

**Speaking of Sin**

St. John 4:16-18

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Has anyone here seen the movie *Cold Comfort Farm*? Or have you read the book? It's one of my favourites—both the book *and* the movie. Flora, a young lady who has just lost her parents and has no income but desperately wants to be a famous writer goes off to live with quirky relatives on a farm in Sussex. Her hope is to gather some life experience that will help her write a novel. What she finds is a family *way* beyond quirky. On Sunday she traipses across the fields with Amos, her cousin's husband, as he goes off to the local village to preach at the Church of the Quivering Brethren. She takes a seat in the back row as Cousin Amos, played by Ian McKellan, takes to his pulpit. In the background is a graphic banner of sinners burning in hell. After looking around the congregation he begins to preach: "Ye miserable crawling worms...Have you come secretly out of your doomed houses to hear what's coming to you?" He then goes on to shout at the congregation what terrible, no good sinners they are as they sit there and squirm and shake in guilt. He rails at them about the torments that await them in hell. At one point he calms down a little bit and asks, "You know what it's like when you burn your hand? It stings with a fearful pain and you run to clap a bit of butter on it to take the pain away." And then, leaning over the pulpit, waving his fingers at them he shouts in warning, "But I tell you, THERE WILL BE NO BUTTER IN HELL!!!"

At that point Flora gets up and leaves the service, so we never hear the rest of the sermon. But I've always wanted to know: What was Amos' point in all that? Was his point only to tell the people what terrible sinners they were? Or at some point—if we could hear the rest—did he offer them hope? At some

point did he bring them to the Cross? Brothers and sisters, that's the point—to bring people to the cross. Especially in a day and age when talk of sin has become unfashionable, even in the Church, Christians who are willing to talk about sin and preachers who preach about it start taking pride in that they do. I've heard an occasional sermon that was all about sin—just like the one Amos preached to the Church of the Quivering Brethren—and then I realised that that's all it was about: sin. But if all we do is preach about sin, we've failed in our mission. Preaching sin is necessary, because unless we understand that we have a sin problem that separates us from God, we'll never be ready to hear and receive the Good News of forgiveness through the Cross. But that's just it. The Gospel is about hope. Jesus said in the last chapter that he came into the world *not* to condemn men and women, but to *save* them. We're *already* condemned for our sins. The Good News is that God offers us forgiveness and redemption through Jesus. Sin is only half the message—and it's the "bad news" part. The Cross is the "good news". We can't preach the cross without first preaching about sin. Preaching the cross without preaching sin is only half the gospel. But by the same token, if all we're preaching is sin, we've missed the Gospel too.

So far in the story of the Woman at the Well, we've seen Jesus cross boundaries and connect with this woman. He's asked her for a drink and then used that as a lead-in to tell her about the living water he has to offer. At that point she didn't fully understand what that living water was, but she understood enough of what Jesus had said to know that it was something better than what she already had and so she asked, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." But Jesus knew that in order to truly receive what he had she needed to really and truly understand what it was he was offering. He needed to talk to her about sin.

There are a lot of Christians today—a lot preachers—who would say, "No! Jesus, stop! You've got her. If you bring up her sin you're going to lose

her." It's tempting to stop at this point. Like Jesus, we tell people about the living water—we tell people that God wants to bless them, that he wants them to be happy, that he wants them to have eternal life. And that sounds great to a lot of people. They think, "My life is a mess right now. I've got lots of struggles. I don't have enough money. I have problem relationships. If God wants to bless me or make me happy I'm up for that. Lay it on me!" And we draw people into our churches that way. They come and they learn how to be "good" people. They come and can be part of a warm family. They can be part of our fellowship...at least superficially...but then that's what a lot of churches are: social clubs. They can even come and sing heart-warming songs that make them feel good about themselves and about God and they can hear sermons that teach them how to be better people or that affirm for them that God loves them. We draw people into the Church with good things, but they miss the single biggest blessing that God has for them: the forgiveness of their sins. The really disturbing part is that we—who should know better—are leading them down a happy-go-lucky path that they think is leading them to heaven when in fact, because they haven't sought forgiveness of their sins at the Cross, they're still going as straight to hell as they were before we got to them—only now they're headed there full of false assurances of heaven.

