Dead: The Greatest Evil Memory Verse: 2 Samuel 24:14

March 5th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Ephesians 5:6-14

**SLIDE 1: TITLE**

Here we are in our second week of Lent. Two Wednesdays ago we gathered together to mark our foreheads with ash…a strange thing to do for most people. But for us, for those who seek to follow Jesus, putting a black cross upon our heads is simply an acknowledgment of reality…we are dust. Last Sunday, Pastor Cassi shared with us a message about the fall of mankind in the idyllic Garden of Eden. And today we will be talking about the greatest evil as we continue our series entitled, “DEAD”. All of these uplifting and wonderful thoughts are brought to you by Lent.

**SLIDE 2: What is Lent?**

“What is Lent?,” you might ask. It’s a good question. Just like Ash Wednesday, it does not make a lot of sense to the general public. But the term Lent refers to the traditional church season that precedes Easter. We spend 40 days in Lent and during that time, some Christians will fast from a specific thing, a treat of some kind or an amenity that they could do without. The point is to identify and remember the suffering that Jesus endured in his time on this earth. Lent is meant to give us an opportunity to get real with our sin…to feel the weight of it, to acknowledge it. To really and truly understand that sin, your sin, my sin, is the greatest evil.

Now, talking about sin is not cool. As I alluded to earlier, this is not a happy-go-lucky topic. It’s much more fashionable and much easier to ignore sin, to sweep to aside, to pretend it isn’t a problem. But to gloss over sin would be an unbiblical position to take. This whole series brings to mind the old adage: “It’s going to get worse before it gets better.” So, on that note…

**SLIDE 3: FRED**

I would like you all to consider Fred. Fred is an average guy, he has a wife and a couple of kids. He works hard and pays his taxes, He tips well at restaurants. Fred is willing to lend a hand when someone is in need and when he goes to sleep at night, he can do so with a smile because if you were ask him, Fred would happily state that, yes, indeed, he is a good person. In fact, when pressed, Fred would probably venture to say that he is actually more moral than most people. Now we all know a Fred…good people, give you the shirt right of his back, reliable..kind. So why are we talking about the Fred’s of this world in a sermon called “The Greatest Evil?”

Well, the truth is, like Fred, we all consider ourselves to be more moral than most people. This has been verified by various surveys given throughout various places. We all fancy ourselves to be good people. The problem is we have been deceived. Have you even had an experience in which seem to remember something being said or done, but you are not sure if maybe you are actually remembering a dream you had? That is sort of a weird moment. You realize that you are not quite sure what is actual reality and what was a dream. You sort of loose your grip for just a moment. You maybe feel like your loosing your mind, or at least that it is playing tricks on you.

Sin has that affect on us. Sin will always deceive us. Sin will always try to keep us in a dreamworld, a world detached from reality, a world in which we are all good, moral people.

**SLIDE 4: Ephesians 5:14, “Wake up oh Sleeper! You are dreaming! Wake up from the dead and let Christ shine on you.” Wake up oh Sleeper and hear the truth! Let the light of Jesus point out the lies you have believed.”**

As we read earlier, Paul, who was channeling Isaiah at the time, wrote in Ephesians 5:14, “Wake up oh Sleeper! You are dreaming! Wake up from the dead and let Christ shine on you.” Wake up oh Sleeper and hear the truth! Let the light of Jesus point out the lies you have believed.”

Fred, and those like him, are asleep.

As I prepared to talk about sin, I came across an old Puritan who wrote in the 1650’s named Samuel Bolton. He put together an essay entitled “Sin: The Greatest Evil”. And in that writing, Samuel makes his point by looking at a little mentioned story from the book of 2 Samuel.

Now, to say sin is the greatest evil is to imply that it is not the only evil. Evil comes in many forms: poverty, natural disaster, disease, crisis, war, injustice of any kind…these and other evils run rampant in our world and will affect us at some point in our lives. Bolton is not denying these evils, but he us saying that these pale in comparison to sin…our sin.

2 Samuel, despite the title, is actually all about king David. He was a great warrior who defeated many enemies, He had a cadre of soldiers who gained great fame as the Mighty Men. And now, after he has fought so many battles, in chapter 22 he sings a song of thanksgiving to God for saving him from his enemies. Chapter 23 includes David’s last words so this last story in

**SLIDE 5: “The LORD burned with anger against Israel again.” So that is very straightforward and direct. God is angry and he has his reasons, we just don’t know them. And he incited David against them (that is, the people) and God said, “Go and count the people of Israel and Judah.”**

Chapter 24 is more of an addendum. It doesn’t really fit as part of the narrative and it begins in a very peculiar way, verse 1, “The LORD burned with anger against Israel again.” So that is very straightforward and direct. God is angry and he has his reasons, we just don’t know them. And he incited David against them (that is, the people) and God said, “Go and count the people of Israel and Judah.” Take a census in other words. There is normally nothing wrong with taking a census, but remember God is using this circumstance as a matter of punishment against the people. So David orders his military commander Joab to perform a census of the population.

