit and then pay off the proverbial credit cards in December.

Well, this year, the decision was made by your executive pastor Sutton Turner, and Kerry Dodd, your CFO, and your executive elders, "No, we're going to live within our means. We're going to not wait for the end of the year to have a big bonus to pay off our deficit. If we get that bonus, we can always invest it in ministry, but if we don't, we'll be viable." It's the thing that the government didn't do. It's the thing that the government didn't do. So, in the grace of God, we made that hard decision midpoint of last year, and so we're not driving off our own fiscal cliff right now. And so God was gracious to us and we rejoice in that, and he gave us wise counsel through his people, and we rejoice in that.

So what that means is going into this year, we're basically even, but we're needing to go above and beyond to get Mars Hill Downtown formally relocated. They're currently meeting in their building. They've raised \$1.2 million of the total \$2 million goal that we need. Some of you know this is the oldest church in Seattle. It's going to come under great persecution, opposition, and criticism, in large part because of things that I say, and so you can pray for them.

And it's an older building, it's a beautiful building, but the electrical is not up to what we need, and things like there's not bathrooms. I know some of you are like, "You megachurches, you just waste money." We need a bathroom. Like, it's not like gold rims on our third SUV, I mean, we need a bathroom. And so right now, the porta-potties are outside for Mars Hill Downtown. I was there recently. It was cold and something to pray about, okay? So, things like bathrooms. So, we're trying to raise the rest of that. We'd encourage you to be faithful.

Mars Hill Everett has been setting up and tearing down in a school. We don't have enough space for the children and it's not really working. This armory that we are finishing the purchase of actually is, financially, a very, very, very good deal for us, but it will take some money. We are trying to raise \$750,000 to get the bathrooms, and the kids' space, and the electrical, and everything up to speed, and we're about \$126,000 of the way there. And so we praise God for those who have given, and we'd ask you to be giving generously this year and be faithful so we can get that opened up here in the next few months.

And then lastly, our third goal this year is Mars Hill Tacoma, one of the oldest churches in Tacoma, a very strategic area. Everett's a good place to set up a base to reach the North Puget Sound; Tacoma's a great place to push out to the South Puget Sound. A beautiful old building that God has provided us, but it has a lot of deferred maintenance, so it totally needs a new roof, again it has no bathrooms. I don't know, for some reason we find beautiful buildings with no bathrooms, and they tend to be inexpensive, but they tend to need some work to bring them back to functionality and viability. And so it needs a roof, it needs bathrooms, it needs electrical, and our hope is to officially move in and start Mars Hill Tacoma this fall.

So those are the three things that I would say please pray, and give, and care. I'll just say this: I believe you will be faithful. I believe you will be faithful. God has been faithful to you, he's always been faithful to us, and I believe that you will be faithful to him with us.

And so to that end, how to give in 2013. You can go to MarsHill.com and open up a Connect account. That'll allow us to know what you're planning on doing this year financially, and that will also allow you to be giving regularly, cheerfully, sacrificially. And one thing I'd set before you: when God saved me at the age nineteen, every year a goal of mine and ours has been, as a family, to give more than we did the year before. And when we started, we were college students, and God has been gracious to answer that prayer now twenty-three years in a row. And so we would ask you, "Where was I last year and where will I be this year?"

But in closing, let me say that this is all in Christ. Christ has given to us, so we give. Christ has loved us, so we love. Christ has served us, so we serve. Christ has gotten to know us, so we get to know others. Amen? And all it is is reflecting who Jesus is to the watching world. And so even in our service, we set it up so that you hear about Jesus and then respond with tithes, offerings, Communion, singing, and the like, and it's an opportunity for you to be faithful by the grace of God to the God who's been faithful to you.

And so Lord Jesus, I thank you for the great honor that I have of teaching the Bible at Mars Hill Church. I really love these people; I really love my, quote unquote, "job"; and I love the opportunity to open the Bible, and to dig into the Scriptures, and to help people, by your grace, know who you are and who they are. And so, Lord Jesus, I pray right now for those who are not in Christ, that, Holy Spirit, you would bring them the gift of repentance and a new nature. Lord Jesus, for those of us who are in Christ, we may know that theologically, but we forget it practically. Help us this week to remember who we are and help us to remind one another of who we are in Christ, amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.