Dead: Gone Astray Memory Verse: Isaiah 53:6

March 19th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 17:1-8

SLIDE 1: DEAD To SIN

During this time of Lent, we have been taking sin very seriously. We have discussed how our sin is not just a small problem but it actually constitutes the greatest evil. We saw from the book of James how sin works. It begins as a craving, a desire…that desire plays out as sin in our lives and the result is death. Death? Really? Death seems a little dramatic doesn’t it? Especially when we can chalk our sin up to a little mistake, a misstep. But death is not my word…in fact death is not the word I would choose to characterize my sin. Death seems far too harsh. And yet, there it is, all throughout scripture. The wages of sin is death.

Have you ever had one of those warning lights go off on your dash board? Could be the tire pressure, maybe you’re low on oil, or you need to refill the washer fluid. But what, I ask you, what does the “check engine” light mean? These indicators on our dash board are supposed to serve as a warning. They are supposed to point out to us problems that we may not know about. When we see the light, we can then address the problem. Tires, oil, washer fluid, okay got it. But the check engine light is much too vague for me. I will have to take the car into the mechanic to get a proper diagnosis. If you are anything like me, when that light comes on, you take note, oh I see something somewhere thinks I should know that something somewhere is wrong with my car. I might listen more carefully to how the engine is running or how it sounds while accelerating. I might purposefully take a few sniffs to try to detect some smell that should not be. And since there is no felt change in the way my car is functioning, I then officially conclude that nothing is wrong, at least not wrong enough to warrant my attention. The next day, when I get into my car, I start it up, see that light and simply ignore it. By the third day, I don’t even see it. Anybody like me?

Now what is the problem with this mode of operating? It’s stupid right? We all know ignoring the problem does not make it go away, in fact, it will just make it worse. Especially, in my case, we drive used vehicles. We are starting off with potential problems. Given all the complexities of motor vehicles, something is going to go wrong eventually. And when one thing fails, it will adversely affect the functioning of everything else. But ignoring the problem seems a lot easier.

Turn with me to Jeremiah chapter 17. We read the first part of this chapter earlier. Jeremiah lays it out, “Cursed are those who trust in humans and blessed are those who trust in the LORD.” And this next verse that we are going to look at perfectly illustrates why I love the Bible. I love it because it doesn’t pull any punches. If you take this book to be the Word of God, if you understand that what it is telling you is the truth than this book is going to throw punches. As we say, the truth hurts, and if you allow the blow to land, if you take the hit, you’ll end up with a shiner, but you also have wisdom. The truth hurts and wisdom does not come cheap, so I want to encourage you to take this one on the chin.

**SLIDE 2: Jeremiah**

Jeremiah 17 verse 9: “The most cunning heart – it’s beyond help. Who can figure it out?” This translation actually puts it a little too nicely. From the NASB: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?” The NET bible: “The human mind is more deceitful than anything else. It is incurably bad. Who can understand it?” The NLT: “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”

Who really knows how bad it is? It’s like a check engine light. I see it, I know there is a problem, but I really have no clue how bad the problem is. I can sniff around, I can listen carefully, but I really need some expertise. I need someone who understands how a car works, a mechanic who can accurately tell me how bad the problem is.

**SLIDE 3: “I, the LORD, probe the heart and discern hidden motives.”**

Jeremiah reminds us that God is the one who knows. He is the mechanic in this situation. Verse 10: “I, the LORD, probe the heart and discern hidden motives.” God is the one who can get under the hood. He is the one who can see what we can’t see, or hear or smell. God uncovers what is hidden deep within us. But what happens when you take your car into the mechanic? Two things: You find out some information you did not know about your car and you get a bill. You must pay.

Jeremiah goes on: “I (the LORD) give to everyone what they deserve, the consequences of their deeds.” When my mechanic works on my car, the consequence is some amount of money that I have to pay. But when it comes to my sin…well, we’ve already established the consequence…death. Death is on the bill. I want to take a moment and just ask, “How are we doing? Can we take such a punch to the gut? Are you hanging in there?”

