

What is Sin?
Psalm 51:1-4, 9-12
BAMF
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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- ¹*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.*
- ²*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.*
- ³*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.*
- ⁴*Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.*
- ⁹*Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.*
- ¹⁰*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.*
- ¹¹*Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*
- ¹²*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit (NRSV).*

I

The Psalm in front of us is one of the main penitential psalms in the Bible. Jews and Christians throughout history have often turned to Psalm 51 whenever we want to express our own personal sinfulness to God. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions” (v. 1). It’s hard to improve on those simple yet heartfelt words. If you’re like me, then perhaps you’ve often prayed those words when your sin stares you in the face and will not let you go. Simply using the words of this psalm as your own prayer can do wonders for a sin-sick soul.

These are powerful words, and yet when you read this psalm carefully, you’ll see that it doesn’t say what sin the person committed. Did the person cheat a neighbor? Fail

to make one of the sacrifices required by Jewish law? Commit adultery? Steal from the poor? Worship one of the Canaanite gods? We don't know because the psalm doesn't say. The only hint comes in verse 4, when the person says that "Against you [meaning God], you alone, have I sinned." Whatever the sin was, the person feels it was a sin against God, rather than a sin against a family member, a friend, or someone else in the village.

However, that might just be a rhetorical flourish, an overstatement of the facts. Perhaps the person really did sin against others as well as God. One of the many things I like about the Anabaptist theological tradition is that we understand how a sin against God is also a sin against people, and vice versa. Many years ago, when Jenny and I were members of Lombard Mennonite Church in the western suburbs of Chicago, we had a guest preacher named Dale Brown. Dale was from the Church of the Brethren and taught at their seminary. Like Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren also belongs to the Anabaptist tradition. In his sermon, Dale gave us a simple way to understand what sin is for Anabaptists and their spiritual descendants. Sin, he said, is anything that harms our relationships. It might be our relationship with God, with others, with myself, or with creation. Let's take each one of these in turn.

II

First, anything that harms our relationship with God is a sin. Basically all Christians I know about would agree that sin hurts our relationship with God. When most Christians think about sin, this is mainly what they mean: sin offends God.

Let's take some examples. Suppose I don't do anything to enhance my relationship with God. Zilch. Nada. I don't worship God, pray to God, serve God in the world, or pay any attention to scripture. I totally ignore God. This would be a little bit like living in the same house with your best friend or your spouse, and refusing to acknowledge their presence. This approach harms my relationship with God, and in an Anabaptist context, would be understood as a sin against God.

Or suppose that we treat the poor with contempt. We take away resources from them that they need in order to live. We make it harder for them to get enough food to

eat. We prevent them from finding adequate housing. We deny them health care. These actions would harm our relationship with God. Why? Because the Bible is very clear, from the early days of the Old Testament, through the prophets, and on into the latter days of the New Testament, that God cares about the poor. Jesus himself cared deeply for the poor. So when we rob resources from the poor, we offend God. We sin.

III

Second, anything that harms our relationship with others is a sin. This category of sin has seemingly endless expressions, from speaking hurtful words to making public policies that trample on human well being. Other examples:

- War is a sin because it harms our relationship with people who are supposedly our enemies.
- Spouse and child abuse are sins not only because of the physical or psychological harm that gets inflicted, but also because abuse hurts relationships. When I listen to the stories of abused persons, I'm always struck by how the abuse has caused lasting damage to relationships.
- Gluttony is a sin that we Mennonites may be particularly prone to commit. The classic definition of gluttony is the inordinate appetite for food,¹ which means eating more than we need for the maintenance of good health. This is sinful because it offends the hungry of the world who don't have enough to eat. How ironic that we Mennonites have spent so much time in the last 30 years arguing about the ethics of sex, while remaining mostly silent about the ethics of overeating. Maybe we could start by admitting that all of us, no matter what size or shape we are, have committed gluttony, likely on a regular basis.

¹ Lawrence S. Cunningham, *The Seven Deadly Sins: A Visitor's Guide* (Ave Maria, 2012) 11.

IV

Third, anything that harms my relationship with myself is a sin. This one probably sounds weird. How, you might ask, can I possibly harm my relationship with myself? Well, this can happen in lots of different ways. For large numbers of men (though not all men), it can happen when we don't pay enough attention to the messages that our bodies are trying to tell us. In my experience of being a man and working with men in spiritual direction, I notice that we men can be remarkably disassociated from our physical bodies. I went through a period a few years ago when my body was trying to tell me I was over-worked and under-rested. It wasn't until the sicknesses and the physical pain in my neck and shoulders metaphorically screamed at me that I finally paid attention and realized I had to make some changes.

In general, women seem to be more attuned to their bodies. However, women may have other ways of harming their relationship with themselves. Research has shown that women often undervalue their abilities—again, not all women, but still a significant number. Sometimes they negate themselves, downplay their own strengths, or perhaps even hate themselves.² For some women, perhaps a new spiritual vitality can emerge when they find their own voice, when they move into roles of responsibility and leadership, and when they speak up and tell the truth as they have come to know it from their own experience.

Using harmful drugs is yet another example of hurting ourselves. I think of smoking tobacco, which has an indisputable correlation with cancer; or of using opioids, which is causing extensive harm in ordinary people across this country. Both tobacco and opioids are highly addictive and as such may be understood as public health crises created by some combination of personal responsibility and social failure. From a theological point of view, we might think of addiction to tobacco or opioids as sin since it harms relationships with self and others. It should be obvious that if I smoke cigars or eat

² For an early exploration, see Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *The Journal of Religion* 40:2 (April 1960). For a more recent treatment, see Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Ashgate, 2004).

junky food, I am in the end hurting myself. If I end up shortening my life through those habits, then I also harm relationships with the people who love me.

V

Fourth, anything that harms our relationship with creation is a sin. A few months ago I taught an intensive course to seminary students. One day in class we were talking about how important being outside in creation is for our spiritual life. People mentioned things like walking in the woods, cross-country skiing on the fields, kayaking rivers, and growing vegetables and flowers. We agreed that if we couldn't go outside and spend large blocks of time in creation, our life with God would gravely suffer. As the conversation continued, we began to realize in a new way that when we human beings trash creation, we are indirectly trashing our spiritual life as well. When we pollute a watershed, dump toxic chemicals, or refuse to try to stop global climate change, we are damaging our spirits.

Why is this so? Because God comes to us in creation. Psalm 19 points out that the heavens tell the glory of God, and that in creation God speaks to us without words. That wordless communication through creation can be quite profound. Some theologians have even said we Christians have two books, the book of the Bible and the book of creation, each of which sustains our spiritual life. Indeed, we can recall that the first followers of God only had creation to sustain them. Think back to the days of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. The Bible did not yet exist, which means that everything they knew about God came to them through creation or some type of personal communication.

So, four relationship sins in our Anabaptist tradition. Sin can damage our relationship with God, with others, with self, and with creation.

However, God knows how to take care of sin. The final verses of Psalm 51 ask God to create in us clean hearts, to renew in us the joy of salvation, and to grant us willing spirits. May it be so even for us, sinners in the hands of a gracious God.