



## Respectable Sins: The Bad News

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Once upon a time there was a church, and that church was made up, like all churches are, of a bunch of people. But these people had problems. The leaders in the church turned a blind eye on gross immorality on the part of the people. They tolerated all sorts of gross sin – even some pretty serious sexual immorality. The people in this church abused the freedom they had in Christ in order to justify their engaging in worldliness and other sorts of sin. They got into disputes amongst themselves and dragged each other before the civil courts. They were proud. They were factious. When they gathered to receive the Lord's Supper they abused the Sacrament. They took the spiritual gifts that God had given them and abused them, using them to further their own pride and ambition. And to top it off, they were grossly confused when it came to theological issues.

Anyone have any ideas what church I'm describing? We could probably rattle off a lot of churches that fit this description. But as much as we might be led to think that this is a modern church, its not. What I described was the Corinthian Church of St. Paul's day. If you want to look at a picture of a messed up church, all you have to do is look at the Apostle Paul's letters. And yet what's so amazing about the whole situation is that Paul didn't write his letters to Corinth and start out by addressing these people as if they were the worst of sinners. No. In fact he does just the opposite. In 2 Corinthians he starts his letter by addressing it to the Church of God in Corinth and all the *saints* in Achaea, and he addresses his first letter to them calling them "those who are called to be saints."

So at first look we might be taken aback. When we think of the word "saint," we think of someone who wrote one of the Gospels, or a New Testament Epistle. We might think of some of the old folks we know that are mature in the faith. But when we think of every-day, ordinary, run-of-the-mill Christians who struggle with their faith, who sometimes fall into sin, we don't often think of saints. And we hardly ever think of the sorts of people St. Paul addressed at Corinth as "saints." These are the kinds of people in other churches that we point our fingers at and wonder if they'd know Jesus at all if he

walked into the room. These are the people, who when they show up at our church and cause problems or tarnish our reputation, we hope will find the exit as quickly as they found the entrance. But the fact is that St. Paul addresses these messed up people as "saints." In fact, throughout the New Testament, he addresses people just like these as "saints."

The key to understanding why not just "super" Christians, but even folks like the Corinthians, can be called saints is to understand what a saint really is. We tend to think of it as a title we earn by our good works. Think about it. When we refer to someone as being saintly, we're describing their character. We see them as a mature Christian and as someone who is known for their good works. But the Greek word that the New Testament uses, *hagios*, doesn't refer to someone's character. It literally means "one who is separated unto God." If you look at 1 Corinthians 1:2, St. Paul writes: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those *sanctified* in Christ Jesus, called to be *saints*." We usually associate "sanctified" with holy and righteous living, but it comes from the same Greek root word as "saint." Being *hagios*, being set apart to God isn't something we do. It isn't something we earn. It's something we *are*. It's a state of being.

So we have to ask ourselves what it means to be set apart. Christ's ministry tells us something about being set apart. In Titus 2:14 it says: "[He] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." And St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians saying, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). A man or woman who is set apart, who is *hagios*, is a person whom Christ has purchased with his own blood and whom he has separated for himself – someone who is now Christ's possession.

Think of the story of Esther in the Bible. King Ahasuerus was looking for a new wife and gave a decree that his men would go out and bring all of the most beautiful women in the land to his harem. Before they even saw the King, those women spent an entire year being trained on everything there was to know about the court: how to act, how to dress, all the right manners and etiquette. In fact the Hebrew text literally says that they spent that time being made beautiful: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics. All that before they even went into the King's presence so that he could choose one of them. That's what it means to be set apart. Just as they were called out of their culture

and transformed for their King, so God has set us apart so that we can be conformed to the image of his Son and leave behind our old sinful ways.

