December 11, 2022

Let God's People Bow Down
III. Bow Down in Repentance
Psalm 38

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

When we think about sin – if we do so at all – we typically think in terms of wrongful actions we have done or good actions we have failed to do. Or sin as simply the breaking of God's rules. But Donald Baillie, a greatly respected twentieth-century Scottish theologian, offers another way for us to think about our sin and what it means for our lives – that sin is first and foremost about the disrupting and even damaging of our relationships. In other words, that our sin is always first and foremost to be understood as relational, not merely as the breaking of impersonal rules. That sin is, at heart, about failing to be in right and healthy relationship with God; and with other human beings, as well.

Here's how he presents this idea – the picture that he paints of sin. He imagines God calling all His children to form a great circle, with Himself at the center, in order to play the great game of Life:

> *In that circle we ought all to be standing, linked together with lovingly joined hands, facing toward the Light at the centre, which is God . . . seeing our fellow creatures all around the circle in the light of that central Love, which shines on them and beautifies their faces; and joining with them in the dance of God's great game, the rhythm of love universal. But instead of that, we have, each one, turned our backs upon God and the circle of our fellows, and faced the other way, so that we can neither see the Light at the centre nor the faces on the circumference. And indeed in that position it is difficult even to join hands with our fellows! Therefore instead of playing God's game we play, each one, our own selfish little game . . . Each one of us wishes to be the centre, and there is blind confusion, and not even any true knowledge of God or of our neighbors. That is what is wrong with mankind.*[1]

So sin is, before all else, not the breaking of the rules, but the breaking of our relationships – with God, and also with one another.

I like this picture Baillie paints – I think it is a very helpful way of getting at the reality in our lives of what the Bible calls "sin." That, if the two great commandments are relational – love God and love your neighbor as yourself[2] – then it only makes sense that sin should also be

conceived in relational terms. That sin, no matter how exactly we are committing it, is essentially about the breaking, disrupting, ignoring, or violating of our relationship with the God of love; and that sin is doing the same in our relationships with those we are given by God to love.

But I really like Baillie's picture this morning also because it helps us understand what the Psalmist describes in Psalm 38. What we find in Psalm 38 is the Psalmist describing his sin, and the effects of his sin, in exactly the same sort of way – in terms of his relationships. First and foremost, the Psalmist describes how his sin has messed up his relationship with God. The psalm starts out with the Psalmist describing how his sins have opened up a great and even hostile divide between himself and God: *"O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger."* He feels himself at a distance from God, perceives God to be silent and angry and far away from him because of what he has done.

But he perceives not just that his sin has disrupted his relationship with God, but also that it has disrupted his relationships within the circle of his family and friends: *"My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off."* He is even finding that his sin has disrupted his relationship with his business associates and with those in the community with whom he has regular dealings – to the point, even, where some are trying now to take advantage of him: *"Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin . . ."* His sin has opened the door for others to feel validated in seeking to sin against him in return.

But aside even from all of that, the Psalmist perceives the damage and disruption his sin is working even in his relationship with himself – his own body and spirit: *"There is no health in my bones because of my sin."* He reports stomach aches and bodily pains: *"For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh."* But the toil his sin and guilt is taking upon his relationship with his own body is nothing compared to what he perceives it to be doing to his peace of mind and emotional well-being: *"I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart . . . and the light of my eyes – it also has gone from me."*

Sin as the disruption of our relationship with God – no matter what form that sin might take. Sin as the disruption of our relationship with those whom we love, and whom we least want to hurt. I remember two sisters in my first church, Gladys and Bernice, who had not spoken in many years. It was a small church, so they had to sit on opposite sides to avoid each other. One time I foolishly asked Gladys what had happened between them. I got an earful. But she never did tell me what had happened – I guess either because she could no longer remember; or because she realized the matter was quite small in proportion to the years of broken relationship it had led to.

And then there is sin, not only affecting our relationships with our nearest and dearest, but also sin messing up our relationship with the world around us – the community in which we live – making life feel ever more difficult on a daily basis, more dangerous, all of us feeling more distant and isolated and even afraid of one another. Like angry souls shooting up the electrical grid, or hackers preying upon the kindness and connection of a church family, or dictators starting foolish wars without good reason and so plunging an entire continent into sorrow, death, and fear.

And all of that as well leading to the number sin does on our own relationship with ourselves – our own mental and physical well-being. How much of what we suffer in our bodies is connected to the disruption of relationships sin causes in our lives? How much of the anxiety and anguish of our minds and spirits stems from broken, damaged and damaging relationships in our daily lives? The hurts we have suffered at the hands of others, especially those closest to us, taking their toll upon our happiness and health. But also the hurts we inflict on them, damaging ourselves at the same time. Sin as the disruption of all the relationships which are meant to fill our lives with love, and protect our hearts from fear and our minds from anxiety. That's why the Bible takes sin so seriously – because it messes up literally everything, but most especially our relationships. The very relationships with God and with one another that were meant to establish us in peace, equip us for joy, and enrich us constantly with the precious and constant flow of love.

