



REFLECTIONS ON PREACHING SIN AS AN ACT OF LOVE

RUSSELL ST. JOHN

Lead Pastor

Twin Oaks Presbyterian Church

Visiting Instructor of Homiletics

Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis

russell.stjohn@tutanota.com

INTRODUCTION

I still recall the first time I sang the hymn, *God, Be Merciful to Me*. The opening words of the third verse declare, “I am evil, born in sin.” As soon as the words left my mouth, my soul balked, accusing the hymnist of hyperbole, even harshness. Sinful? Yes. Evil? Hardly. But the word lingered, knocking about the back of my mind, humbling me, as my conscience questioned my reaction. “Why not call you evil? What part of you shines as holy as God? Does your heart not also display the corruption of Adam, your father?” Soon, self-defense turned to self-examination, accusation to prayer, and defiance to repentance. I too think evil, speak evil, do evil. If “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, [and] slander” (Matthew 15:19), then my heart—the core of my being—is, in fact, evil. The stark, ugly truth, though hard to hear, forged in me deeper awareness of my own sin, and thus deeper appreciation for the Christ who overcomes it.

Would you ever stand in the pulpit and say to your sheep, “You are evil, born in sin?” My experience with *God, Be Merciful to Me* has, over time, affected not only my awareness of the depths of my own sin, but also the manner in which I preach about sin. I have grown more direct, more probing, more willing to say hard things. The world, and some Christians with it, label

preaching about sin “unloving.” But I have come to see that preaching the stark reality of sin, so far from comprising a loveless act, represents instead a profound act of love.

CULTIVATING a SENSE of SIN

Against a Five Dollar “Savior”

Only a sinner needs a savior. Only a debtor needs forgiveness. Only a prisoner needs a ransom. If the sheep to whom I speak do not own themselves as sinners, they will not sense their need for their Savior. If they do not own themselves as debtors, they will not sense their need for forgiveness. If they do not own themselves as prisoners, they will not sense their need for ransom. Jesus made this truth explicit when he said, “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 5:31-32). His parable of the two debtors builds upon this truth:

“A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly” (Luke 7:41-43).

If you possess five dollars’ worth of sin, you possess a five-dollar savior. If, however, your debt stands mountainous, infinite, and eternal, then your Savior looms mighty indeed in your sight. When, moreover, the Scripture declares that Jesus “gave his life as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:6), it teaches that every unsaved person to whom you preach languishes in bondage, awaiting a Redeemer to offer the ransom price of freedom. That price transcends the ability of any sinner to pay, for as Peter declares, “[Y]ou were ransomed,” not “with perishable things such as

silver or gold,” or anything else that a sinner has to offer, “but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Big Forgiveness, Bigger Love

If “he who is forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47), then faithful preaching of the doctrine, depth, and depravity—of the evil of human sin—helps your sheep to know that they, in Christ, have been forgiven much indeed. And he who is forgiven much, loves much. Preaching sin, as an act of love *for* the sheep, fosters greater love *from* the sheep.

PAUL and HEROD AGRIPPA II

Chief of Sinners

The apostle Paul imbibed this truth, not only in his theology, but also in his practice of ministry—in his preaching. The same Paul who declared that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), likewise described himself as the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), applying his theology of sin to his personal history of sin. Paul understood that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), and this conviction informed the way he ministered. Luke records an episode in Paul’s life that demonstrates the manner in which Paul preached sin directly and without diminution. This episode strikes me deeply, for the sin Paul preached was *his own*.

In Acts 26 Paul stood before King Herod Agrippa II, ostensibly to refute false accusations that Jewish authorities had leveled against him (Acts 26:2-3), but Paul harbored other ambitions. He desired not so much to exonerate himself as to proclaim his Savior. But rather than establishing his theological credentials, rather than reviewing for Agrippa his apostolic *bona fides*, Paul began by describing his sin:

I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in

Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities (Acts 26:9-11).

So far from skirting over his past or attempting minimize his crimes, Paul instead purposefully accentuated his iniquities, recounting not only his sinful actions, but also his wicked goals and unchecked wrath against the Church. Why?

Chief of Sufferers

After decades of faithful service to Christ, why did Paul not simply gloss over the less seemly moments of his past? After all, the persecutions Paul had perpetrated against the nascent Church occurred before Paul professed faith in Christ, before he left his pharisaical way of life, and before he endured “far more imprisonments, with countless beatings,” for the sake of Christ, such that he was “often near death” (2 Corinthians 11:23). Since his days of “raging fury” (Acts 26:11) against the Church, Paul had suffered enormous misery for the sake of Christ:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure (2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

Why, then, magnify his sin rather than magnifying his ministerial labors, his ecclesiastical accomplishments, or his apostolic sufferings?

