

“Jesus Exposed Sin”

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Brian Watson

Snow can be a pain. We have to shovel it and it makes driving difficult. But snow can be quite beautiful. It covers everything in a pure, white blanket. Last week, I was with Carole and Doug and we commented on how the little bit of snow we had several days ago was pretty. Part of the reason snow can be beautiful is that it covers all the barren and bare landscape in winter. It covers the dirt, the soot, the brown, dead vegetation. But it can also cover filth. It covers litter. I remember the times when we’ve had more snow, and what happens when it finally melts away. Often, what is left is a great deal of junk. I remember after one blizzard that finally melted away, I went around and collected trash on the side of the road in front of the church’s property. I found a great many nip bottles, some random fast food trash, and even a half-eaten Pop Tart.

That’s an interesting thought: the world can be dirty and beautiful at the same time. We can wonder at how beautiful everything is, and yet we know things aren’t perfect. That’s obviously true in a physical sense: there is garbage and manmade distortions of nature, like pollution. And, of course, there are what we might call natural evils, like earthquakes and hurricanes.

However, the trash of the world is not limited to that which is physical. Allow me to make a bit of an odd reference. In the movie *Taxi Driver*, which is nearly fifty years old now, Robert DeNiro plays a New York City cabbie named Travis Bickle, who is isolated, antisocial, and a bit psychotic. In the movie, Bickle keeps a journal. In a voice-over, he says, “Thank God for the rain, which has helped wash away the garbage and trash off the sidewalks.” Then he says, “All the animals come out night,” including prostitutes and drug dealers. He claims, “Someday a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets.” Travis Bickle moves from talking about real, physical trash to real, moral trash.

All of us know that something is wrong in this world. Everyone knows that something is wrong with us. We don’t always agree on what’s wrong, exactly, but everyone makes moral judgments. Imagine if everything you ever said was recorded. Now imagine if someone made a transcription of every time you made a moral judgment, every time you said, “He shouldn’t have done that . . . She ought to do this . . . That was wrong . . .” and so on. If you could read that transcript, you would find out pretty soon that we all make moral judgments, and we make them

frequently. While our moral judgments aren't always correct, they do point to the fact that we know something is wrong with the world. In fact, I would say that our judgments are evidence that God exists. God is a judge, and we are made in his image. And that is why we make moral judgments.

Christians call wrong actions “sin.” But sin can be easily misunderstood. Francis Spufford, an English writer, says that the word “sin,” as used in the world, is often trivialized. We use it to talk about little pleasures—a sinfully decadent chocolate cake, for example. We talk about the “sin tax” on things like cigarettes and alcohol. Or “sin” is used of only certain things, like sex. But sin isn't just “doing something naughty.” It goes far deeper than that. Spufford says, “It's our active inclination to break stuff, ‘stuff’ here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people's, as well as material objects whose high gloss positively seems to invite a big fat scratch.”¹ We may call bad actions sins, but sin is an inclination to do wrong.

The filth of the world is not just “out there.” It's within us, too. Sin is something that affects us all. And it's not just about us. Sin is primarily about God. Sin is a rebellion against God and against things that he has made. Don Carson says, “What makes sin *sin*, in the deepest sense, is that it is *against God*.”² It is a rejection of the way God originally made things to be and it is a rejection of the way God wants things to be. When we reject God, we make things in his world a mess.

So, how can this mess be cleaned up? How can the filth truly be washed away? In order to understand how our situation can be fixed, we have to see sin for what it is. We have to see the filth clearly. Which one of us tries to clean our houses in the dark? You know, if you keep the lights low, your house may not seem all that dirty. But when we turn on the lights, we see where things are dirty, where things need to be cleaned. And that's what Jesus did when he entered into the world.

¹ Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 27.

² D. A. Carson, “Sin's Contemporary Significance,” in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 24 (original emphasis).

In John 8:12, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”³ Light and darkness are big themes in John’s Gospel, as well as his letters. For example, we read this in the first chapter of 1 John:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:5–10).

