

Sin Impacts Everything

Mark 9:42-50

Introduction

Have you ever heard someone speak and they sounds really hot under the collar and passionate about something but you just want to say, “Hey dude, chill out, yeah”?

I may be a passionate Queensland supporter but I remember hearing one man talk about the State of Origin and why it was vital to beat the Blues. This wasn't just about that year, it wasn't even about the history of State of Origin. I wasn't surprised when the man went on about how Queensland always got the raw deal of losing our best players to NSW when the competition was based on where the players were currently playing. However, this man didn't end there. I was informed that Australia's politicians, dominated by New South Welshmen, had decided in World War 2 to sacrifice the northern part of Australia down to the NSW / QLD boarder should Australia be invaded by the Japanese. If that wasn't enough there was the stories of how NSW had sought to sabotage the establishment of QLD as a colony. Needless to say, I really did want to say to this man, “Hey mate, please, just take a chill pill and relax.” I didn't say anything because the fact that I was born in NSW and spent the first four years of my life there would probably haven meant that I was inexorably tainted with blue blood should I dare suggest that State of Origin was just a game.

When it comes to speaking against the things which are described in the Bible as sin, it seems that people will very quickly want to say, “Hey man, just settle down. Why are you so uptight about this?” Someone who seeks to avoid sin and speak against sin may be described as a ‘wowsers’, a ‘puritan’, a ‘prude’, ‘repressed’, ‘too heavenly minded she’s of no earthly good’, a ‘goodie two shoes’, and so on.

This morning we're going to look at words of Jesus which would probably have resulted in some people wanting to say to him, “Jesus, why are you getting so worked up about this? Can't you just relax?”

Defining Sin

Before we begin it's worth providing a definition of 'sin'. Sin is a word which is often heard in churches and even in society (Football uses a 'sin bin'), but it's not something which is always clear in our heads. For some people sin has to do with really bad things like murder and child abuse, for others sin is simply you enjoying yourself because if it's fun it must be bad for you or God is against it, and for others sin is simply having a thought of doing something wrong. With all these mixed messages, let's clear up a few mis-conceptions.

First, when you have the thought in your head of doing something wrong but you don't pursue it, that is not a sin, that's temptation. All people, including Jesus, experience temptation but temptation only becomes sin if we act upon it or we dwell upon it as a fantasy. Seeing your sister get an award when you really wanted it may see you tempted with jealousy. The thought pops into your head, "I hope she trips as she goes to get the award and everyone laughs at her." Satan is both the tempter, and so he prompts such thoughts, but is also the accuser and so he will try to trick you at this point by saying, "Look what evil thoughts you have about your own sister. You horrible person, God won't forgive you for this. Oh, but since you've already sinned, you may as well keep thinking about how embarrassing that fall will be for your sister."

Martin Luther is quoted as saying, "You can't stop the birds flying over your head but you can stop them nesting in your hair." You can't stop that thought of "Wouldn't it be nice if my sister fell over so people will laugh at her." That's temptation. But we can stop dwelling on that thought, imagining and playing it over and over in our minds or working to see our temptations come to reality. To say again, temptation is not sin, sin is dwelling on temptation (as in a fantasy) or acting upon temptation.

Second, there are lots of great things to enjoy in life which are not sinful at all. I've heard of women who loved baking but who would say that they were only doing it for the sake of their family because they thought that it would be sinful if they enjoyed

baking just because it gave them joy. That is a lie. God wants us to enjoy the good things that he has given us and to give thanks to him for those things. A husband and wife enjoying lovely intimate times together shouldn't feel bad. God created sex and knows the best way for it to be enjoyed is between a husband and a wife.

So then, sin is not temptation, nor is it connected with enjoying things, so what is sin? There are a few ways of describing sin in the Bible, one is of missing the goal or the mark. The idea is that if God has a standard and when we don't meet that standard we sin. Needless to say, when God's standard is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37) and "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:39) you can see that it's pretty easy to fall short of God's standard and so all people sin.

Other than falling short of the goal or mark, sin in the Bible is also presented through the image of broken relationship. In the Genesis story of our forebears' rebellion against God, we see from the consequences that were read for us that there is a broken relationship between humanity and God, between humanity and nature, between people and even in ourselves there is brokenness.

However, more critical than missing God's standard or of the breaking of relationships, sin in the Bible is most crucially regarded as an active or passive rebellion against God. Therefore, one way of defining sin is that it is putting anyone or anything before God. God is the only one worthy of our allegiance.

So then, with a better idea of what sin is and isn't, let's look at this passage in Mark 9 and consider why Jesus is so strong in his language here.

Sin Impacts Others (v. 42)

We start with verse 42, which we also looked at briefly last week, where Jesus says, "If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were thrown into the sea."

Last week we saw how this verse could be tied to verse 38 where the disciples were telling someone who wasn't part of the twelve to not cast out demons in Jesus' name. Whether it is related to forbidding others from proclaiming Christ and seeing people experience the freedom which Jesus brings or whether it's dealing with encouraging Christians to sin generally, the point is still very clear, to influence someone who trusts in Jesus to instead give their allegiance to another and so betray their commitment to God is a terrible and serious sin.