**SLIDE 4: Isaiah 53:5 “By His wounds we are healed.”**

Let’s take a look at another prophet. Turn to Isaiah chapter 53. In this passage, we read about the description of what is known as the suffering servant. This servant is sent by God and this servant will be despised and rejected. This servant will carry our sickness and bear our sufferings. He will be pierced for our rebellion and crushed for our crimes. Isaiah says in verse 5, “By His wounds we are healed.” So who is the “we” in this passage. “We” refers to the people of God. Isaiah’s message was aimed at the Jewish people, those whom God had chosen to represent him and share his glory with the whole earth. So if the we is God’s people, then who is the servant who suffers on behalf of God’s people? Well, at the time, no one knew. Isaiah himself did not know. Whoever it was certainly was getting the short end of the stick. What kind of poor soul is born just to suffer for the sake of others? What kind of unfortunate person lives just to die? Well, we know what kind of poor soul don’t we? We know who this man of sorrows is. We have the gift of hindsight. We can connect the dots that Isaiah and his people could not.

This suffering and death the sin brings about is very real, and now take a look at verse 6: “Like sheep we had all wandered away, each going its own way…So stop right there. Who is the “we”? God’s people…that is the Israelite’s, but that is also you and me. We are now sitting here, God’s people. And what Isaiah spoke almost three thousand years ago applies directly to our lives. We are like sheep who have gone astray. All of us. We have wandered, we have walked away from our good shepherd. Sometimes it’s on purpose out of defiance, sometimes we just get distracted and lured away by, what James calls our cravings…our desires. Whatever the reason, whatever excuse we might have, we are like sheep going our own way and that behavior is not without consequence. We see that as we finish up verse 6: “The LORD let fall on him, that is, this servant, all our crimes.” So the consequence of our crimes does not come to us, but rather falls upon God’s suffering servant, which as it turns out, is the eternal, uncreated Son, Jesus Christ.

So what then, is our response to this miracle, this amazing grace that has been poured out upon us? Well, as humans with deceitful hearts, we might conclude, “Hey, I have received mercy as a result of my sin. If I do the math then that means that I could keep on sinning and thus continue to receive grace.” We know that is foolish on its face, but these hearts of ours…there is not telling the evil thoughts we can come up with. The apostle Paul saw all of this coming. We have received mercy in light of our sin and Paul asks in Romans 6, “So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! And why not? Because you have died to sin. If that is true, if you have trusted in Christ, you’ve been baptized into his death, you have received forgiveness, then you are dead to sin and if you are dead to sin, how can you still live in it?”

**SLIDE 5: I don’t know! I just do!**

Well, Paul…I don’t know! I just do! I do believe in Christ’s death and resurrection. I do believe that he took on my punishment. I do believe that I have been forgiven…but yet, I do still sin. Why? Paul is right there with us…in chapter 7 he admits, “I don’t do what a want to do, instead I do the thing I hate. I know it’s wrong. I know it is wandering away…but I still sin. He says in verse 24, “I’m a miserable human being…or a wretched man. Who will save me?”

Jesus, the risen Savior, Jesus the suffering servant, he will save us. He will set us free from the law of sin and death and he gives us the opportunity to become slaves of righteousness. So how do we do that? Can we take the step from being dead in sin, to being dead to sin?

**SLIDE 6: Warning Light**

Let’s go back to the check engine light. We know we are sinners. We are stray sheep. We see the warning light. We know there’s a problem. We can confess our failing, we can ask for forgiveness, and thank God, we receive it. We are reset, the warning light has been switched off and we are free! But sure enough, maybe even on our way home from the shop, that light flicks back on again and we feel defeated. Frustrated. Stuck in an endless cycle.