I think that if we look at our calling in this sense, we can see that sainthood isn't something we earn or attain to – it's a state of being – it's what we are by the merits of Christ's death and passion and by the inner working of the Holy Spirit. Again, to quote St. Paul: we have been "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred...to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Regardless of what the popular culture says, you can't earn sainthood. We're made saints immediately by the action of the Holy Spirit when we make Jesus Christ our Lord and Master. I like the way Ezekiel describes the work that the Spirit does:

**And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.**  
(Ezekiel 36:26)

I told you this morning, tonight's sermon topic was "The Bad News" and so far this is all good news. This is the good news, but the problem is that we can't just leave off here. Anyone who's been a Christian for twenty-four hours knows that God had called us to one thing, but we still do another. He calls us to holiness, but we still desire unholiness. The ugly truth is that saints still sin. Paul puts the example of the Corinthian church right in front of us. They were saints by the work of Jesus Christ and his Spirit, but they were still sinners. And so we ask ourselves why does God promise one thing, while the reality we experience daily is something different. In Galatians 5:17 we read:

**For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.**

Even in the renewed heart there's a daily battle that goes on. This is why St. Peter warns us to stay away from the things that give ammunition to the "flesh" – "I urge you...to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). Sanctification – the actual business of being set apart – is an ongoing process. Esther was as much set apart her first day in the king's harem as she was the day before he selected her as Queen, but that didn't mean that she was as ready to be Queen when she first got there as she was after a year of training. God has called us into his Church where he has set us apart. It's as part of his body that we learn what it

means to be set apart, that we learn how to follow Christ, how we learn to be a holy people, all in preparation for our own wedding feast with Our Lord when we get to heaven.

When we live in the Church as set-apart people, but don't wage the battle against the old ways, we're like some of those young women Esther may have been with. Country bumpkins maybe, who may have been very beautiful, but were diamonds in the rough, who might have been turned off by all the fuss, all the pomp, all the formality and didn't really avail themselves of the year's training. But if that's what they did, they wouldn't have been ready for the king. The same goes for us. We're set apart for *the* King, but are we learning what that apartness means? That was the Corinthians' problem. St. Paul starts his first letter addressing them as ones set apart by God, then he spends the remaining sixteen chapters telling them in no uncertain terms that they need to act like people who are set apart – that they need to act like saints.

In the military there's an expression: "conduct unbecoming an officer." If your accused of such behaviour, it doesn't mean that you're not an officer, but it does mean that your conduct is not what's consistent with and expected of an officer in the military. We might do well to have a similar expression in the Church: "conduct unbecoming a saint." I'm sure there are military officers who think twice before doing something shady, knowing that a lot is expected of them, and I think as Christians we'd stop short before gossiping, getting unjustly angry, or becoming frustrated and impatient if we had the reminder always before us that such conduct is unbecoming a saint.

But the fact is that we already have an expression for this. The Bible calls it sin. And sin is broad. It covers what we think of as the "small" stuff like gossip, impatience, and anxiety to the "big" stuff like adultery and murder. There are degrees of seriousness, but the bottom line is that sin is sin and no matter what the degree, it's all unbecoming a saint. And this is why I think this subject is so important. One of our worst problems in the Church is that we can easily see the gross sins that are committed by non-Christians, but we're totally blind to our own "little" sins. In fact, we become so blind to them that they've become acceptable – even sometimes respectable.

It doesn't help matters any when the Church starts taking its cues from the world around us. Our culture has largely forgotten about sin. In fact many have turned it all upside-

down, and what was once known as sin is now proclaimed as virtue and vice versa. But even in many conservative and evangelical churches sin isn't addressed as it should be. I try to read a couple of books on preaching each year, and I'm always shocked at the way some of them actually say that a preacher shouldn't use the word – because it's "churchy" and scares people away, because it makes them feel guilty. We're also guilty of putting so much focus on things that are, for the most part, outside the church, like homosexuality, abortion, and other "big" sins, that we fail to focus on our own sins like gossip, pride, lust, bitterness, and even our frequent lack of the fruit of the Spirit.

I've sat in a lot of prayer meetings where the people gathered there spent the whole time praying about the sins of the world around us and never thought to pray for the spiritual needs of the Church – we're blind to all of our faults, when we should be coming to God like the tax collector in Luke's Gospel, praying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

We have a growing tendency as Christians to take a very self-righteous attitude. We look at the world with a very prideful attitude and condemn it for its sins, while forgetting that "but for the grace of God there go we." Think back to how outraged we all were when the Diocese of New Westminster and her bishop decided to approve blessings for same-sex unions. As Christians we were justified in our outrage. But why do we not become just as outraged over our own selfishness, our critical spirit, our impatience, and our anger? Why do we mourn the fall of another part of the Church into sin, but not mourn our own? We sort of let ourselves off the hook, because our sins aren't as bad as the big ones we see elsewhere. But the fact is that God never gives us the authority to put different values on sins. In fact, St. James tells us, "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2:10). You see, it doesn't matter if you commit a murder or if you use your speech in an unloving way that cuts someone down – either way, you've broken God's Law. There's no curve when God grades the test. 99% is still a failing grade.