I wonder if the very firm words, "it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were thrown into the sea" are indicative of the damage that people's sins do to others. While it's made clear that "little ones" refers to all who trust in Jesus, how much more pointed are these words if we consider them referring to literal "little ones" too. How much horrendous damage has been done when churches have not protected children and vulnerable people in our care and so have damaged their view of God and others?

Just this past week I was speaking with a young man who was on the verge of committing violence because of the improper actions of someone who claimed to be a Christian. While I'm seeking to counsel that young man to not pursue violence I'm also thinking that the person that this young man is angry with is risking terrible judgement from God. Do you really think that Jesus should just 'chill out' or are his pointed and challenging words justified?

Sin Impacts Ourselves (vv. 43-48)

After mentioning the damage that sin does in connection to others, Jesus next focuses on the seriousness of sin for ourselves.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the

kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

How seriously do you regard sin? Are you aware of where you allow someone or something to have more allegiance and trust from you than God? Where are you weak? Is it your hand, or your foot or your eye? What measures are you willing to take to address sin in your life? No, Jesus doesn't intend for his words to be taken literally here, Jesus knows that if your right hand caused you to sin that you would still have your left hand. Jesus isn't calling upon people to mutilate their bodies but rather to take radical and decisive steps to correct sin when we see it in our lives.

I'll give you two examples from my own life. On my phone and computer, etc. I have a program that records all my internet usage and it sends a report to a friend of mine who keeps me accountable about what I'm looking at. I've chosen a friend who is not embarrassed about asking bluntly if something I've looked at is unhelpful. I would rather cut off a tiny measure of my freedom (my freedom to anonymity on the internet) than to risk indulging in sin that would dishonour my Lord, my wife and my family.

On a lighter note, but still important, I struggle with self-control when it comes to computer games. There's lots of computer games which are fun and I don't feel guilty about enjoying them. I enjoy the silly cartoons of *Angry Birds*, the strategy of *Solitaire* and so on. My problem is knowing when to stop playing games. For that reason I don't put games on my phone. However, about a month ago Ella had her birthday and we gave her the very edifying card game, *Exploding Kittens*. The problem was that there was also a phone version of the game and so I downloaded it to check it out and before I know I've wasted hours playing that silly game. The solution of course was simple, I deleted it. It wasn't a full cutting off of a limb but I know it needed to be done.

Where are you weak? Are you aware that Facebook or other sites like that are the place where you try to cultivate a false appearance because you want to have one up on others, feeding your pride? Do you know that when you step behind the wheel

of a car that the red mist comes down and every street is a racetrack? Who are the people that you love to meet with because they always have the latest gossip? Whatever is your weakness, what steps are you willing to take to stop yourself from falling into sin? For some, changing who you hang out with, changing the amount of time you allow yourself to be on Facebook, maybe even changing the type of car that you drive could feel like an amputation. Is God worth that to you? Is your hope for life eternal worth that to you?

For God's sake ... and for your own sake, be willing to take radical steps to address any areas of sin. This is not about you earning God's love or about proving that you're worthy of heaven, this is simply demonstrating that Jesus really is your king and you want to live a life characterised by the values of his kingdom. If Jesus isn't your king then you won't care about sin but then there is a very unpleasant image of the future presented to us. Why is Jesus passionate about avoiding sin and uses such strong language? Because Jesus is passionate about you! Jesus wants the best for you!

Sin Impacts Our Witness (vv. 49-50)

The call to live with Jesus as our king leads us to the final verses in this little section, verses 49 and 50, "Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Here we move from fire being an image of punishment to being an image of testing. This testing is connected to the image of salt which Jesus uses to indicate how his followers were to be different from the world.

We've seen that sin impacts others, that sin impacts ourselves, and here we're presented with the image that sin impacts our witness, our living distinctly in the world. Put simply, sin makes us 'un-salty'. Followers of Jesus are called to be salt, that is we're called to be different from the world around us in a positive way and yet sin causes us to lose our saltiness and then how can we be made salty again? Jesus

then ties this image of salt with the early challenge to not cause others to sin, moving from a negative reference to a positive one. Instead of causing others to sin we are to “Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” There is a strong connection between what Jesus says here and what he says in John 13:35, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

I’ve already indicated how sins can have a significant impact on those outside of faith as they look in. Author Brennan Manning wrote, “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

I mentioned last week that doing things in Christ’s name will mean that we have to speak up, now this passage calls us to “live up”. We are to speak up about Christ’s lordship and that he is the victorious king but we are also to live lives which are consistent with that gospel message. In this way we will be salty - distinct from the world and yet making a positive impact on the world.

Jesus is passionate about this because it’s his reputation and the honour of his Father which is on the line. When we want Jesus to just ‘chill out’ we’ve forgotten how our actions reflect upon God.

Conclusion

Where do we go from here? We are going to have a time of confession because it’s important that we confess to God when we have caused other Christians to sin, particularly those whom we had an influence on. We’re also going to confess times when we have sinned against God in our own lives, as well as confessing when we have damaged our witness to others because of our sin. However, in this time of confession I also want us to take seriously the challenge to take significant, even if painful, steps to seek to avoid and overcome sin. You may even want to consider whether you need the help of a brother or sister in-Christ. Be willing to accept the

embarrassment of asking for help ... that's still nothing compared to losing an eye ...
which is nothing compared to walking away from God.

[Lead into Confession]