

The Nature of Sin as Lawlessness

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Bible Text: 1 John 3:4

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...chapter three. I will read verses one through four. The text will be verse four. 1 John 3:1-4.

Hear God's Word.

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Everyone who practices sin practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.¹

Let's ask God's blessing upon his Word.

Father, we would pray that you would address us to our deepest needs and we pray that you would grant your Spirit, not only that we might understand this text, the nature of our own sin, but that we might be afresh driven to Christ, that we might delight in the beauty of his holiness, that we might find great comfort and solace in his blamelessness, that we would draw near and be assured and comforted by his blood. And may we know a greater depth of your love because of his Spirit abiding with us.

Oh, our Father, we pray now that you would speak to us and speak to us things of reality, things that are true. Make us a wise, discerning people. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

We have taken up a series on justification by faith and this is what a 19th century pastor wrote in a volume dedicated to this study of the doctrine of justification, James Buchanan. James Buchanan writes, "The best preparation for the study of the doctrine of justification is neither great intellectual ability nor much scholastic learning, but a conscience impressed with a sense of our actual condition as sinners in the sight of God.

¹ 1 John 3:1-4

Entering into the study of justification, not needing great intellectual ability nor much scholastic learning, but a conscience impressed with a sense of our actual condition as sinners in the sight of God.”

The first several messages are, I believe, going to be rather difficult. We’ll talk a lot about sin and not sin in the abstract, but our own sin. And we do that in order that we might come to a greater awareness, trust and love for our Savior. I think we would all be willing to confess this morning that we are sinners and that we have experienced the grace of God in forgiving us and, though as children of God we continue to stumble and battle against that remaining corruption of sin within our hearts, yet that only is motivation to draw ever closer to our Savior and find comfort and assurance in him.

We need to be convinced. We need to have a deep conviction of the awful reality of sin in our own experience. We need to be convinced, convicted of its power as an evil force cleaving and harassing us daily, yea, moment by moment. We need to know the depth of sin. We need to understand its deep taproot which reaches into our hearts, into our minds, into our psyches to such an extent that it is beyond the most careful reflection to find the end of that taproot. We need to be convinced of its guilt which is an utter offense before a holy and righteous God and that this sin is deserving of his full wrath and curse. We need to be convinced of the experience of our own sin if the biblical teaching of justification is to have any relevance or benefit for us.

The problem is assume sin for what it is. And the very nature of sin is that it masquerades and hides itself. Sin does not want to be discovered. It is like a snake that continually wants to crawl into the hole so that it doesn’t get its head smashed. It is like...oh, I am not a physicist, but from what I understand an electron in which one tries to identify, focus, locate the electron and as soon as you think you have located it, it is gone. Sin is always hiding. It is always masquerading itself as something else. Sin is a master at rationalizing and excusing, of reinventing itself. Sin is like a virus that is always mutating so that no one can get a handle on it in order to find healing.

The problem is the sin is within us and it brings us to our text which describes sin as lawlessness. Let me define lawlessness. This lawlessness of sin is a condition in which no moral boundary, restraint, standard, rule is acknowledged or recognized as absolute, but subtly uses boundaries, restraints standards, rule for its own destructive purposes. I’ll read it again. Lawlessness is a condition in which no moral boundary, restraint, standard, rule is acknowledged or recognized as absolute, but here is the twist. Sin uses boundaries. It uses restraints. It uses standards. It uses rules. It uses codes of conduct for its own destructive purposes. Rather pernicious.

In the physical world there are laws that are laws that are acknowledged and recognized and we conform our lives to these physical laws for our own safety and protection; the law of gravity. I am not a physicist. I haven’t studied physics, but in my own naïve experience what goes up must come down.

You can tell I have been out in the woods for the last two or three days.

Objects will fall and somebody could figure it out with a certain speed, you know, given the right conditions, we can calculate. What goes up must come down and we can calculate how quickly it is going to come down.

So when I am out hiking and I go to a high point to look out at the vista and I just love the beauty of that kind of perspective out in the woods and I am always endeavoring to want to participate in it more, I wouldn't jump off of that outcropping in order to participate. I would come down and I would destroy myself.