Some sins are more serious than others. The earthly consequences of some sins are great than others. I'd rather be guilty of being angry with someone than of murdering them. I'd rather be guilty of lustfully looking at a woman than actually committing adultery with her. But Jesus said that whoever murders *and* whoever is angry with his brother both stand under God's judgment. As I said, some sins may be less serious, but

that doesn't mean they're *not* serious. All sin is serious business, because all sin breaks God's law.

God's Law outlines his moral will for us – it's how he expects us to live. It doesn't matter what part of it we break, if we break any of it, we've gone outside what God's will is for us. God's Law is different from civil law. By the standards of the civil law, you can get an occasional speeding ticket and still be considered a law-abiding citizen, but God's Law doesn't work that way. Break one part of it, and you're guilty of the whole thing.

Temptation to sin may come from all sorts of different sources – which is why St. Peter tells us to do as much as we can to avoid those sources of temptation – but when it really comes down to it we're the ones responsible for the decisions we make. The Devil might tempt you, but the Devil never "makes you do it." Ultimately St. James is right when he tells us, "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. We get unrighteously angry because it satisfies our sinful desire for vengeance. We gossip because it satisfies our desire to build ourselves up by tearing someone else down.

What's really dangerous when we as the Church turn a blind eye on these "respectable" sins, is that they spread. Sin is spiritual cancer. If one part of the Body of Christ has it, it'll spread to the rest if its not treated.

St. Paul had to have had this in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians, "Let no corrupt talk come out of our mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). What we say, no matter whom it's about, will either tear people down or build them up. What we say will either corrupt the minds of those who hear it, or will show God's grace. If I gossip I tear down another person and corrupt the mind of the person listening. If I complain about my circumstances, I impugn the sovereignty and goodness of God, and in modeling that sinful behaviour I tempt my listener to do the same.

I have a friend who is struggling with cancer. It started out as Prostate Cancer, but he didn't even know there was anything wrong until it had metastasised and got into the bones of his pelvis. Cancer tends to be like that. Sometimes it's treated, you think it's gone, and it pops up later somewhere else. I can't think of a better analogy to sin in the Body. I think this is especially true when we talk about these "respectable" or

“subtle” sins. These sins are subtle in the sense that they deceive us. We start to think they’re not so bad – especially when compared to the sins of others. Sometimes they deceive us to the point that we don’t even think about them. Some of our subtle sins are so refined that we never even realise they’re in our lives.

We live in the “feel good,” “I’m okay, you’re okay” world where “sin” has almost become a dirty word, because it might make someone feel bad. Put that into perspective by looking at the Puritans. They understood their own sinfulness and they understood just how serious their sin was. They really feared the reality of sin still in their lives. Think about the titles of the books they wrote. These are just a few in my own library: *The Mischief of Sin*, *The Anatomy of Secret Sins*, *The Sinfulness of Sin* (there are at least two different books by that title), and *The Evil of Evils or The Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin*. Ralph Venning, who wrote one of the *Sinfulness of Sin* books, describes sin in just a few pages as vile, ugly, odious, malignant, pestilent, pernicious, hideous, spiteful, poisonous, virulent, villainous, abominable, and deadly.

Think about those words and then think about whether or not you think that way about your own sins. It’s easy to think that way about gross sin we see in the unbeliever’s life, but what about sins like impatience, pride, resentment, frustration, and self-pity? The fact is that to allow these “small” sins in our lives is the spiritual equivalent of letting that “small” tumour keep growing instead of removing it. Small sins tend to lead to big ones. Lustful looks lead to addictions to pornography, which often lead to adultery. Anger leads to bitterness, then to hatred, and sometimes goes as far as murder.

