

## SIN

Each morning I drive into Corona del Mar and see this big green sign saying, “Morning Cyn” [Sin]. And each morning I smile, for it reminds me, at least in part, of why we are here. And sometimes I nod and say to myself, “Yes, we are in such a hurry – can’t even wait until evening.” And of course I note that it is not even spelled correctly. I guess the concept is falling into disuse even more than I realized.

I have been in several conversations with people here who, at least from my perspective, really don’t understand the meaning of the concept of sin. I cannot go on without at least trying to get us all on the same wavelength. I cannot just pick a different word, because the Bible frequently talks about “sin” and, if I change words, you won’t know that we are talking about the same thing. Neither can I just skip using the word, though many people today are trying to do that very thing. Jesus is Savior; if we are not sinners, we don’t need a Savior – hence, no need for Jesus or His church.

Classically, the Christian Path begins with the realization of sin – with our seeing clearly the condition of our souls and the seriousness of sin. However, some people, even in our churches, do not “speak the language” anymore – they don’t know what our words mean. They get all incensed when certain words are used, because our culture today has a completely twisted notion of many of our most important concepts. I rarely encounter people who have any clear or accurate understanding of what our tradition means by words like humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, salvation, love, grace, repentance, and many others.

Most people today, for instance, when they say “be patient” actually mean “be lethargic.” At the very least, they want us to cut enthusiasm, back off, stop being so intense, stop trying so hard. Lethargy is a virtue? Patience *is* a virtue – the second highest virtue of the Christian Life. It does not mean to cease striving; it means the opposite: to endure and continue in your striving without ever letting up one iota. A truly patient person keeps their eye on the goal and moves toward that goal in every conceivable way, no matter what obstacles are put in their path. We have very nearly reversed the meaning today. I have this little prayer I frequently pray: “Dear God, let my enemies be rich, handsome, popular, brilliant, lucky, and happy. But please, oh please, dear God ... don’t let them be patient.” The point is, if we reverse the meanings of our most

important concepts, no wonder some people have a hard time understanding why they should be interested in the Christian Life.

The meek shall inherit the earth?! The meek, as most people think of them, couldn't inherit a used toothbrush. And if they did, they wouldn't be able to hang onto it long enough to use it. Scripture says Moses was the meekest man who ever lived. (Numbers 12:3) Do you know anything about Moses? If we reverse all the meanings, no wonder people have a hard time getting interested in the Christian Life.

I am simply saying: It is hard to walk in the Christian WAY, or to invite others into it, if we no longer speak our own language – if we no longer comprehend our own major concepts. Do you speak the language? Would you feel insulted if I called you a sinner? Would you smile and nod in understanding if I reminded you that the church is a place for sinners, and that it is no place and *has* no place for the righteous? *“And the Pharisees and their scribes murmured against his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”* (Luke 5:30-32) If we are the righteous – the “okay” – Jesus has no business with us, and He will have nothing to do with us.

According to the Christian Faith, sin is the basic condition of all life on this planet. If we do not understand or identify with that basic presupposition, then everything else about the Christian Faith will be hopelessly distorted. We simply must come to the place where we can call ourselves and each other “sinners” and know there is no personal insult intended. If we are not sinners, what are we doing here? Are we here as the righteous or reformed, standing ready to help others who are still sinners? If so, that's an entirely different religion and has no resemblance to Christianity. The church is a support group for sinners. It always has been. If you are a drunk and you want to get sober, who do you need in your support group? People who have never taken “one too many” in their whole lives? The church is for people who want to get out of their alienation from God. That is, we are a fellowship of sinners. No righteous people are allowed here. (I did not say “self-righteous”; they are flawed enough to be quite welcome here.) What do you talk about out there in the courtyard after the worship service? At least sometimes it should sound like a prison yard at free time: “Hey, what are *you* in for?” In any case, the truth is: “In Christ's army, only the wounded soldiers can fight.”