Friends, it's easy to tell people all the warm-fuzzy stuff. It's hard to tell them about sin, because sin means confrontation and unpleasantness. It means that they might get upset, reject the Good News we're trying to share with them. Even amongst Christians in the Church we're often terrible about confronting each other when we see brothers and sisters in sin. But remember two things: First, men and women can never be saved without first confessing their sins and turning to Jesus for forgiveness. And second, remember that it is not our job to turn hearts to Jesus. Our job is to faithfully convey the Gospel message—the *whole* message, including sin—and pray for the Holy Spirit to do his job of convicting and turning the heart.

The fact is, when you think about it, there's no point hiding from the sin issue. God knows our sins and he knows the sins of the people we're evangelising. Look at what Jesus does in our passage. She wants this living water, but she doesn't understand about sin yet. But Jesus knows. Look at John 4:16-18:

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

St. John makes a point of including this part of the story because one of the major themes of his Gospel is the divinity of Jesus—he wasn't just a man or even a great man, he was God. And only God could have known this woman's sin. Daniel wrote, “He knows what is in the darkness,” (Daniel 2:22) and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote, “No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13).

Think of all the places in the Bible that show us that God knows our sin. Cain killed Abel in secret, but God saw it and held him accountable. Sarah went into her tent to snicker about God's promise that she would have a son in her old age, but God heard her anyway. Achan stole a gold brick and some fancy clothes from the ruins of Jericho and buried them under his tent, but God led Joshua straight to him. Jonah was supposed to go to Nineveh but ran the opposite direction and hid in the hold of a ship. God found him there. Even though the Israelites went through the outward motions of religious piety, God knew what was in their hearts and condemned them through Ezekiel: “I know the things that come into your mind,” he said (Ezekiel 11:5).

One of the most profound examples may be King David. In 2 Samuel 11 we read how David committed adultery with Bathsheba and how he covered up

his sin, even to the point of setting her husband up to be killed on the battlefield. No one knew what had happened. And yet the last verse of the chapter tells us, “The thing that David had done displeased the LORD.” God knew. Even though David had covered his sin and no man knew what he had done, God knew. In Psalm 90 we read, “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.”

The acknowledgement of our sin is necessary if we are to turn to Jesus in faith for forgiveness. There's no point in avoiding the issue in our evangelism—God already knows the sins of every one of us already.

The second point that comes from Jesus confrontation with the woman here is that our sin separates us from God. This is why simply preaching about sin misses the point of the Gospel. Yes, we have to acknowledge sin, but the whole point of acknowledging sin is so that we can present the solution. Sin separates us from God, the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus offers restoration. The good news isn't worth much if we don't understand the bad news first. Let me offer you three ways that sin separates us from God that I think will make our problem clear.

First, sin separates us from God because it is opposed to his holiness. Think of it this way: God is light; sin is darkness. Can you take darkness into a brightly lit room? No. If you could somehow wrap your arms around the darkness and carry it into the room, the bright light would immediately eliminate the darkness. That's what light does. Darkness is the absence of light. Shed light on it and it vanishes—in a sense, it's destroyed. God is holy. Sin is unholy. This is why sinners cannot enter the holy presence of God—his holiness cannot tolerate our sin—his perfect holiness demands the obliteration of anything unholy in its presence.

This is more important than we realize. Experience has taught me that a lot—maybe even most—Christians tend to think of God's laws as an almost

arbitrary list of do's and don'ts—as if lying is wrong simply because God decided that it's wrong, or that coveting is wrong simply because God decided it was wrong. Brothers and sisters, realize that sin is sin precisely because it opposes the very character of God. “Thou shalt not lie” is no arbitrary rule. Dishonesty is wrong because God is, at the core of his character, the Truth. Murder is wrong, because at his very core, God himself is Life.

This is why God does not and cannot tolerate sin—it is opposed to his very being. And that brings us to point two: Sin separates us from God because it puts us under his judgement. He is a just God and justice is not justice unless it punishes sin. Abraham asked, “Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?” And of course, the answer is: Yes! Consider how we become outraged to see our civil judges take a slack hand with criminals. We know that *real justice demands* just punishment. If that is true of earthly judges, how much more true is it of God? Ironically, we often become angry with God when he judges justly.

Third, sin not only drives God away from us, but it drives us away from God. Think of Adam and Eve. Their first actions after sinning were to cover their nakedness and hide from the presence of God. They knew he was holy and knew that they were not. Think of St. Peter when Jesus filled his nets with fish to the point of bursting. Peter suddenly realized that he was in the presence of his holy God and cried out to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8).

