Dead: How Sin Works Scripture Reading: Romans 8:12-17

March 12th, 2023 Memory Verse: Romans 8:13

**Slide 1: Title**

We enter into this third week of Lent having already talked about the fall of Adam and Eve, having already recognized that sin, our sin, mine and yours, is the greatest evil. Sin goes beyond the bounds of this earthly life. It wants to destroy our eternity. Sin is the only thing in this life that puts us directly in opposition to God. Nothing else can make us God’s enemy…only the greatest evil can do that.

This time of Lent is important for us because everyone else everywhere else, wants to take sin lightly. We are encouraged at every turn to justify and make excuses for our sins. We do this constantly and we are so good at this in fact, that we do it without even realizing that we are doing it. Author Jerry Bridges wrote a book about it called “Respectable Sins”. These are the things we tolerate in our lives because, we say, they are not that bad, they are not that big of a deal. Things like ingratitude, anxiety, frustration, discontentment, impatience, jealousy and all the subtle jabs and slights we make with our tongues. These sins are not murder…they are not outrightly hateful, but they are sins all the same, and if that is true, they are evil and God hates them. We like to talk a lot about how God is love, as we should, God is love, but it is precisely because he is a loving God that he hates sin. Respectable, tolerable or not, God hates sin. The goal of this sermon series, the goal of Lent, the goal of the gospel is to move us toward transformation, towards maturity, towards holiness. That we too, might hate sin just as God does. And that entails a change in our hearts, because we really, really like to sin. We are good at it. As I said before, we can do it without thinking. It literally comes naturally to us.

Well so can God blame us when we are just doing what comes naturally? Of course he can. If what we are doing goes against what he wants us to do, if it flies in the face of his holiness, then he hates it and as we talked about last week, we are in deep trouble.

**SLIDE 2: Superbowl**

Just last month our country gathered around chips and dip to watch the two best football teams in the world face off on the gridiron in what we call the super bowl. Now, I am no expert on the sport of football. To me, it’s a simple matter…the team with the ball is trying to get it down the field and the other team is trying to stop them. It seems to me that the team with the faster, stronger players will achieve victory. But I recently discovered the science of reviewing tapes. Players and coaches spend lots of time studying tapes on how opposing teams operate. In fact, these days, every team has available to them every play that occurs during an NFL game. The data is stored in computers so players and coaches can analyze anything they want in any specific way. If they want to see all second-down plays they can do so….maybe they want to see how an opposing team functions between the 20 and 5 yard line. They can do that too. Being able to review and carefully study how an opposing team plays changes the game. If a coach is wise, he will adjust his gameplan based on whether the other team plays a long game or focuses on running the ball for example. Ray Lewis, a former line-backer for the Baltimore Ravens put it this way, “When you are playing against minds, every little thing is a chess match.” So all of the sudden football becomes chess. Speed and brawn are less important when playing against a mind.

Our battle with sin is no different. Knowing how the enemy works, knowing how sin functions in our lives helps us in the fight. It requires us to take some time and review some tapes. Take a look at how things have played out in certain situations. How did sin get the upper hand? Where have we left ourselves vulnerable? The game is much more complicated than we assume. It’s much more than throwing and catching…To modify the quote from Ray Lewis: “when you are playing against evil, every little thing is a chess match.”

**SLIDE 3: “when you are playing against evil, every little thing is a chess match.”**

Author Rebecca DeYoung encourages us by saying that the study of sin can catalyze spiritual growth. In other words, we are going to have some more wins, and experience victory more often as we improve upon our defensive plays, as we know more about the opposition. She makes the point that we tend to psychologize our sin. We seek solutions in the world of medication, or maybe therapy. We tend to see more education as the main solution. If only we have some more information about the human body or how this or that environmental factor affects our mental state. Certainly, education is a fine thing, but it may very well be that we are suffering from too much information and not enough research. We have a wide variety of things to know and study, but our depth of knowledge remains quite shallow. I would say, we have all the information we need, now we need to get to studying it. We have been given a playbook here, now we need to carefully consider what it says about us, who we are, as well as what it says about our enemy, about who he is.