**SLIDE 6: So the king said to Joab and the military commanders[a] who were with him, “Go throughout all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and take a census of the people so I know how many people there are.” Joab said to the king, “May the Lord your God increase the number of people a hundred times while the eyes of my master the king can still see it! But why does my master the king want to do this?” But the king’s word overruled Joab and the military commanders. So Joab and the commanders left the king’s presence to take a census of the Israelites.**

READ 2-4.

Joab pushed back on this idea. He finds it to be unnecessary. A census provides lots of information but the main reason to take a count of the people is to get a good idea of how large of an army you have. Joab knows that Israel has secured military victory thus far, not because they had a massive army, but because God has provided for them and given them victory. This move on the part of the king would only serve to reinforce the idea that Israel has somehow achieved on their own. A census at this point would only serve to stroke the king’s ego. But David dismisses such concerns and asks that the census be taken. So Joab goes through with it. He sends men throughout the land and it takes them almost ten months but they finally finish. READ 9-10.

**SLIDE 7: Joab reported to the king the number of the people who had been counted: in Israel there were eight hundred thousand strong men who could handle a sword; in Judah the total was five hundred thousand men. But after this David felt terrible that he had counted the people. David said to the Lord, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, Lord, please take away the guilt of your servant because I have done something very foolish.”**

David feels the sting of conscience here. Somehow he becomes aware of his pride that he had so easily dismissed earlier and he wakes up from sleep and sees the reality of what he had done. He admits his sin and asks that his guilt be taken away.

**SLIDE 8: When David got up the next morning, the Lord’s word came to the prophet Gad, David’s seer: Go and tell David, This is what the Lord says: I’m offering you three punishments. Choose one of them, and that is what I will do to you. So Gad went to David and said to him, “Will three[a] years of famine come on your land? Or will you run from your enemies for three months while they chase you? Or will there be three days of plague in your land? Decide now what answer I should take back to the one who sent me.” “I’m in deep trouble,” David said to Gad. “Let’s fall into the Lord’s hands because his mercy is great, but don’t let me fall into human hands.”**

READ 11-14

This is such a strange story…especially to us. Our general mode of practice goes something like this: we realize we have done something wrong, we quietly say a prayer asking God for forgiveness, we say thank you and Amen and that’s that. We move on with our day. We don’t concern ourselves much with thinking about any sort of punishment. But here David is given three options and he has to pick one. His choices are three years of famine, three months of running from enemies or three days of plague. Now we do not know if David agonized over this decision…it seems like a tough call to make, they all seem incredibly terrible, but as we have it in the text David states the facts simply and clearly…”I am in deep trouble.”

**SLIDE 10: I am in deep trouble.**

This is the sentence of a man who has been woken up! The reality of what he has done has dawned upon him. His dream state of innocence has been shattered. I wonder when was that last time you thought or said these words? Honestly, for me, it’s been a while. I don’t often see myself as someone in trouble. I can remember some instances as a kid when I had done something wrong and I had to gulp down a huge lump in my throat and I knew I was going to face the wrath of my father. But in those times, I might have admitted that I was in deep trouble, but what I really feared was the punishment. I did not regret what I had done so much as what I had coming to me. Does that make sense? My wrong act did not worry me…my punishment is what worried me.

**SLIDE 11: I am in deep trouble…so let us fall in to the LORD’s hands because his mercy is great, but don’t let me fall into human hands.**

But take a look at David’s response here: “I am in deep trouble…so let us fall in to the LORD’s hands because his mercy is great, but don’t let me fall into human hands.” David’s wrongdoing is going to bring trouble, but at the same time David allows his repentance to drive him back to God. Normally, when we are in trouble we want to run off and hide from mom and dad, we see that in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve actually try to hide from God. Our natural response is to avoid punishment. But David stands before God, acknowledging his sin and desiring to reclaim a right relationship with the God he had wronged.

In this way, David understood then that the greatest evil was not the coming punishment but the sin itself. Our greatest desire should be to please God and therefore the greatest evil is our failure to do so.

As we have said, sin is deceptive. It’s always deceptive. It wants us to feel bad for ourselves when we find we are in deep trouble. Sin will always seek to move out of the spotlight. It would rather be hidden and exist undetected. And that Church, is part of the point of Lent. It’s a time for us to do a deep dive into ourselves, to root out the sin we find hidden in the recesses of our hearts and minds and drag it into the light of Christ.