Agrippa, in the Grippa' Sin

Maybe it helps to understand a bit more about the man to whom Paul spoke. Herod Agrippa II was great-grandson to Herod the Great, who had not only murdered the baby boys of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16), but also murdered his own son, Aristobulus,¹ who was Herod Agrippa II's grandfather.² Herod Agrippa II's great-uncle, Herod Antipas, whom Jesus dubbed "that fox" (Luke 13:32), had beheaded John the Baptist (Mark 6:27). Herod Agrippa I, who was Herod Agrippa II's father, murdered James, the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:2), and later suffered death by devouring worms, for "did not give glory to God" (Acts 12:23). Although nominally Jewish,³ the Herodian family tree reeked of incest and intrigue, of imperial politics and pagan values, and Herod Agrippa II offered little exception to the character of his family.⁴ His given name was Marcus Julius Agrippa,⁵ and his allegiance lay with Rome, not Judea. When the Jewish people rebelled against Rome in AD66, Agrippa fled Jerusalem, supporting the armies of Rome⁶ as they conquered Judea, razed Jerusalem, and enslaved the Jewish people. Throughout his lifetime, rumors hounded Agrippa of an ongoing incestuous relationship with his sister, Bernice.⁷ Suffice it to say that Herod Agrippa II was no son of Abraham.

To this man, Paul revealed the truth of his own sinfulness, depravity, and naked wickedness, holding nothing back. And the implication seems clear. It is as though Paul says, "If I can be washed of my sin, Agrippa, so can you. If I can change and serve this Christ, so can you. If I can acknowledge my sin and seek the Savior, so can you. If you think, even for a moment, that I'm some Christian goody-goody, who doesn't understand what it means to be ruthless, to employ violence for personal gain, or to murder innocent people, you're wrong." Paul magnified the enormity of his own sin, for by so doing, he magnified all the more the

surpassing mercy of Christ in overcoming it. He proclaimed the unveiled sinfulness of sin, using himself as Exhibit A, not only to convict Agrippa, but also to teach him that no sinner stands beyond the reach of Christ's mercy. Not even Herod Agrippa II.

YOU and YOUR SHEEP

Preaching Sin

Not every man or woman in your congregation has committed atrocities like Agrippa, but every human heart is atrocious (Jeremiah 17:9). And although none of us is as wicked as we could be, none of us has escaped the depravity and corruption of original sin (Psalm 51:5). Even the most sanctified Christians "were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another" (Titus 3:3). The Word of God profits by means of reproof and correction as much as by teaching and training (2 Timothy 3:16), and every preacher must strive to testify along with Paul, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable" (Acts 20:20).

Big Sin, Bigger Savior

So, dear preacher, preach sin. Expose its full wickedness. Help your sheep to see the sin in their own actions and inactions, words, thoughts, attitudes, desires, and even heart motivations. Tell them that every sin committed against an infinite and eternal God demands an infinite and eternal punishment (James 2:10). Instruct them that they commit no sin so small but that it merits the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41), while their acts of devotion never serve Christ so fully that they merit commendation much less salvation (Luke 17:10).

If you proclaim Christ but not sin, you proclaim a savior who comes to forgive a five-dollar debt, to heal a common cold, or to ransom a people who never suffered real bondage in the first place. But when you preach sin as an act of love, you

proclaim *the* Savior who comes to forgive a five hundred trillion-dollar debt, to heal an incurable, fatal malady, and to ransom a people who suffered eternal bondage to sin and its awful wages.

Simply put, if I minimize sin, I minimize the mercy of Christ in overcoming sin, but when I offer full weight to the enormity, the criminality, the perversity, the rebellion, and the misery of sin, I magnify all the more the mercy of Christ in overcoming it. In order fully to exalt Jesus Christ as Savior, I must put sin under a microscope, expose it, and proclaim it in all its ugliness, it's wickedness—even its *evil*—in order to show the greater beauty of Christ our Savior.

CONCLUSION

I *am* evil, born in sin. The hymnist wasn't exaggerating. But Christ saves evil people like me, like you, like our sheep. I urge you to join me in preaching sin boldly, clearly, and without equivocation, for preaching sin is an act of *love*.

NOTES

1. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 29.
2. H. W. Hoehner, "Herod," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume 2*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 693.
3. Herod the Great's second wife, Mariamme, was a princess of the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty, and thus the Jewish people considered Aristobulus, Herod Agrippa I, and Herod Agrippa II Jewish leaders. See Bruce, *History*, 22, and Hoehner, "Herod," 689.
4. J. A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1963), 392; and Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 689.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 456.
6. Hoehner, "Herod," 697.
7. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity), 368.