So this Samaritan woman asked Jesus for his living water, but before Jesus could give it to her he had to confront her sin—he had to help her understand just why it was that she needed his living water. Conviction of sin is the first step in receiving the Good News. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: “A gospel which merely says, ‘Come to Jesus’, and offers Him as a Friend, and offers marvelous new life, without convicting of sin, is not New Testament evangelism. The essence of evangelism

is to start by preaching the law; and it is because the law has not been preached that we have had so much superficial evangelism....This means that we must explain that mankind is confronted by the holiness of God, by His demands, and also by the consequences of sin."

St. Paul tells us in Romans 5:6-8:
"While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly....God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." That means that not only may sinners be saved by Jesus, but that *only* sinners are saved by Jesus. Let me say that again: "Not only may sinners be saved by Jesus, but *only* sinners are saved by Jesus. If you're not willing to admit that you are sinner, that you're worthy of God's judgement, then all the Good News about Jesus in the world is of absolutely and utterly no use to you. Brothers and sisters, remember: there is no salvation from sin without first being convinced of our sinfulness. We need to remember this as Christians ourselves, especially as we share the Gospel with people.

The world doesn't like hearing about sin and it will mock us. Many people will turn away from the Gospel message at that point of confrontation of sin. And yet consider in our example in John 4: Jesus confronted this woman about her sins *because he loved her*. He sets an example for us. Think about his own life and ministry:

He who was God, humbled himself to be born a man—and not just any man, but a poor man born to a poor mother and father. Think of his humble birth—in a stable and lying in a feeding trough. He was born in humiliation so that he could take up our cause as sinners. He insisted on being baptised by Jon for repentance even though John protested: "Jesus, you don't need this. I'm the one who should be baptised by you!" He spent his life with sinners—and often with the worst of sinners, because he was the physician who had come to heal the sick. And when the time came, he humbly and meekly submitted himself to the unjust convictions of the religious leaders and of Pontius Pilate. He

allowed himself to be brutally beaten. He who could have called down a legion of angels to save him instead allowed himself to be mocked and crucified, to be forsaken by God, as he willingly took the sin of the world on himself. He came to deal with our sin problem. That was his whole mission. Can you see why we can't share the Gospel without addressing sin? The Gospel is the message that Jesus has dealt with our sins at the Cross.

But notice too how carefully Jesus deals with this woman's sins. A lot of Christians would probably be like Amos in *Cold Comfort Farm*—angrily berating her for her sins. That's not what Jesus does. He asked her go and get her husband. He knew what she would say: that she had no husband. The conversation about her sin went from there. The point was that Jesus knew that the confession of sin needed to come from her. You and I aren't all-knowing as God is. When we share Jesus with people we don't have the ability to know in advance what their sins are as he did, but we do know that we are *all* sinners and we should keep that in mind as we confront the problems of sin. From there we can lead people through the steps of confession, repentance, and turning to Jesus in faith for forgiveness.

Brothers and sisters, these are the things that will keep us humble and that will make our evangelism effective. Sometime we start thinking that we were somehow born sinless or that we were born "saved" and that we deserve to have Jesus in our lives. We forget that we are sinners forgiven by faith in his blood. And as start thinking that way, it becomes easy to confront people in their sins, but it also makes it very easy to forget that Jesus came not to condemn sinners, but to save. It becomes easy to point to all the sin in the world with accusing fingers, while ignoring the sin in ourselves and forgetting the grace of God. This is part of the purpose of the season of Lent—a reminder of where we stand before God as sinners redeemed from judgement. If we are, day by day and moment by moment, cognizant of who and what we

are before God, if we daily confess our sins and seek his mercy and grace, *then* we'll be ready to take the whole Gospel message to the world—the whole message that, yes, we are all ugly and terrible sinners, but that Jesus is a great and loving Saviour.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, as we live in your forgiving grace each day, help us to always remember that your Son came to deal with our sin. Give us boldness to confront sin as we share your Good News, but never let us forget that you sent your Son into the world not to condemn it, but to save it. Let us never forget that the point of confronting sin is to explain the reason for the Cross. We ask this in through our Saviour, your Son who died for us, Jesus Christ. Amen.