Darkness represents sin. It’s often committed in secret, behind closed doors. And, as we’ll see, sin has more to do with what’s inside of us than what we do on the outside. If we want to have a relationship with God, we need to walk in the light. God is that light. If we want our filth to be cleaned up, and our sins against God to be forgiven, we must walk toward God. But when we do that, our sins are exposed for what they are. They are revealed. We see in the light of who God is. That can be a bit frightening. If you’ve ever confessed to someone else that you’ve done something wrong, you know what I mean. It’s a bit scary. But until we do that, we can’t have a relationship with God.

That’s what Jesus is talking about in John 3:16–21. Now, we all know John 3:16, but we forget about the context. God loved the world, yes. But what does that mean? I think it means, in part, that God loves Jews and Gentiles. I get that because of the context: this falls between Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader (John 3:1–15), and a Samaritan woman (John 4:1–26). But “world” also refers to “this sinful world.” It’s the realm of rebellion against God. Don Carson says, “God’s love for the world is to be admired not because the world is so big but because the world is so bad.”⁴ But Jesus comes to offer salvation. Yet many reject him. Why? Let’s read John 3:16–21:

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁴ Carson, “Sin’s Contemporary Significance,” 25.

world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Many people refuse to come to the light because their evil deeds will be exposed. They love those things more than God, so they stay in darkness, instead of coming to the light, where those deeds will be exposed.

One part of Jesus’ mission was to expose sin. He came to reveal to us how bad our condition is. He came to show us that not only are our deeds evil, but our hearts are also evil, too. Some of us know this already, because we’ve read through the Bible carefully. This may be a new concept to some of us. I have seen some people portray Jesus in such a way that it seems he came and said, “Hey, guys, you’re fine just the way you are. God loves you, so we’re cool. Carry on with your lives.” But such an idea is silly.

I’ve also seen other distorted views of Jesus and what he said about sin. Greg Boyd, a pastor and theologian, said, “it is important to notice that religious sin is the only sin Jesus publicly confronted.”⁵ Jesus certainly confronted what we might call “religious sin”: he spoke out against things like hypocrisy and legalism, which is adding laws on top of God’s laws. But Jesus also confronted all kinds of sins in public. Jesus exposes the sins of everyone: the wealthy and the poor, the religious and the non-religious, Americans, Asians, Europeans, and Africans—everybody.

Let’s consider two things. One (something I said last week), when Jesus began his ministry, he preached that everyone needed to repent because the kingdom of God had come. That alone suggests two important things: People are on the wrong track and they are currently outside the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. Part of the condition of entering God’s kingdom is abandoning old ways of thinking, old attitudes, and old behaviors. Robert Yarbrough, a New Testament expert, says, “It implies forsaking sin and replacing it with what is right.”⁶ Everyone needs to repent. This is a universal statement.

⁵ Gregory A. Boyd, *Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 203.

⁶ Robert W. Yarbrough, “Sin in the Gospels, Acts, and Hebrews to Revelation,” in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 85.

Here's something else to consider, and I think this is a very powerful statement. In John 7, Jesus is talking with his brothers, who, at that point in time, don't even understand exactly who he is. They want Jesus to go to Jerusalem to take part in a Jewish religious festival. They want him to show his miracles to his followers. Jesus says that his "time has not come." He wasn't quite ready to die on the cross. If he had revealed himself clearly as the Messiah, the Son of God, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem would have accused him of blasphemy and killed him. They would do this because they couldn't bear Jesus' message. This is what Jesus says next: "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil." (John 7:6–7). The world—remember, this is the realm of sinful humanity—cannot hate Jesus' brothers because they were not yet his followers. But the world hates Jesus. Why? Because he declares that people do evil things. In fact, he shows that *we* are evil (Matt. 7:11).

I think it would also be a mistake to think of sin as merely breaking rules, in either thought or deed. The Bible isn't a big set of rules. I think rules are important, and there are some major rules in the Bible, like not murdering and not committing adultery, that we must obey. But the heart of sin is a broken relationship with God and broken relationships with others. Later in Matthew (22:37–40), Jesus says that the greatest commandment is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." In other words, we can distill all the commandments in the Old Testament down to two principles: love God and love others. That means that all sin is a failure to love God and to love others. So sin isn't anything less than breaking rules, but it's a whole lot more. It's breaking relationships.