When I was a child—I was told, I don't remember this incident—but I was always fascinated with birds and their ability to fly and so I decided to climb up into the apple tree in our back yard and flap my arms as though they were wings and what do you think happened? I came down.

Physical laws, predictable. We can calculate things. And we conform our lives to such laws, don't we?

Not so in the moral world because of sin. Laws are established by God, but they go unacknowledged. There is no recognition. John says, "Sin is lawlessness."² It recognizes no law and since it recognizes now law it is unpredictable. It is clever. It is subtle. It is always nuancing itself, always reinventing itself, always masquerading itself as one thing or another. It is always kind of disappearing and then reappearing. We can't put our finger on it. We can't get behind it. We can't follow the roots of it all deep into our psyche to come to the end of it. It is so pervasive in our being and we cannot reflect in such a way as to figure it out. It is an enigma. It is a riddle. It is unexplainable, incomprehensible and it has a power that affects us day by day, moment by moment. And unless you come to see that and acknowledge the very nature of sin within your own hearts that the taproots go very, very deep and that its power is pervasive, unless you come to see that, the doctrine of justification, the biblical teaching of how one is made right with God might be a curiosity, but we remain, by and large, irrelevant...we will find no relevance and no benefit.

Sin is lawlessness. Your heart is the nation of Somalia. From what I understand there is no law that rules that nation. You have warlords; various tribes you wouldn't even call them tribes. I don't think it is even that organized, various clans, warlords who impose their own will and whim upon a select group of people, a very dangerous place to live.

There is supposed to be a neighborhood in Haiti, inside of Port-au-Prince in which troops from the United Nations will not go because it is so dangerous; murder, kidnapping, rape, a daily experience. That's your heart, lawlessness. It is the nature of sin, recognizing not, acknowledging not any boundary, restraint, standard or rule and yet at times will take a boundary, standard, restraint, rule and use it for its own destructive purposes.

² 1 John 3:4

In the book of Judges the covenant people at one time so degenerated into a community in which—this is how it is described—everyone, “did what was right in his own eyes.”³ Really, a condition of anarchy. That is the lawlessness of sin, doing what is right in one’s own eyes.

That, my friends, is not a pleasant environment if you consider the natural selfishness that often drives and motivates us, seeking what is good even in a deceptive way what is good for us and not for our neighbor.

Paul says in Ephesians that you were once darkness.⁴ Interesting phrase, interesting description, not that you were in darkness. The Scripture talks about that as well, but he goes so far as to say you were the darkness, the very instrument and agent by which you caused not only yourself, but others to stumble.

Westminster Shorter Catechism: What is sin? I could ask the children and I imagine many would be able to answer this. What is sin? Sin is... What is sin? Sin is... Anybody want to give it a try?

I am getting various answers and they are all correct. The Shorter Catechism: What is sin? Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.⁵

Now there are various ways in which, you know, we can qualify and nuance this very, very dark description of the human heart and sin that lies within it that is described as lawlessness. To be sure God gives restraint. In his providence he gives the various ways in which he holds that the expression of lawlessness back, but overall that is essentially what sin is.

We talked about it in Sunday school. You see it all around us, events like a man who is angry with God goes to an honors school and he guns down a bunch of students. Lawlessness.

Marines that are accused of executing an innocent man. Lawlessness.

Woman teacher who has improper contact...well, let’s put it quite bluntly, has sex with junior high boys. Lawlessness.

A politician who hits up on young people, particularly young males who are working as pages. Lawlessness.

Public money stolen by very shrewd and clever men either in business or in government. Lawlessness.

³ Judges 17:6, 21:25

⁴ See Ephesians 5:8

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism #14.

But is that any different than what we are? Though restrained in various ways, thankfully, by God's providence, perhaps an informed conscience, perhaps even with a regenerate heart, yet worst case scenario those thoughts that may crop up within the mind, the most disgusting and dark thoughts deep within the being. Lawlessness.

But what is most disturbing is that sin can show itself to be the most law abiding and religious while it remains lawless. We were hiking out of the woods yesterday and we were talking about all kinds of things. And if you don't mind my using your name, Clifford, I will. He talked about the Italians at the end of the Second World War who had an efficient government and bureaucracy and used that bureaucracy in order to allow more time for Jews and other Europeans to be killed, executed by the National Socialists.