I suppose the reason “sin” is such a volatile word is because judgment, condemnation, and Hell seem to follow so close behind. If we are guilty of sin, surely we are about to be judged, then condemned, and then sent to Hell. But supposedly we know better. The whole story and Message of the Christ who came to us stands for precisely the opposite. Our core Message – our Gospel – says that this is *not* what God in Christ does about sin, or to sinners. But we have a hard time believing that, no matter how bravely we talk. And we have a hard time trusting each other to truly believe it.

A woman who was called to jury duty told the presiding judge that she was not qualified to serve because she didn’t believe in capital punishment. The judge said, “You don’t understand, ma’am. This is a civil case involving a man who spent twenty-five thousand dollars of his wife’s money on gambling and other women.” To which the woman replied, “I’ll be happy to serve, Your Honor, and I’ve changed my mind about capital punishment.”

A college sophomore who had spent most of the school year in one kind of trouble or another received the following card from his parents, who were vacationing in Greece: “Dear Son, we are now standing high on a cliff from which the ancient Spartan women once hurled their defective children to the rocks below. Wish you were here.”

Somewhere deep inside, we have the uneasy feeling that maybe – just about the time we buy into the Christian Message and admit that we are sinners – maybe the lady will change her mind about capital punishment, or maybe the Great Parent In The Sky will decide to throw us over the cliff after all. So we decide not to think about the whole thing very much – maybe take a stab at giving up some minor habit during Lent, fully expecting to regain it after Easter, and that’s that.

There are three words most often used in the Old Testament for our word “sin” (*ht*, *awon* and *pesha*). The first (*ht*) characterizes sin as failure to meet a standard or arrive at a goal. To sin is to miss the mark, as when you shoot an arrow and miss the target. The second word (*awon*) sees sin primarily as an action that is irregular, “crooked” – deviation from the normal behavior patterns. C.S. Lewis loved this one and often used the words “bent” and “warped” to refer to our condition. The third word (*pesha*) sees sin as an infringement upon a psychic totality. We say “being out of tune with nature, or God.”

The common denominator of each of these is still separation – alienation. In the first case, the missile is separated from its intended target, the person from the intended goal. In the second case, it is action separated from the true or normal pattern of action. In the third case, it is separation from an awareness of the life principles themselves, or from the Creator of those principles. In any case, when reading the New Testament, most of the times you see the word “sin,” you should be translating it in your head: separation, alienation, isolation FROM GOD.

To ponder sin in this light is amazingly revealing. Suddenly all sorts of teachings and concepts and principles in Scripture leap to a far more profound level, become helpful, and get downright exciting. Jesus saves us from sin by making us get rid of all our bad habits? Heavens no! That isn't even talking about the same subject. **Jesus saves us from our separated state by reconciling us to God** – that is, by putting us into, or back into, communication and relationship with God. When you are called a “sinner,” you are not being condemned as evil; you are just understood as being lonely.

The next thing people say is: “That's really helpful, but I can't believe that Paul and Luke and Jesus were smart enough to know this definition.” In other words, the next time they see “sin” mentioned in the Bible, they go right back to thinking only of evil deeds. Please be clear: The early Christians would never have turned the world upside down if they had thought sin meant what modern people think it means. They were not getting thrown to the lions, burned at the stake, and crucified along the highways of Rome because they were enthralled with giving up smoking, cutting down their television time, losing some weight, or even quitting their adultery. That kind of thing has its importance in its proper context. But the Christian Faith enthralled and converted a pagan world over issues greater than that. Because of Jesus Christ and all that had happened, people realized they were caught in an entire way of life that was literally built and running on principles of separation, alienation, loneliness, and isolation – and *that* is what they meant by sin. They were sinners, and everybody was caught in this web of life running on the energy that *divides* – us from God, us from each other, us from nature. Everywhere you turn, everything you experience – all of it always ends in separation.

