



The Need for Sin: Why the Most Avoided Part of the Gospel is so Necessary



When Passion Fails: Preaching Christ in Spiritual Crisis



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Evangelism often is about nuancing language, contextualizing ideas, and negotiating communication and cultural differences. Eventually, however, every time we share the message of Jesus there are “compulsory” concepts that will be articulated if the message is to be complete. Concepts like sin, death and judgment, the righteousness of Christ, his death and resurrection, and the Lordship of Christ are all in this “compulsory” category. Talking about many of these issues is difficult for so many reasons. If our hearers

are aware of the ideas and categories, often they are misinformed or have warped, self-made perceptions of them. If our hearers are unaware of the Biblical concepts in this category, beginning to

actually explicate them can cause even the most committed Christian to internally say, “This sounds strange to me, how will it sound to them.” There is a fantasticalness to the gospel that can hinder our passion and willingness to articulate it, or at least portions of it. Probably no greater concept elicits apprehension in the Christian’s personal witness more than sin.

Sin is hard to talk about with people, let’s face it. We often have no problem talking about God’s love, how following Christ can heal us and set us free from various forms of external evil or suffering.

We have no problem talking about the promises of God or how much He has changed our lives but sin, really!?!? Can’t we just skip over the fact that the person we seek to share God’s love with is a sinner, was born a sinner, and will die a sinner only to face the eternal consequences of her sin in a place of horrific suffering and separation from God? That may sound nice, it may sound more effective, but here are several reasons why leaving sin out of the picture is not only inadequate evangelism, it is also,

ultimately, ineffective.

The Problem of Causality: Without the concept of sin there is no cause for the extreme measures to which God has gone in providing his Son as our sacrifice. God did not merely inconvenience Himself in sending Jesus. Jesus did not merely die a normal death, he was mercilessly beaten, scourged, spit upon and ultimately died at the hands of sinful men. Isaiah 53:10 tells us that it was the Lord’s will to “crush him,” thus signifying that Christ’s death was a result of God’s direct wrath and judgment, poured out on Him on our behalf. In fact, for thousands of years before Christ, all divine history pointed to this cosmic act and all divine history after Christ’s sacrifice is interpreted through the cross. Nothing in the Christian story makes sense of this except the problem of sin. The fact that we have transgressed the law (Grk, hamartema) necessitates a punishment for what we’ve done or left on done through the transgression.

The Problem of Culpability: Without the concept of sin we have no personal responsibility to God or to others for the

decisions we have made or the actions for good that we fail to make. There is a sense in most people that they owe a moral debt they cannot pay. At some point, we feel the weight of our wrong doing but even when this is not readily apparent, the Christian message of the gospel requires justification for the command for “all people everywhere to repent,” (Acts 17:30). The commandment of God for

repentance and the subsequent requirements for total submission to Christ make sense only in light of the fact that we are, in the depths of our being, sinners. The problem with this in

communication is that we often soft-pitch sin as merely “bad things that bad people do.” The Greek word hamartia does not mean to merely miss the mark, a gross under-representation of this robust Biblical concept. Hamartia, often translated as “sin or sinful” refers to a corruption of spirit, a soul sickness and because of this our problem is not merely our actions. We are sick unto death as our friend Kierkegaard tells us and we are responsible before God not



only to answer for all we’ve done but also to seek him as the only Physician who can heal us and impute to us a new righteousness found only in Christ.

The Problem of Consequence:

Without the concept of sin there is no justification for the wrath of God or the consequences to be faced in the afterlife. There are real and dire consequences to sin here and now but also after this age. It is unbearable to think of loved ones who have passed on without knowing Christ, who now are suffering and will forever suffer the darkness, the despair, the absolute torment of hell and later the lake of fire. Such thoughts are too painful for us to dwell on but nevertheless a reality for all who have not had their sin cured and their sins washed away. Because sin is as serious as God says it is, he went to the extreme measures He did to save us from not only sin but also its consequences. This is not insignificant for the hearer of the gospel. She needs to understand the justification for the fantastical consequences, the cosmic horror that awaits her and this can only be explained by the veracity of sin.