I believe it was Stalin's Russia, Soviet Union, in which through a government that agent and instrument that was to be just, punishing evil doers and encouraging and protecting those who would live peacefully, Stalinist Russia, 10 million people killed.

Perhaps the greatest example would be the Pharisees who believed that they were obeying the law of God. Think of the contradiction of this, the enigma, the riddle. Thinking that they were obeying and serving God by putting to death the Son of God. That is sin, lawlessness. The very embodiment of the righteousness of God being despised, ridiculed, spat upon, betrayed, crucified. That is the nature of sin, thinking itself righteous, religious would even put to death the embodiment of righteousness.

We must see our sin for what it is. Away with the excuses. Away with the rationalizations. Away with the blame shifting. Away with thinking of the problems that we face within our heart in all kinds of various ways as diseases or whatever else. And I recognize that there can be diseases. And yet in the heart the most profound problem that we have, that we experience, is our sin. And that is described as being lawless.

If we do not face what we are as creatures before God, even as regenerate creatures with the remaining corruption that we have, we will continually delude ourselves. Sin cannot be figured out. It must be forgiven and it must be put to death. It is not such an enigma or a psychological problem that needs analysis. We don't need more counseling. And all that needs to be qualified I recognize, but when it comes to sin it doesn't need and, in fact, will not submit to analysis. It must be forgiven and then it must be put to death.

If not, we deceive ourselves, my friends. Think of all the excuses, all the rationalizations, all the stories that you create, all of the blame shifting for things that you have done because you have either transgressed or you have not conformed yourself to the law of God.

Within your heart lies Somalia. Within your heart lies Port-au-Prince. Within your heart lies an angry man who shoots down children. Within your heart lies sexual perversion. Within your heart lies all kinds of evil and you can't excuse it. You can't rationalize it. You can't figure it out. It must be forgiven and then it must be put to death.

When we consider the doctrine of justification we consider how that sin is forgiven by the free grace of God. There is nothing you can do, ultimately, about your sin. One must do it for you. And he has by living a perfect life, by dying on your behalf, by accepting the punishment that you deserve and by putting to death that sin in his own death and resurrection.

We must look away from ourselves. We cannot help ourselves. Only the Lord in his mercy and his grace can help us.

The danger is we become like the Laodicean Church who think they have all knowledge, they are rich, satisfied, happy and yet Jesus comes to the Laodiceans and says, “You are naked, wretched, poor, and blind.”⁶

Sin has a way of so masquerading itself even religiously that we delude ourselves in thinking we are not that bad when, in fact, we don't see how evil and dark the human heart really is. If we come to see it and experience it for ourselves—our own sin—we see that it is lawlessness. It is Somalia. It is Port-au-Prince. It is all of the garbage you read in the Metro section of the *Columbus Dispatch*. That is your heart. You can read about it every day. Only when you come to see and experience that will the doctrine of justification make any sense. For in the free grace of God he forgives all of your sin past, present, future and he gives you a righteous standing, not by virtue of any works that you have produced, but solely on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And that, my friends, is a glorious expression of love toward you.

Let's seek our God in prayer and prepare ourselves as we come to the table of the Lord.

Father, we ask that we would not be a people who deceive and delude themselves, but that we would have the ability to see our hearts for what they are, even as your children, to recognize what our natural estate is, that we are sinners in your sight and we need your grace, mercy and compassion in Jesus Christ. We are thankful for the Lord Jesus who lived righteously on our behalf, who died an atoning death that we might be forgiven, who was raised again for our justification. We are thankful that in him the power of sin has been conquered and that we now have the ability to put it to death. We would ask, our Father, that you would stir up our minds once again that we might know the awful reality, the evil of sin that it is lawlessness, that it recognizes none of your sovereignty. It has nothing to do with your Word except to use it for its own evil purposes. We would pray, our Father, that you would teach us how subtle, how deceitful, how masquerading, how powerful sin is within the human heart and that we will not excuse nor rationalize, but confess it for what it is and seek forgiveness and grace to put it to death.

And so, our God, we pray that you might work in us in these ways over such serious matters. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

⁶ See Revelation 3:14-17