Now I said earlier that this is the bad news. It gets worse. I think we’ve seen now how our sin affects others around us, but what’s even worse is how it affects God. I like R.C. Sproul’s definition of sin as “cosmic treason.” The Bible talks about sin as “transgression” and if you look at what that word really means, it refers to a rebellion against authority. In this case we’re talking about God’s authority. That means that when we gossip, we’re rebelling against God. It means that when we become resentful, we’re rebelling against God.

In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of God in his absolute majesty in the heavenly court. And Isaiah heard the angels there calling out, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Isaiah’s Jewish audience would

have immediately understood that the repetition of that word was meant to convey the highest possible degree of holiness. God is infinitely and perfectly holy. But holiness also speaks of God’s infinite majesty and his sovereignty over all of his creation. And so when we transgress – when we sin – no matter how small the sin might be to us, it’s ultimately an act of cosmic treason against the majesty and sovereignty of God.

Remember how David committed adultery with Bathsheba, then tried to cover it up. When it didn’t work he murdered her husband and then tried to cover that up too. God was righteously angry and sent the prophet Nathan to confront David. And what’s interesting is how God, through the inspired prophet, talked about David’s sin. He says, “Why have you *despised* the word of the Lord, to do evil in his sight” (2 Samuel 12:9). In violating God’s Law, David was showing that he despised both God’s Law and God himself. Now think about that in terms of our own sin. Our “small” sins show just the same despising of God’s Law and of God himself. Think about that the next time you’re tempted to speak an unkind word.

Now think about what it means to God when we, his redeemed and set-apart people, despise him by sinning. St. Paul describes it, warning the Ephesians, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (4:30). Our sin grieves the heart of our heavenly Father. And so not only do even our small sins show that we despise God, they also break his heart.

Not only do we grieve God’s heart when we sin, but we also presume upon his grace. We can take great comfort that he has forgiven our trespasses according to the riches of his grace, but sin in its subtle deceitfulness, suggests to us sometimes that our sins really aren’t that big of a deal – that they don’t matter – because God has already forgiven them. What we forget is that forgiveness doesn’t mean overlooking or tolerating our sins. God never does that. In fact, God always – *always* – judges sin. It’s just that in our case, he has already judged our sins in the person of his Son, as Isaiah wrote, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6). So should we then presume on God’s grace by tolerating in our lives the very sins for which Christ was nailed to the cross?

Finally, I want to remind you that every sinful thought, word, and deed we are guilty

of is done in the presence of God. Look at Psalm 139:1-4:

**O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.**

God knows our every thought, let alone our every word and deed. Paul reminds us that he even knows all of our motives. When the world sees good works, God is able to see the selfish ambition behind them: “He will disclose the purposes of the heart” (1 Cor. 4:5). We might as well be committing every sinful deed right in front of his throne.

Going back to Ralph Venning: in his book, *The Sinfulness of Sin*, he makes this point: “As God is holy, all holy, only holy, altogether holy, and always holy, so sin is sinful, all sinful, only sinful, altogether sinful, and always sinful.” In the end, it doesn’t really matter if our sin is big or small, gross or respectable, all of our sin is sinful, only sinful, and altogether sinful. It might be small in our eyes, but it’s all heinous in the sight of God. God forgives our sins by the blood of Christ, but he doesn’t tolerate them. And for that reason, every sin we commit, even the small and subtle sin that we don’t even know we’ve committed, was laid on Christ as he took God’s curse in our place. More than anything else, here’s the real malignancy of sin – that Jesus Christ, the Son of God suffered because of our sin.

So this is the bad news. What you need to do now is think about how you respond to it. My prayer is that you will be prompted to examine your own life and drive you to your knees before God in repentance and contrition over the sins that you – that we’ve all – tolerated in our own lives. If you’re willing to do that, then you’re ready for the good news.

Let’s pray: Heavenly Father, we came before you earlier tonight confessing that we have “followed to much the devices and desires of our own hearts,” “that we have offended against they holy laws.” We thank you that your desire is not for the “death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live.” Let us truly mean that when we pray those words, Father. Work in our hearts by your Holy Spirit, that we will be able to see the subtle sin in our lives and by your grace put an end to it, that we would no more presume on you grace. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.