Last week we talked about those respectable sins, the ones we tolerate. It’s not about murder or adultery, it’s about the subtle sins, the persistent sins that just won’t go away. Sins like impatience, discontentment, selfishness, envy, bitterness, anxiety or a lack of self-control or fill in the blank. And if you’re anything like me, you have struggled long enough that now you tend to just ignore the warning light. You have resigned yourself to accepting these sins as a normal, albeit, disappointing part of life. As I mentioned before, scripture does not pull any punches, and if we can, I want to encourage you to let the sting of sin arouse you to take time to do a little diagnosis and fight back! But then we see that warning light we can’t just make an appointment with a mechanic for a quick-fix. Our spiritual lives are a bit more complicated than that. So how can we go about this work? How do you pop the hood and learn to observe the inner working of sin in our lives? Remember what Jeremiah said, the LORD probes the heart. He knows what’s inside of us. We begin by taking the problem to him; the Good Shepherd, the Great Mechanic.

When it comes to a particular die-hard sin, when we observe that warning light, we need to pull over and take stock of four qualities. Grab a pencil and, before anything else, write down a particular sin, something specific that you struggle with. You know it is not what God would want in your life and yet, there it is… But you are going to want to avoid being to general here. The more focused and pointed you can be, the better. We tend to say, “The devil is in the details” and I think that is more true that we know.

**SLIDE 7: “The devil is in the details”**

Once you have specific sin written down, the first thing to consider is it’s duration: When you do struggle, how long does it last? Do you experience this sin as a blip on the radar or is it a slow-cooker sort of sin that takes awhile to heat up? Have you struggled with this sin for years or has it shown up more recently in your life?

Next, think through the frequency of this sin. How often does it occur for you? Is it a rarity or a path you tend to frequent often? Chances are, you wrote down what you did because you feel it happens too often, but try to get a gauge for its frequency. It is daily? Hourly?

Next, think about the intensity of this sin. Does the struggle bring sweat to your brow or does it come and go less noticeably? What sort of heat or friction does this sin generate in your life and in your heart? How much passion do you put into committing this sin? How do you feel in the midst of it?

Lastly, what triggers this sin? What circumstances are in place when it occurs? What seems to set you off in this area? What can you do to adjust and minimize the power of this sin in your life? Typically our triggers are connected to our daily habits, but certainly there are times when we are tripped up in an unexpected way. Still, we can give ourselves a pretty good head’s up about the presence of sin in our lives if we intentionally think through the things that trigger certain responses.

This little rubric of introspection: Asking about frequency, intensity, duration, and triggers will go a long way in aiding the work of the Spirit in our lives. We know that if we continue in sin, our ability to fight against that sin diminishes. Before too long, we have allowed Satan to gain a foothold in our lives. And then our experience is bondage to sin and not the freedom Christ dies to give us. We need to take the time and put in the intention to identify what exactly is going on inside of us. When we couple this with a strong prayer life, we can bet the Holy Spirit will point out to us where we need to repent as well as reveal to us the root of the problem.

**SLIDE 8: “Making honest observations of our sin will not only help us know better the ways we need to change but will also give us an indication of the progress we are making toward holiness.”**

Witt writes, “Making honest observations of our sin will not only help us know better the ways we need to change but will also give us an indication of the progress we are making toward holiness.” And that is what this life is all about, that’s what a disciple is; someone who is becoming more and more like Jesus.

When we neglect this fight, when we ignore the warning light – our car does not immediately explode. The tires do not fall off and the doors do not fall off their hinges. In fact, everything seems perfectly fine and normal. Things could continue to run smoothly for a while. See sin is so deceptive, even the damage it does is misleading, it’s all under the hood, unseen. We are so easily blind to it. John Owen, a pastor from 1650’s lays it out. He said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” There is no middle ground here.

So today, when you see that warning light, when your heart sinks and you think to yourself, “Not again. Why do I keep doing this?” Pull over, pop the hood, reflect, pray, repent. Go to the Great Mechanic.

May we no longer be dead in sin, but rather dead to sin. Amen!