The Problem of Categorization:

Without the concept of sin we have no categories to understand the horrors of the world or our self-propensity toward immorality. We all sense it, as Neo tells us in the Ma-

trix-there is something terribly wrong with the world around us. From the sexual exploitation of children through the commercial trafficking industry to our own inability to change disgusting and deflating addictive behaviors, we need a concept to help us make sense of the brokenness of our world and of our lives. When there is something wrong with us medically, when we suffer chronic pain and the panic of the potential causes of our symptoms, there is a relief in the diagnosis -even when that diagnosis is life threatening. We want to know what is wrong eventually. We spend much of our time evading death, sickness, suffering and thoughts of such but ultimately we want to know what is wrong with us and with our world. The answer is sin. Sin is what is wrong with everything-it is sin that causes us to struggle with porn, to commoditize women. It is sin that causes us to abuse our bodies, to tear others down, to distrust those who love us, and to marginalize ethnic groups we don’t understand or value. Sin helps us make sense of it all. In fact if it were not for the concept of sin, the world would be nothing more than the twisted fantasy of a deranged monster but because of sin, we can see and appreciate the beauty and meaning that still resides in our broken world. Through the lens of sin we see a life just beneath the surface that is free and beautiful, where all things flourish and are as they should be. Only the problem of sin helps us recognize this.

The Problem of Conceivability: Without the concept of sin it is hard to truly believe the whole of the message as the problem of sin makes sense of our world, God’s actions, and the consequences of ignoring our sin problem. The whole of the gospel can only be seen as a cohesive, consistent and sensible message when we name the

Problem of Sin (cont.)

problem. The concept of open and corrupt embrace or the love of sin (Grk, hamartano) that we all gravitate toward without God's intervention leads to the absolute moral bankruptcy or worthlessness of our souls (Grk, adokimus) and it is this decaying process that helps us believe the totality of the message of God's actions. More importantly, it is this decaying process that helps us understand our need to abandon all to follow Christ. The Lordship of Christ is necessitated because any other captain at the helm will only lead us further into the deep seas of death and judgment. Sin itself separates us from God, preventing us from living the life of flourishing we've been designed for but the concept of sin in our articulation of the gospel gives us motivation to abandon all in favor of Christ's transformative Lordship.

In the end, there is no Christian message, no understanding of God's grace, no need for Christ's sacrifice, and nothing to be set free from if we and our hearers are not sinners. We have been born into sin (hamartia) and have actively sinned against God and our world (hamartema) and are in the process of embracing a love for sin (hamartano) which will lead to our eventual absolute depravity and worthlessness (adokimus). This multi-dimensional understanding of the problem of sin and the rationale sin provides us in making sense of the world and God's actions gives us confidence as we articulate the fantastical, calling our hearers to leave it all and follow Christ as Lord.



Early in my career as a preacher, I would spend time in prayer and Scripture study trying to connect with God before an opportunity to speak to an audience. I would find long walks in the woods, quiet meditation, focused time in the Word and in prayer always connected me with God and I found what I needed, or what I thought I needed to be used by God to lead people to Christ. Over the years, I've been able to lead thousands of people to Christ primarily through my preaching gift but as time has passed, I have found it difficult to connect with God. Though I continue to lead many to Christ, I cannot seem to lead myself to Christ. In the last four years in particular, I've entered into a deep and log void of spiritual passion. I have felt like a child, lost in a cavernous warehouse, alone in the dark. I have not "felt" connected to God though I know rationally, I am. As this "crisis of faith" has progressed and become more intense, it has caused me to wonder what it is that I need from God to preach Christ with passion and effectiveness and to see evangelistic fruit as I do so.

I reached a crisis point in this dark chapter of my spiritual journey in early 2009, just prior to being asked to preach Christ later that year to 16,000 students at Urbana 09. I recall being asked by the organizers of the event and immediately wondering, "How can I ever do that when I don't feel the least bit connected to God

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myself!?!?" As the months progressed leading up to Urbana, I continued my normal rituals, trying to get back to my early days of passion and nearness to God. Long walks in the woods, time spent in God's Word, seeking the advice and prayer of people I trust, praying myself-not only did these practices fail to bring me closer to God in my perception, my emotional and spiritual decline sharply escalated and I began to wonder how I would even find the energy to preach at all. I was in the midst of what many call "the dark night of the soul." In my youthful naivety, I always assumed that this concept referred to a literal night, not a multi-year, extended spiral like the one I found myself in.