Now let's move on to some of Jesus' specific teachings about sin. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows that sin is not just a matter of what we do on the outside, but it's also what goes on inside of us. Consider what Jesus says about murder. This is Matthew 5:21–22:

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

Murder is certainly wrong. The Sixth Commandment is “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). But Jesus says not only is murder wrong, but anger is also wrong. The word translated as fool here, “raca” is an Aramaic word that means something like “empty head” or “idiot.” It’s not just saying that someone is foolish or a fool—you can find that in plenty of places in the Psalms and in Proverbs. Here, it’s a stronger insult. The idea is that hating someone is a way of wishing that they were dead. Jesus says this kind of attitude is just as bad as murder.

A few verses later, Jesus talks about adultery. He says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–28). Adultery is prohibited by the Seventh Commandment (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). Here, he says that not only is having sex outside of marriage wrong, but desiring to have sex outside of marriage is wrong.

I remember when I first read through the Sermon on the Mount. I was a freshman in college. I remember walking around for days afterward thinking, “God knows my every thought.” Since I knew what went on in my own head and heart, I was terrified. I suppose I grew up thinking that only my actions were sinful. But now I realized that my thoughts and desires could be sinful, too. I didn’t realize everything that the Bible said about my sin, and I didn’t really understand the remedy for my problem, but I knew sin was serious.

As we move along through the Sermon the Mount, we see that many things are wrong: divorce (unless one’s spouse has committed adultery—Matt. 5:31–32), retaliating against others (5:38–42), hypocrisy, or performing religious activities only to be seen (6:1–4, 16–18), greed (6:19–24), anxiety (6:25–34), and judging others more harshly than you want to be judged (7:1–16). The sins described in the Sermon the Mount are enough to condemn us all.

At the heart of sin is idolatry. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 6:19–24:

¹⁹“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Jesus says that we shouldn't store up treasures here because they won't last. We should store up treasure in heaven. That means we should treasure God above anything here, and we should treasure doing things that will last, like loving God and loving others. The important part of that is captured in the last verse. We cannot serve two masters. We must choose God above anything else. If we have a great love for money, our love for God and our service to him will be divided. Greed—wanting things we don't have—is a form of idolatry (so says Paul in Col.3:5), which is putting anything else ahead of God in our hearts, minds, and activities. I think that's why greed is frequently denounced in the Bible.⁷ When we are greedy, we want things more than we want God. And when we want things, it is never enough (see also Luke 12:13–21). Sin is like that: it never satisfies; it always leaves us wanting more. I'm reminded of something else Jesus said, in John 8:34: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” When we sin, we think we're in control, but we actually become enslaved to sin. We are like addicts. We are not free.

Jesus also talks a fair amount about sex. Sex and money tend to be the two big idols. Because these are two big topics, I'll devote sermons to them later in this series.

And, yes, Jesus also talked about religious sins. In Mark 7, some religious leaders, Pharisees and scribes, see that some of Jesus' followers ate without having first washed their hands in a ceremonial cleansing. Then we read this in Mark 7:5–13:

⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”⁶ And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God)—¹² then you no longer permit him to

⁷ In Jesus' teaching alone, see Matt. 19:16–26/Mark 10:17–25/Luke 18:18–25; Luke 12:13–21, 33–34; 16:13, 19–31.

do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

There are two things that are really important here. The Jewish religious leaders added to the laws that God gave the Israelites in the Old Testament. They added laws about cleanliness, including cleaning one’s hands. Notice that the Pharisees mention “the tradition of the elders.” So, Jesus tells them they ignore God’s commands in order to hold on to manmade traditions. This was a problem then and it is a problem in churches today. The other thing is that they skirted one of the Ten Commandments, “honor your mother and your father,” by saying they had an obligation to give “Corban,” which was an offering devoted to God, another thing that they added to the Old Testament laws. This would be like saying, “Sorry, mom, I know you have medical bills you need help with, but I have to give my ten percent to the church.” All of us need to understand the principles behind God’s commandments. We must remember that we love God often by loving others. We can’t use service to God as an excuse not to serve others.

