

## “Missing the Mark”

見沼 MJCF 2023年3月5日

Luke 15:11-32

Last week, we entered the period of Lent, the waiting and preparation time before Easter. During this time, we remember Jesus’ journey to the cross. We remember how he invited those who wish to follow him to take up their own cross, to face the challenges of following God’s ways with an attitude of trust in Christ. It’s also a time when we remember the depth of our own sin, and how we are all in need of the grace of Christ, made visible to us through his death and resurrection. For this year, I’ve chosen Romans 6:11 as a focus verse. “...you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Yoko has led us through the book of Romans, and it was actually quite recent that we looked at Romans chapter six. I appreciate the way she has led us into a deeper understanding of each chapter.

One of the original words that the Bible uses for sin is the Hebrew “hattat” which means to “miss the mark.” In other words, one meaning for sin is missing God’s perfect will for us, not listening, and instead doing just what we believe to be best. Are we focused on serving God, trusting in Christ to lead us? Or, do we get caught up in our own personal concerns?

We all have sin, and even Christians are not immune from the effects of sin within them. Over many years, I’ve felt it important to focus on the love, joy, and peace of life in Jesus. But recently, I’m personally feeling like I need to go deeper in understanding the depth of my sin. We cannot ignore the influence of sin in our lives. During this time of Lent, it is good for us to spend time to think about sin’s influence in each of our lives.

Sin is quite a wide topic. There are many different definitions. In the Bible, sin could refer to breaking the law, wrongdoing against another person, or rebellion against God. Many people think that sin just means the “bad things people do.” We might talk about the many “sins” someone has committed. This is one aspect, but it gives the impression that if we don’t do anything bad, we don’t have sin. But, the biblical understanding of sin is much deeper than that, and it influences everyone. If we do bad things, it could be evidence of the work of sin in our lives. But, sometimes the things we don’t do, things we should do but don’t are also the result of sin.

The scripture passage for today is Jesus’ story of the “prodigal son”. Most of us know this famous story well. Today, I’d like to focus on the second part involving the older brother. To begin, I’ll summarize the wider story. A son asks for his inheritance from his father, even though the father isn’t dead yet. The son leaves and spends his time on prostitutes and partying. After using up all the money, he hits rock bottom and decides to humbly return home, in hope that his father may at least accept him as a slave. The father is so happy to see his “lost” son return home that he throws a huge party for him. It’s a hopeful story for anyone who has hit “rock bottom,” feeling like they are beyond hope.

But, the story continues with the older brother coming in from working in the fields. He hears the music and dancing of the party for the younger brother and becomes angry, refusing to go in. The father comes out to him and tries to convince him to come and join the party. The son has been faithfully doing his best, but his attitude “misses the mark.” Listen again to what the son says. “...For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for

him!” The Father replies, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

This reflects the heart of God. We celebrate a God of love who forgives, a God who understands us when we fail. We see the joy reflected in the father’s actions on seeing the “lost son” returning home. But, the older brother seems far from having a similar love for his brother. It must have grieved the Father greatly to see how his older son refused to rejoice with him. I feel like I could be that angry older brother. Consider this. He followed all the rules. He “never disobeyed” his father’s commands. He did all the right things! Yet, in his self-righteous, angry reaction, we see the influence of sin in his life. Maybe he thought the sin of his brother was unforgivable. Could he be angry because he’d maybe now receive less of an inheritance because of his younger brother? I can only imagine his feelings. One thing is clear, though. The older son did not realise how much he had in living with his Father. He seemed to work hard trying to earn favor rather than seeing that the Father already loved him. If he had realised how much the Father loved him, his daily work would have been done out of love and thanksgiving for the Father.

How often have we been focused on our own concerns, ignoring God’s love for us? A second story that helps us focus on how we may focus on our own agenda and miss God’s leading is another famous one – the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10.

Recently, I’ve been thinking much more about how we may actually be sinning by choosing to do something good! I’d better explain myself here. I don’t mean we should stop doing good! In fact, Jesus says we are to let our light shine before others so they may see our good works and give glory to God. (Mtt.5:16). What I mean is that sometimes we may choose to do something good in order to avoid something much better, but more challenging, that God would want us to do. It’s possible that the many good things we do for God can distract us from actually following God! I think of the priest and the Levite (temple worker) in the story of “The Good Samaritan.” They passed by the man who had been attacked, lying injured by the road. Jesus’ message is that rather than those who passed by, it was the Samaritan who followed God, by caring for the injured man.

As a pastor, I can easily identify with the priest and temple worker who were likely distracted with their own work, and didn’t stop to help. They had important things that needed to be done. It could have been a huge sacrifice for them to even touch the injured man, since it could have made them ritually unclean for a period of time. Their sin is harder to see than the sin of someone who steals, or murders. They were more concerned about their own duties than about following God’s command to love others.

They are examples of people who were doing no wrong, but who were focused on their own agendas. Because of this, they missed the opportunity to show love, and be a neighbour to the injured man. I continue to struggle with being too satisfied in just focusing on what I need to get done, rather than listening more for the leading of God’s Spirit, and following when prompted to take a step to give attention to someone nearby.

In trying to be good by following God’s laws all people fail. But, when we let go of ourselves in order to let Jesus Christ into our lives, we focus on our relationship with our new Redeemer rather than details of God’s laws. We are no longer condemned for our sin because of the grace of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose to life. In Jesus we now have forgiveness of our sin rather than condemnation. Through God’s grace, as shown in Jesus, we are now able to be a part of God’s “spiritual” family. At the same time, it doesn’t mean we’re suddenly perfect. In following Jesus, we have the power of God’s Spirit at work in us. In fact even the Apostle Paul talks about his own struggle with the influence of sin in his life. In one passage he says, “I do not do the good I want, but

the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19). All people have times like Paul describes. It shows the reality of how sin is something that is often beyond our control. I pray that through today’s message we can deepen our understanding of sin...

How many of us have done our best to do good, and yet sense there’s something missing in our relationship with God? Maybe we’ve been avoiding something more challenging that God is been calling us to do. It’s so easy to justify what we do, by thinking, “I did my best. There’s nothing more I could have done.” Maybe God has been calling us to take a step of faith, maybe an uncomfortable step, to follow a more risky path. As we remember Jesus’ journey to the cross, may we take up our own cross with courage to face the challenges. Let’s pray.

Loving God, we confess the times we’ve ignored the influence of sin in our lives. Forgive us for our lack of trust in you, for the times we’ve settled for more comfortable ways when you’ve challenged us to instead take steps of faith. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 19 (13-14), “But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression. May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Amen.