So just as the head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs would ask, how does the Philadelphia offense work? We need to ask, how does sin work? We are going to turn to the book of James to begin to answer this question. READ James 1: 13

**SLIDE 4: James 1: 13 13 When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.**

So here is our first clue…remember last week, I mentioned how sin is always deceptive. And here is it’s first play…to pass itself off as God’s doing. When we face a trial or a temptation, the knee-jerk reaction is to blame someone else, God included. We might say things like, “This would never have happened if she had done her part.” Or, “God, you are all powerful, you could have made me avoid this situation.” Or, “Why am I like this? I’ll never change.” Or, “It’s just an accident…a little bad luck.” The fact is, if you choose to get out of bed in the morning, you will face temptation. If you have any sort of brain function going on, you will face temptation. But James is clear, it’s not God’s fault. As much as you want to blame him, as much a sin itself tries to point it finger elsewhere, God does not temp anyone. Remember, he hates sin. His desire is that we become holy just as he is holy. There is zero sin in that equation.

So if God is not the source of our temptation, what is? James is so glad you asked. READ 14.

**SLIDE 5: James 1: 14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.**

So, the problem is us after all. More specifically, our cravings. We typically associate that word with food, but all it means is a powerful desire. Each of us, James says, “everyone” has within them a powerful desire. And that desire of course is enticing. It always involves something we enjoy. That is why it is tempting in the first place. And just like a lure in the water shimmering in front of a fish, we are enticed to at least check that thing out. And that’s when we get hooked.

See, temptation is a part of life. It is always before us. It is always a factor. But being tempted is not a sin. That just means you are alive. Look at the next verse, READ 15.

**SLIDE 6: James 1: 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.**

When we follow the lure, when we are overcome by whatever enticing thing that is dangled before us, when we cross the line into action, we sin. We do what is wrong. We have been tricked, we have been overpowered, we have been outplayed. We have lost the game. Sin got us again. But you see it’s not just some outside force that we can avoid…it’s a craving that is within us…a craving in our hearts that we cannot escape. And when we cross that line into sin, when we give birth to it, to grows up…it reaches maturity. Instead of us becoming spiritually mature and more holy, sin reaches maturity instead and the result of that mess is death.

We are stuck in the center of this tug of war between life and death. And through we are in the middle of that fight, we are also the deciders of that fight. Will we give into temptation or won’t we? Will we cross over into sin, or won’t we? Will we become spiritually mature or will our sin be the thing that grows up?

The determining factor in the answer to these questions is summed up in one word: habits. DeYoung offers up an analogy: READ pg. 13.

I want to make sure we don’t miss that last thought…Habits incline us swiftly toward certain types of action. Swiftly…it’s quick…it happens before we know it. But the beauty of this is that we get to control the way in which we are inclined. Depending on our habits, we can lean toward virtue or vice, righteousness or sin. Just like the pathway of a sled in the snow, righteousness or sin is internalized and settled through years of formation. Which side of the hill are we going down? In other words, by addressing our habits, we can turn the tide in our battle against sin. And biblically speaking, it is us or sin…We have just read in James how sin gives birth to death and in Romans 8:13, Paul shares the other side of the coin when he writes, “If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if, by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live.”

**SLIDE 7: Romans 8:13 If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if, by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live.”**

So it’s pretty clear cut…either we die or we allow the Holy Spirit to put to death the actions of the body. You can see why we decided to simply call this series “Dead”. Death will come to our spiritual life, or to our sin life.

