

## The Story of God and Us: Sin

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Genesis 3:1-13

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."*

Genesis 3:1-13 (NRSV)

*And now, Lord, as my words are your words, may they be taken to heart. But if I should stray from your words, may they be just as quickly forgotten. Amen.*

About two months ago Dr. Pace called me and said, “Bill, I’m going to begin a new sermon series in June and since you’re retiring from St. Luke’s at the end of June I want you to preach a sermon for me on one of those Sundays.”

I said, “Well, thank you. I would be delighted. What do you want me to preach on?” And he said, “Sin.”

Okay, I guess he figured that as old as I am, I’m sort of an expert on the subject. In fact, when I was at a Stephens Ministers meeting last Sunday afternoon and met with my Emmaus brothers on Monday morning, I told them that Tom had asked me to preach on this topic. They thought it would be a pretty good one for me to preach on.

So what is sin? What is it exactly? We just asked God to forgive us for our trespasses in the Lord’s Prayer. We said, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” You know, that word trespass - I don’t know who came up with that. But we’re talking about sins here. Somebody took the word sin and put a petticoat on the word, and it became “trespasses.”

The formal definition of sin is that it is an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law. Let me say that again—an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law.

That’s a mouthful. I’ll tell you for myself I have a much simpler definition for sin. It’s anything that I can think, or I say, or I do that separates me from the love of God. As a Christian, I want to be as close to God as my hands when I put them together - right there. I want him to be so close to me that he can tell him whether I’m chewing spearmint or Juicy Fruit gum. I want him right there with me. Yet I will tell you that in my life, I have sinned over and over again.

As. St. Paul writes in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” In preparing for this sermon, I honestly had to look back over my life and think about the sins that I had committed. And I went back as far as I could go and the first time I remember sinning I was six years old. It was a Sunday. My father was the pastor of the great First Baptist Church of Macon, Georgia, and of course, Baptists do communion differently than we do. They have these round trays with little glass cups with grape juice in them. They pass the trays up and down the aisles. Sometimes there is some leftover that people don’t use, and I found myself in the kitchen of the church.

I looked up and saw that a lot of these little cups still had grape juice in them. I love grape juice. It was my favorite drink, Grapette was my favorite soft drink, and I loved grape popsicles. So, I went for it. I went in there, and I was knocking down those little shots of Welch's Grape Juice as fast as I could, and the church janitor walked in. "Mr. Billy," he said, "Does your daddy know what you're doing?" I looked right at him and, without a beat, said, "Yes, sir."

Well, of course, Dad didn't. And that afternoon when we got home from church he said, "You know, I'm going to give you a spanking. Do you know why?" I said, "Yes, sir, because I drank the grape juice." And he said, "No, that's not why I'm giving you a spanking. I'm giving you a spanking because you lied to Mr. Washington, and lying is a sin."

I remember cheating on a couple of math exams in high school. There were times when I wasn't entirely truthful with my parents about different things. Often, I blamed someone else for my sin. Look at Adam and Eve. Eve said that the serpent gave her the apple. Adam said, "Eve gave it to me. It wasn't my fault."

Back in the 1960s and 1970s there was a very famous comedian who was enormously successful. His name was Flip Wilson. He even had his own television program. And from time to time on the program, he'd do a monologue taking on the persona of Geraldine who was always getting into trouble. Then when she was cornered about her messing up, her classic response was "It's not my fault! The devil made me do it!"

Well, certainly, there are a lot of ways for us to sin. For years, for generations, the church has defined the seven deadly sins under a big umbrella, and those sins are pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth. Now in our Bible, sin doesn't begin until the third chapter of Genesis.

Last week Dr. Pace shared with us those two creation stories. In Genesis 1, a magisterial story where you read those words it's like a symphony orchestra coming up. Then you got to Genesis 2, and it's what I call the "Country-Western version" of creation, a different story. It's almost like hearing it sung by George Strait. It's not until chapter 3 that sin makes its appearance.

Pride in my life and envy in my life have been two sins I've constantly had to deal with. Speaking of pride, back in 2000, when I entered the ministry Dr. James Killen who was pastor of the Trinity United Methodist Church in Beaumont, asked if I would preach a sermon before I went off to Perkins at SMU. And I did, and I worked so hard on that sermon, and it was a great

sermon. I just thought it was a masterpiece. I delivered it, and people came up to me after church and said, “Bill, that was a wonderful sermon.” And “Bill, you don’t need to go off to seminary.” “Bill, I just felt like St. Paul was up there preaching.” My head was getting bigger and bigger, swelling with pride. And then the last person to come through the line was a little old lady who was one of the saints in the church. She took my hand, and she said, “Bill, I want to tell you something.” I knew what was coming. She said, “Yes, that was a good sermon, and don’t you worry, you’ll get better!”

That punched a hole in that pride balloon! I was so proud of myself when I was up in East Texas. I had my own radio program every Wednesday morning for 30 minutes. I thought I was the cock of the walk. It was really special.

Then envy. You all cannot imagine what it’s like to sit in this chancel every Sunday morning and hear Tom Pace deliver these amazing sermons. The man is so gifted. So bright. And he puts together beautifully crafted sermons that are spiritual, they’re challenging, and they’re seamless. I confess to being envious of what he can do.