The greatest problem with religious sins—like any other sins—is that they are committed with bad motives. Offering up acts of worship to God with a bad motives—such as a desire to appear holy and righteous—is not worship at all. All sins stem from the heart. We see this in the very next passage in Mark 7 (verses 14–23):

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

When God gave certain commands in the Old Testament—ones referring to certain foods to eat or not eat, or certain clothes to wear and not wear, or certain ways to be physically clean or unclean—these were merely pictures of a greater reality. The real problem is not what food we eat or clothes we wear. The real problem is our desires, what is in our hearts. The things in our hearts make us unclean. If you stop and think about all those words that Jesus uses—evil

thoughts, sexually immoral thoughts, thieving thoughts, murderous thoughts, lustful desires, covetous desires, wicked desires, deceitful intent, lewd thoughts, envious desires, slanderous thoughts, arrogant thoughts, foolish thoughts and desires—you have to realize that you, like everyone else, are unclean. You are sinful. You stand deserving God’s wrath. We deserve condemnation.

Now, if I stopped here, this would all be bad news. But bad news is necessary to understand the good news. If we don’t understand the depth our sin, we can’t understand the height of God’s love. If we don’t see our sin for what it is, we won’t realize how much we need salvation. Because of our sin problem—because we have hearts that are bent toward evil—we can’t pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. We need help that only God can provide.

The good news is that Jesus came to help sinners like you and me. He didn’t come for people who were doing fine on their own. He came to sinners. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matt. 9:12). He also said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13). He said that those who confessed their sin and pleaded for mercy would be in the right with God (see his parable in Luke 18:9–14). The self-righteous will not be made righteous, but those who admit their unrighteous and call out to the only Righteous One will be in the right with God. Jesus didn’t come to condone sin, but he came to sinners to give them mercy and grace, to tell them to sin no more (John 8:11). He came to treat the spiritually sick and to bring them to health.

Not only did Jesus come for sinners, but Jesus also died for sinners. We find this in many passages in the New Testament:

Romans 5:8

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

1 Timothy 1:15

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

1 Peter 3:18

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.

Jesus came to die in our place on the cross. To be children of God, we don't rely on our own righteousness. Our best deeds are filthy, spoiled by impure motives (Isa. 64:6). But Jesus is our righteousness, and we merely need to come to him in faith and confess our sins and turn from them in order to be right in the eyes of God.

So, what are we to do? If you are not a Christian, consider that you have done wrong things. You know you have. And the problem is that you have ultimately done wrong things against God. You may say that you have objections to Christianity, that there are things you can't believe. Let me suggest that your objections are not intellectual, but moral. You know that if what the Bible says is true, that you are in the wrong and you need to change, and you don't want to. But one day, your life will end, and you will meet God. Tell him now about your sin. He already knows all about it. Tell God that you've wronged him. God stands ready to forgive. Turn to Jesus now, receive that forgiveness, and follow him.

If you are a Christian, take sin seriously. Jesus died for your sin. Don't trivialize it. Use the resources God has given us—the Holy Spirit, the Bible, prayer, and the church—to fight against sin. We are supposed to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:14/1 Pet. 1:16). Are we truly walking in the light, or are we afraid that Jesus will expose our sin? That's a question for everyone. If we claim to be Christians, we need to walk in the light, knowing that our lives will change, but all for the better. What is in the light is not only exposed, but also healed.

As "children of light," we shouldn't walk in darkness. Rather, we should expose evil deeds (Eph. 5:3–11). We can do this within the church, by confessing sins to each other and lovingly calling each other out on our sins. But when we share the gospel, we must also tell people about their sin problem. This isn't popular or fun, but it's a necessary part of the gospel. Without the bad news of sin, salvation from sin doesn't seem like good news.

Jesus came to expose sin, but he also came to die for sinners. Let's live in light of this, and let's share this message with others.