

Lent: Lighten Up: The Joyful Truth About Sin & Grace

Lent 1: Let's Talk About Sin

March 6, 2022

Romans 7:15

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

What is sin? Let's start with a simple definition.

"Sin is breaking a moral law." If you're religious—as many of us happen to be—and you believe that moral laws come from God, you might say: "sin is breaking God's law, or disobeying the will of God." One of the beautiful things about being a human being is our capacity for living morally. We're animals. But we're evolved to be moral animals. I like the way Wendell Berry puts it: "*Rats and roaches live by competition under the laws of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy.*" We human beings are capable of moral reflection and moral action.

Many human cultures choose to write down our moral laws. And our religions enshrine morality—they underscore that moral action isn't just a "nice feature" of human life, but it's central to human life. Moral action is sacred and good. Think about how the 10 Commandments function. Think about Jesus' summary of the 10 Commandments as a distillation of the moral action that is expected of us: love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself.

So, everything's great, right? We have these moral laws that guide our shared life together and map the good life. We know there are things that we can do with our bodies that nurture and bless other living beings. All of us just do what we're supposed to do, right?

That's the bizarre, maddening, bewildering part of the human condition. We're capable of writing and following these lovely, humane moral codes to guide our lives... and then we act like they don't apply to us. We know what we're supposed to do... and we don't always do it.

That's the conundrum—that's the conflict—that's at the heart of this whole conversation about sin and grace. We know what's good. We don't do what's good.

This tendency we have to deviate from moral laws is actually written into the story of the giving of the law itself in Exodus. You know this. Moses goes up the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments—God's great gift to the people—and when Moses comes down, what are we doing—dancing around a cow, worshiping an idol, breaking the first commandment! Do we have any Law and Order fans in the house? Every single crime show on television is predicated on this same tension. Every show begins with a crime committed—the violation of a moral law. Lawyers and detectives piece together clues that will bring the perpetrator to justice. The ending is always bittersweet—when the offender finally confesses, it is tragic, pathetic. We see how this person was urged or compelled or coerced against their better judgment against their

nature to do what they did. Even though the crime is solved, there's no joy in the justice. Next week will begin with another crime.

No one has ever put into better words our human proclivity to deviate from moral laws than the apostle Paul in the letter to the Romans.

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

That's sin. We know what is moral. We know what is good. We know what we should do. And we do something else.

And when we do that something else, someone gets hurt. Sin has consequences. Sometimes mild. Sometimes catastrophic. Sin causes pain. So much of our lives are spent—consciously or unconsciously dealing with the pain caused by sin. Journalist Chris Hedges wrote a powerful book about the 10 Commandments. He looked at each of the commandments through a story about the impact that a broken commandment had on people's lives. In the chapter on murder he tells of an Army chaplain who spends his days counseling soldiers who are trying to exorcise the ghosts of those they have killed. In the chapter on adultery, he tells the story of a young man who is the child of a loveless sexual encounter who as he moved through his teen years searched desperately something that felt like real love—and the only community that he can find is in a gang called the Latin Kings.

Hedges book doesn't shame or moralize about sin. He just tells stories that show what we already know: sin hurts people.

We know what sin is. It's breaking a moral law, disobeying the Divine will. We know sin not just because a preacher says it—we know sin because of the wounds it causes.

What can be done about it? What can be done about sin? Are we just stuck in this place where we're destined to commit sins and hurt people and feel guilty and that just repeats over and over and over? Some people have decided they can solve this problem by just doing away with the idea of sin entirely. They act like sin doesn't exist. They say "I'll do what I want and I'm the one who gets to decide. And if it's good for me but it hurts you, well too bad for you." People are living like that. Yes, it's pathological. We had one of those folks for a president not too long ago.

I don't think you can pretend like there are no moral laws and that there's no such thing as sin. Our tradition teaches that we are not powerless against sin—not its effects and not its causes. God helps us with sin. **God's answer to sin is grace.** What does that mean? What is grace? We'll get into it much more later in this series, but in short: grace is love. Grace is love for you that does not account for the ways you have disobeyed God's will, or broken moral laws, or rationalized and justified and weaseled your way through life. God loves you. This is grace.

How does grace “fix” sin? But I think some of us imagine God fixes sin on some cosmic ledger where there is an accounting of every sin you’ve ever committed and that eventually God kind of wipes those sins away. That’s way too abstract. Our religion is much more practical than that. So much of our religion is concrete and in our body. So today, I want to show you how grace might deal with sin. We’re going to do some live demonstrations. Are you ready?

When the Biblical writers talk about sin, they emphasize that there is a “thingness” to sin. They often use metaphor to describe the physical reality of sin. There are 4 major Biblical metaphors for sin. And I’m going to show you what they look and feel like and then we’ll also show you what grace looks like when it responds to sin.

The primary metaphor for sin in the Hebrew Scriptures is “**weight.**”

- Psalm 38: “my sins... weigh like a burden too heavy for me.”
- Demonstrate putting the weight on s/o shoulders
- Why is sin like a weight...? For the one who sinned? For the one sinned against?
- What does grace look like here?
- LIFTING THE WEIGHT; god’s grace removes the weight of sin
- Mt 11: ²⁸ “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” By God’s grace, the weight of sin is lifted.

The second metaphor for sin in the Hebrew scriptures is “**stain.**”

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

- Let’s go ahead and stain this shirt (coffee, sharpie);
- How is sin like a stain? What does grace look like in this situation?
- God’s grace washes us clean... or God removes the stigma of being stained.

The third Biblical metaphor for sin is “**debt**”

Give us this day our daily bread.^[4]
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

- There’s an economic idea at play here. That when you sin, you take something. Then you owe something in return.
- Have someone take my cinnamon roll... take a bite. You can’t simply give it back.
- Modern life is complicated—we take things from people without even knowing it. We may benefit from artificially low wages—do we owe those workers? What about the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow—debts incurred long ago?
- How does grace respond to debt?
- Your debt is paid. Your debt is forgiven. God’s grace eliminates debts.

The final scriptural metaphor for sin is “hamartia.” Hamartia means “missing the mark.” It’s an archery term.

- Take a few shots at the target
- How is sin like missing the mark? How does God’s grace help?
- You can’t unmiss something... you can try again. You can get a teacher. You can practice. You can get a bigger target.
- What is the mark? Is our goal perfection? Is there such thing as “good enough?”

What I hope you see is that with all four of these metaphors—weight, stain, debt, and missing the mark—there are clear images of what it means for “grace” to change the reality of sin.

How do *you* describe sin and its effects? Weight? Stain? Debt? Missing the mark?

- brokenness
- alienation
- going to sleep
- Christopher Morse: “sin is simply humanity’s separation and hiding from God.”

Part of what it is to be human is to be capable of moral action—but to fall short of doing it. This is sin, and it has real, painful consequences.

Yet, to belong to our tradition is to know that God sees our sin and its consequences. And God responds to sin with grace. Grace is always God’s response to sin. And grace works.

Amen.