I’ve also always been envious of my brother Jim. Not to the extent of Cain and Abel, of course, but envious of him. He’s two and a half years younger than I am, much better looking, disgustingly handsome. You don’t believe me? Okay, let me give you an example. When he and I were teenagers, we would go to a party, maybe a church function or something else. I’d walk in and go over to where the girls were, and they’d nod, “Hello, Bill.” Jim walks in two minutes later, and every girl in the room is riveted to him. They start moving towards him with their sweet voices saying, “Hi, Jim!” You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?

Well, it’s just not fair, and I’ve been envious of him. My point is that each of us sin and continue to sin, we do stumble, and we fall. We do it with our families, with our friends, with our neighbors, with our co-workers; we even do it here in church. We sin. And that’s where Jesus comes in. That’s where Jesus comes in. Because if we confess our sins and ask for God’s forgiveness, we can be forgiven.

We are blessed in the Methodist church that we love to sing. We have many wonderful hymns that are just - talk about God’s love and also talk about sin. And two of the lines that I like from two of those different hymns. One says, “My sins are gone! I’ve been set free! My God, my Savior, has ransomed me. And like a flood his mercy reigns, unending love, amazing grace.”

Them from another hymn the words, "Sing, make a joyful sound. Sing, life in Christ is found. Wages of sin and death, he paid them all."

Several years ago, I made a visit in the medical center to visit the mother of one of our church members. She was here for a very serious medical condition, and her home was in Arkansas. As we visited, she told me that she lived on a farm way out in the rural part of Arkansas. It backed up to a large forest. And as we talked about flora and fauna of that area, I told her that my wife really loved hummingbirds. She said, "I do, too. And I've saved the lives of about 3 dozen of them." I said, "Saved their lives? What do you mean?" She said, "Well, in the forest behind us are these huge spider webs that are maybe 8 to 12 feet wide. Sometimes that tall. And hummingbirds will come along and not realize the danger and fly right into those webs. They'll become so stuck in them that they're caught, and they fight and they finally just give up. And on my morning walks, I go by and look and see if there's one there. And if there is one there, I'll stop, take the time to make my way through the web and pull that bird out. It's completely exhausted. And I take it back to my kitchen, and I have a pan there that I fill with warm water and some dishwashing detergent, and very gently I begin to stroke that little bird's wings. Carefully, carefully removing all the spider webs from the wings and feet and the head."

When she told me that I thought, "That's just what Jesus does for us." When you and I get caught in the web of sin, Jesus doesn't come to us with a hammer, he comes and gently reaches in and takes us and he cleans away those webs and then sets us free.

It's impossible for you and me to live without sinning. Now we may not be guilty of sinning in unspeakable ways, but we do sin. I remember years ago late in the 1960s when I was in the army in Germany. On one weekend, I took some time off and visited the infamous Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. As I went through that camp - it's now a museum - I was just overwhelmed with the sense of evil that was in that place. What was perpetrated on innocent men, women, and children. Unspeakable things. But I must tell you that I was even more appalled at how close Dachau is to Munich. It's not out 100 miles in some forest where no one could see it. It's like from downtown Houston to say, Beltway 8 and 69. It's right there. And these crimes were committed by a "Christian nation."

Our country is still reeling from the murder of George Floyd, and you and I every citizen in this country is still paying the price for the sin of slavery and racism. Now, sin can take on many forms, and you and I must be on our guard against it, and recognize it for what it is whenever it

is. You say to me, "Bill, I'm not a Nazi. I'm not a skinhead." But you and I know ourselves. We are sinners. And we know that the only way that our sins can be forgiven is in our faith in Jesus Christ.

God loves you. He loves you. He loves me. He loves both of us.

I had a conversation with my brother and my two sisters a few weeks ago. It was Mother's Day weekend, and our mother died 47 years ago during Mother's Day week. And we remembered different things about her. Jim recalled the story that I'd forgotten that happened to us when we were boys. I was about 15, and he was 13. We had pulled some stunt - I don't remember what it was, but it was a doozy. Our mother had us in the living room of our home on Chevy Chase, and she was sitting there, and she was crying, and her fists were clenched. She was saying, "I am so angry with you. I'm so mad. I'm so disappointed in you. What in the world were you thinking? What in the world?"

And Jim and I are standing there, rocking back and forth on our feet. Then all of a sudden, she stopped. She wiped away her tears, and she said, "But I want you boys to know something. That no matter what happens to you in your life, where you go, what you do, I will always love you. I may be disappointed in you. I may be angry with you. But I will always love you."

That is what God says to each of us every single day. He might say: "I know you messed up. I know you've sinned. You've disappointed me. But no matter what, I'll always love you."

My friends, God has given to each of us the gift of free will, and we can use that free will for good or for evil. It's our choice. And the good news is that when we sin, we can be forgiven.

This cross behind me tells the whole story, tells it all. Christ died for you and for me, and you and I can sin, and we can play the blame game like Adam and Eve or Geraldine. We can push God away, and we can sin. Or we can have him closer to us than our very breath. We can choose to break God's heart, or we can remember with gratitude that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

*In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*