You get married because you fall in love and want to be close and share and care ... and what happens? Professor Hans Jurgens asked five thousand German husbands and wives how often they talked to

each other. After two years of marriage, most of them managed two or three minutes of chat over breakfast, more than twenty minutes over the evening meal, and a few more minutes in bed. By the sixth year, that was down to ten minutes a day. A state of “almost total speechlessness” was reached by the eighth year of marriage. (*Daily Mirror*, London.)

You have children because it is a miracle of life, and you want to raise them perfect and fill them full of love. The idea of family – people working and living together in joy and harmony through thick and thin – is so beautiful we cannot even think about it very long without hurting inside for longing. But then we try it ... and what happens? Sometimes we taste it for a while, just enough to remind us it’s possible.

Sometimes people in a crisis find each other. Sometimes in war, people find each other. Sometimes a cause, a significant-enough project, or something of great beauty or potential draws us together for a little while. But then the crisis passes, the war ends, the cause gets organized, the thing of beauty becomes familiar ... and what happens? Everywhere you turn, everything you experience – all of it always ends up in separation. We live in a realm running on the principles of sin, and we are caught in it as sinners. And there is no escape here.

At least there *was* no escape. Then Jesus came and we began to understand: *We cannot fix it!* No matter how well we keep the rules, it won’t get any better. Try as we might to make it a better world, it always returns to the principles of alienation. We have to step apart from the entire system. We have to die to it all. We must be born anew to a different WAY. And even after that, the only hope is that the power and love of God will indwell us, invade us, come into us ... and replace the entire system and way of separation – our wanting to be alone, do it ourselves, be in control, do everything our own way. We cannot change the world, but Jesus can change *us*.

Of course, this New WAY separated the early Christians from all other ways, and from the people who wanted to hang on to those ways. And the Christians were not nice or compromising about it either, despite the high priority such neutrality has among some circles of Christians today. Nevertheless, the church came into being and converted the world because people were eager and alive again to God and God’s love. They were not very interested in peace in this world because that meant to be at peace with a reality that was itself separated and alienated from God. If you are well-adjusted in this world, you are really sick by any known spiritual standards.

Back to our passage: “*The wages of sin is death.*” (Will you please – please – start translating this, and other passages on the subject, as: “The result of our alienation from God is death.”) If you follow the principles of being alone and apart for long enough, you will die totally – mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually. If you follow the alienation way for just today, you will be more apart and alone by tonight than you were this morning. It is inevitable. Resentment, fear, hatred, getting even, suspicion, competition, pride – where else can it all go except into separation that grows wider and colder, until life cannot exist. Of course, along the way, there is behavior that reveals the condition we are in – the condition of our souls. Lonely, angry, frightened people do not treat others well. But those are symptoms. Jesus Christ was never trying to put Band-Aids on symptoms. And He certainly wasn’t trying to sweep any of it under any rugs. He was trying to heal the condition itself, SIN – the state of alienation and doing all things by the principles that support and maintain alienation.

We are sinners. And we will stay sinners until the grace and love of God can change every part of us, from thought wave to every last deed we do. And we *cannot* do that for ourselves. It requires a Savior. But we *can* cooperate. Cooperation begins with our recognition of our condition: SIN. We are SINNERS: alienated from God; isolated, frightened, lonely people.

Forty years ago, malaria killed at least half the people who died each year. How was malaria conquered? Not by killing mosquitoes. It was conquered by developing quinine and similar medicines that counteract malaria from within the lifestream itself, from within the hemoglobin. So with sin. It is not conquered by going around slapping mosquitoes – individual sins. It has to be healed at the source and core of things: our closeness to God. Christianity is not about sins, though we keep getting sidetracked by such things. Christianity is about SIN: the Great Divide – the Great Separation – between us and our Maker. And that is what Jesus came to heal. That is what Jesus is about: reconciliation between us and God.