As we turn back to James, we notice that he has pointed out to us the three stages in which evil works in our lives: the first stage: desires, cravings, temptations. The second stage: the sin itself, the action, the wrongdoing. And thirdly: death. James continues. READ 16-18

**SLIDE 8: James 1:16-18 Don’t be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. 18 He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created**

A few things to highlight from this passage, the first is that God gives us the good stuff. Every good gift comes from him. Evil does not originate in him, God hates evil, and he loves good so much that he gifts it to us from above. Secondly, in God there is no change. His character, who he is, how he acts, is set. Malachi 3:6 tells us the same thing. Hebrews 13:8 applies the same truth to Christ. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. We live out our days finicky and on an emotional rollercoaster and trying out new things and making different choices Sometimes we are sinning and sometimes we are victorious over sin…we are in a constant state of change. God is the opposite of that. His character was and is and always will be that of a loving heavenly Father, who is holy and just and who gives good things. Third, we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created. Now what does that mean?

If we have been given birth by his true word…meaning we have believed the gospel. We have been spiritually born again into new life. And just as the first-fruits of the harvest were dedicated to God, so James is saying, we belong to God. We have been set apart from the rest of creation as those who belong to God. And if we belong to God, who is holy, than we, in turn, have been made holy. And if we have been made holy than we have no sin.

But we know that is not the whole picture. We know we fall into sin. In fact, 1 John 1:8 tells us clearly, “If anyone says they are without sin, they are a liar.” That’s pretty blunt.

If we skip to James 1:22 we can get some direction on the next step to take in our battle against sin. James writes, “You must be doers of the word, and not only hearers who mislead themselves.” He goes on, “They study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don’t listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives.” That sounds like habits. James goes on, “They will be blessed in whatever they do.”

James is underlining the importance of action in the Christian life. It’s easy to hear the truth of God’s word, but what is the point if it does not actually play out in our lives? The law of God is both perfect, there is nothing better; it cannot be improved upon, and the law of God is our source of freedom. Commentator William Barclay writes, “So long as a man has to obey his own passions and emotions and desires, he is nothing less than a slave. It is when he accepts the will of God that he becomes really free – for then he is free to be what he ought to be. His service is perfect freedom and in doing his will is our peace.”

**SLIDE 9: “So long as a man has to obey his own passions and emotions and desires, he is nothing less than a slave. It is when he accepts the will of God that he becomes really free – for then he is free to be what he ought to be. His service is perfect freedom and in doing his will is our peace.”**

We can know this peace; we can be victorious over sin. It takes some action on our part. We are dependently responsible. Remember Romans 8:13, “If, by the power of the Holy Spirit, YOU put to death the actions of the body, you will live.” We are both fully dependent and fully responsible. We are called upon to defeat sin, to pay attention to how it gives birth in our lives, to address our day-to-day habits. We have that responsibility, but at the same time we are utterly dependent. We need the Holy Spirit to help us. He points out our sin, and he empowers us to put those sins to death. And we find access to the Holy Spirit’s power through the reading and living out of God’s word and through the practice of prayer.

I want to challenge you this week to come before the Lord in prayer. And life a football player, come suited up, come with your gear on ready to play. Come having studied the pernicious ways sin works in your life, come with full knowledge of the playbook that has been provided for you. Come ready to get off the bench and ready to win the game.

**SLIDE 10: Come ready to fight.**

Come ready to fight. Maybe you want to stand while you pray these prayers. Maybe you want to raise your voice a little while you pray these prayers. Maybe it would help to add a little physical action into these prayers. But when you pray, ask God to fill you with his power. Ask him to give you a holy hatred for the sin in your life and lay out before him specifics. Don’t just repent of a general selfishness. Consider you life, consider your temptations, consider what lures you and name those things before God in your prayers. Fight against the specific schemes Satan uses against you. Remember, as God’s children, we are both completely responsible as well as utterly dependent. And if you keep it up, if you are persistent and willing to put your faith into action…you will find victory, because God gives good gifts. He hates evil but he loves his children, and he will help any child of his who is willing to fight against sin. Amen.