So, what do we do about this problem of sin? The Psalmist confesses his sin – both owns up to and condemns the wrong he has done in his relationship with God, first and foremost, as well as in his relationships with others:

But for you, O Lord, do I wait;
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer . . .
I confess my iniquity;
I am sorry for my sin.

And then his final plea: *"Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!"*

The Psalmist owns up to what he has done to damage his relationship with God and with others. Repentance, the Bible calls it. Picture Baillie's circle again – only the second picture, what happens when sin breaks in. Everyone with their backs turned towards God at the center of that circle. Everyone having let go of the hand of their neighbor on either side. Repentance – the first movement we make in order to begin to repair the damage, restore the relationship – is turning ourselves back around to face God at the center again, and then telling Him what we have done, owning up to it. Turning around – that is literally what the word "repentance" means in the original Greek – turning our minds around one hundred and eighty degrees to face God anew, in sorrow and in regret and in honest desire for the relationship to be repaired.

But what of God – how will He respond? What of God – how will He receive the Psalmist's plea for the restoration of the relationship his sin has squandered and ripped apart? What of God and how will He hear our plea of repentance?

I confess my iniquity;
I am sorry for my sin . . .
Do not forsake me, O Lord!
O my God, be not far from me!
Make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation!

How does God answer our plea for all to be forgiven, and for all to be put back into right and good relationships once again?

The psalm does not give us the answer – it leaves us with that question. But we who have known the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, His life and death and resurrection for our sake – we know the answer. That when we broke our relationship with Him in sin – He did not, in mercy, let it break His relationship to us. In fact, to the contrary, it only drew Him even closer to us in mercy and in love. We turn our backs on Him, we walk away from His presence – and so He decided to come down and seek us out, wherever we had wandered. In His love for us, He bridged the divide in His relationship with us, which we had opened up. He kept on loving us, even after we had spurned His love. He chose to restore the relationship, no matter what it might cost Him – even a cross and a cold, dark tomb.

In fact, our God even chose to make possible the restoration of all our sin-broken relationships – to restore us to right relationship not only with Him, but also with one another. This is the miracle and meaning of Christmas: that before even we had had the thought to turn back to Him in repentance, He had already come to us, tapped us upon the shoulder, and opened wide His arms to invite us to come back into His embrace, back into the right relationship we were meant to share with Him, and with one another, forevermore.

Picture Donald Baillie's circle again. God didn't just stand there in the center, waiting and hoping for us to come back to Him on our own – which we couldn't have done on our own, even if we had wanted to. Instead, God in Christ came out to the periphery of that great circle where we were still standing, defiant and alone – that we might be persuaded to once again love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and even with all the damage we do to one another, that we might be reconciled to one another and that we might learn how, truly, to love one another as He has first loved us. As the Gospel of John puts it, this miracle of Christmas: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*[3] Or as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians: *"You who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."*[4] Or, in the words of Charles Wesley's beloved Christmas carol:

Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!

So, thanks be to God in Christ, that our relationship with Him, our relationships with one another – even after all the damage our sin has done – all can now be repaired and set right again. In Jesus Christ, all things are now being set right again. And, in Christ, we have been given the possibility, the gift, the joy of repentance – of turning it all around – so that, in us and between us, Christ can and will make all things new.

A story. A true story told by a woman named Sue, who tells of coming to Christ after spending her teen years lost in a haze of drugs and prostitution. The child of an alcoholic and

abusive father, she had witnessed the suicide of her sister and run away from home before she was sixteen. When she first started attending church, she looked much older than her nineteen years. She had already become a haunted, hardened, lonely, desperate-looking woman, whose past weighed heavily upon her. She writes:

> *For ten long years I struggled to find peace. Sisters and brothers [in Christ] tried to help me, but no matter how hard I fought, I could not break through my dark prison of impurity.*
>
> *Only through seeing the freedom offered to another member who confessed sin . . . did it dawn on me that I could find freedom. I realized I had to lower my guard once and for all and reveal myself as the miserable person I was . . . I had to repent, and then God would finally give me the peace I had been seeking for so long.*
>
> *In the next days, my whole life flowed in front of my eyes; it was as if I saw every touch, look, word, thought of filth that I had wallowed in, every person I had willfully misled and hurt. With pain, but also with joy, I went to confess my sins . . . I had to go back many times before I was able to get through everything. Peace poured into my heart after each cleansing. The years seemed to roll off me, and I felt free as a child again.*
>
> *I'm over forty now, married, with children, but I feel much younger than I did at nineteen. And if someone asked me today, what is peace? I could give them a far better answer.*[5]

Right relationship restored with God. Right relationships restored with one another. That is what God in Christ comes to us at Christmas to accomplish.

So, with the Psalmist, let us – this Advent season – bow down before our God in repentance. Praying alongside him, *"Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!"* For, in the coming of Jesus Christ to us at Christmas, that is precisely what our God has done – He has made Himself our Help and our Salvation.

---

[1] D. M. Baillie, God Was In Christ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p.205.
[2] Matthew 22:34-40.
[3] John 3:16-17.
[4] Ephesians 2:13.
[5] Quoted in Johann Christoph Arnold, Seeking Peace (Farmington, Pennsylvania: The Plough Publishing House, 1998), pp. 148-149.