During the most intense months of this process, I began to wonder what would happen if my feelings never returned, if I never would again sense the nearness and pleasure of God in my preaching. I also lost all sense of internal passion and drive to seek out opportunities to preach Christ and with the opportunities that I did have, I would often cower in bathrooms across the country in fear and apprehension before addressing my audiences-I was in a bad spot, or so I thought. Despite this sense of spiritual drift, fear, despair and depression, I continued to receive invitations, some amazing invitations at that, to preach Christ. Though I lacked motivation, I knew I had to be faithful to my call. I sat down with my spiritual advisor and shared my journey and my angst with him and the words he shared gave me the energy to continue on in my calling. I remember one aspect he shared, "York, I believe God can use you in some of the most amazing ways

during this time of weakness and uncertainty. You need to ask yourself why you always sensed the need to have this internal passion to preach Christ and whether that was more for you rather than God's plans and the needs of your listeners."

It had never occurred to me that there was an aspect of selfishness and self gratification in my preaching. I immediately felt ashamed, embarrassed, and convicted. I felt like running out of the meeting but instead wept as he gently helped me unpack my mixed motives in preaching during the earlier years of my career. I made a decision that day. I decided that the glory of God, His fame, the power of the gospel despite the state of the proclaimer were enough to keep me going. If I never again experienced what I had in my youthful days as a preacher, I would still preach Christ because He is worthy, in and of Himself, to be proclaimed. I had several opportunities to preach Christ before Urbana that confirmed I had made the right decision. I recall preaching one night, almost in surreal detachment from what I was saying, expecting no one to respond to anything I had shared when quite the opposite happened. Students began to weep, people were set free from deep bondage, real and lasting transformation was begun in hearts that were previously hard toward God. Preaching at Urbana proved to be a similar experience. Though I felt detached leading up to those months, I found myself weeping uncontrollably during times of preparation, even up until going onto the platform. I remember praying for a weeping and repentance in the audience as they responded and this certainly happened. The Holy Spirit was at work in power, bringing uncontrollable weeping as hundreds gave their lives to Christ. During this same message,

however, I wept too, something that never happens. I had no idea my prayer was for myself as well.

For the first time in my career, I've come to the end of my prayers and ambition. I recently shared with my supervisor, "You know, I don't even know what to ask for anymore. For the first time, I don't know where to go with God, with my career, or in evangelism." I remember the BIG prayers of my youth, "God, help me to write a book," "God, help me to preach at Urbana," "God, help me to lead thousands to you," "God, help me to be a national leader in evangelism." Despite mixed motives in these and many other similar prayers over the years, God has seen fit to answer them. I never really thought I would see God answer all of my BIG prayers and so I always prayed for much more than I thought I'd get, thinking that half of a far-reaching list of prayers answered is far better than a fully answered list of mundane prayers.

Now, at the end of myself, my prayers, and my ambition I find myself in despair, wondering where my passion for the next leg of the journey will come from. I have realized several valuable lessons from being in this place for an extended time, lessons that I now know could never be realized unless this darkness was so long and painful. First, I believe that as all else fades, even my inner world, the glory of the gospel of Jesus does not. In fact, the absolute beauty and power of the simple message of Christ shines brighter to me now than ever. Second, the fame of Christ is sufficient incentive to wake me up, get me out, and to preach Christ if it be only for his fame.

Regardless of whether or not I get anything out of my faithfulness, His glory and fame are enough for me to obey and fulfill my calling as an evangelist. Third, and most important to me personally, I believe that there is a grace I am experiencing that may have always been there in my youthful passion but that I was unaware of until now. This grace is the grace of God's sustaining power in absolute weakness, the grace of God's effectual power when charisma and rhetoric are entirely insufficient. The presence of this grace for a preacher, for an evangelist demonstrates to us that we can be used, even in great ways, when we ourselves believe we are useless. To God be the glory, great things He has done!



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