It is all too easy to brush off our sin as not a big deal. We can sit comfortably here in our pews content to know that we have never murdered anyone, we have never committed fraud, we have never purposefully lied under oath. Yes, we can admit that we are sinners…no one claims to be perfect. After all we are human aren’t we? But my sins are really pretty minor. They are nothing to report on, nothing to worry too much about. And, lo and behold, before we know it, we find that we are hanging out with Fred again…fast asleep.

**SLIDE 11: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23**

We know what the Bible says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23 and the “wages of sin is death” Romans 6:23. There is not mention here of levels of sin, no separation of big sins from minor sins. We have all have sinned…we have all earned death. Any sin, whether or not we consider it benign or massively offensive, is the greatest evil.

Samuel Bolton explains that no other evil makes us the subject of God’s wrath. We read in Psalm 45:7 God loves justice and hates evil. He hates evil and sin is the greatest evil because it puts us at odds with God. If God really is just, then he really must hate that which is unjust. And if God really is fully just, then he must really hate that which is even a little unjust. God hates sin. No other evil makes us the subject of God’s wrath. And we are guilty of that evil. We are not as evil as we could be…by God’s grace we can act decent and civil most of the time, but the point here is that no one is able to dodge the reality…sin is the greatest evil and like it or not, we are guilty of it.

Samuel Bolton makes another argument saying that sin is the greatest evil because all other evils oppose your well-being in the here and now. The things we listed before: disease and poverty and crime disrupt and destroy our well-being, but sin is opposed to your eternal wellbeing. Sin is out to destroy your eternal future. Sin is the only evil that affects us after this life is over.

Moreover, sin is the greatest evil because from it flows every other evil. In sin evil finds its putrid source. That is exactly what we learn from Adam and Eve’s story in Genesis. They were guilty of evil before God, and their decision bred into each of us this natural inclination to sin, to choose that which God hates. Sin begets more sin.

We are in deep trouble. We need to wake up to that reality. We need to be able to see sin for what it really is…not benign, not “something we are working on”, not a concession of our shared humanity, but as the greatest evil. To be so awakened, so be able to see sin for what truly is is in fact a great gift from God, because of sin, the greatest evil, God has responded with the greatest good. Bolton writes, “Let us fall down and admire the wisdom and adore the goodness of God who out of the greatest evil, could bring the greatest good.”

**SLIDE 12: “Let us fall down and admire the wisdom and adore the goodness of God who out of the greatest evil, could bring the greatest good.” Bolton**

The greatest evil requires the greatest good…the greatest sin requires the greatest redemption…the greatest debt requires the greatest price…all of which is found in Jesus Christ. Romans 5:8 “God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!” What a mercy! What a deliverance!

Church, do not let Lent pass by this year without trying to understand the depth of your sin. It’s not a fun topic, this is not a feel good speech. But it’s truth…it’s reality. If you need cleansing, come to the water. For most of us, most of the time we come to the ocean of God’s forgiveness and we take a small washcloth, dip it in the water and wipe down our face and maybe our hands. f I consider myself am only a little dirty, this is my response to God’s grace. But the greater the offence, the greater the pardon. How much better to admit the evil of our sin and dive into the depths and cover all that we are with the cleansing waters of the fountain that flows with living water.

King David loved God more than he feared his punishment. When he found that he was in deep trouble, David still wanted to land into the hands of God. In the end, David chose three days of plague as punishment and 70,000 Israelites died as a result. Yet, this disaster drove David to worship the Lord, to turn to him in prayer and ask for mercy. God heard David’s prayer and the plague was stopped.

Do you fear plague, or do you love God? Do you hate sin and the evil it brings? Our failures are not simply mistakes to be shrugged off – our sin puts us in deep trouble. Let me just stop and ask, does this all sound bleak? If it does, it should…it is. Enter into the bleakness, wake up to reality, but don’t stop there.

**SLIDE 13: 2 Corinthians 7:10 “Godly sadness produces a changed heart and life that leads to salvation and leaves no regrets.”**

2 Corinthians 7:10 reminds us that “Godly sadness produces a changed heart and life (we call that repentance) that leads to salvation and leaves no regrets.” So we can let the bleakness lead to repentance. Spend some time today and every day this week taking account of your own sins. Make them a big deal. Our sin puts us in deep trouble. But thanks be to God that we have available to us the even deeper depths of God’s grace! Amen! So come to Jesus today, confess your sins, renounce the evil that resides in your heart and mind.

May we fall into the hands of our merciful God, open ourselves to his correction and grow to hate that which is the greatest evil: our sin. “Wake up, oh sleeper! Get up from the dead and Christ will shine on you.” Amen.