

Disintegration

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[0 : 00] So, this evening we're looking at the third of our series of four on a Sunday evening entitled, Miserable as Sin. Okay? So, I reckoned if we were going to carry this on for a few more weeks, we probably have no one coming at church at night, because it seems such a miserable kind of subject to deal with.

But I hope it's not miserable. It's not meant to be miserable. The theme is meant to be provocative, I guess, but it's not really meant to be miserable. It is meant to look at the reality of what sin does in our lives in order to point us more to Jesus.

That's what it's meant to do, because the more we understand what sin is actually like, the more it will push us towards Jesus and know His wholeness and His healing and His shalom, because that's what we looked at the first week, wasn't it?

The breaking of shalom. And then we looked at sin and how it divides people and divides us from God and the damage that does. And this evening, we're kind of on this spiral downwards and we're looking at disintegration and how sin actually, I'm sure there's another word for disintegration that I've been looking for all week and I haven't found it.

I can't think of it. Something like discombulation or something like that. It is the coming apart, the disintegration of what is whole. And rather than looking at it theologically, I want us to think about it as something that can be so damaging in our own lives.

[1 : 34] Not that theological definitions are unimportant, but really want to get across the destructiveness behind its sometimes alluring beauty.

Okay? There's an alluring beauty about sin and I want to get across that as well. So the theme this evening really is the trajectory that sin takes us on, because what it does, it puts self in the place of God, okay?

So that's really the core of what we're thinking about this evening. And that is the deepest battle you and I face on a daily basis, is selfishness.

Is enthroning ourselves in the place of God. You see that most closely and most powerfully in Gethsemane, where Jesus says, not my will but yours be done.

That's our biggest battle, is every day saying, Lord, not my will but yours be done. So it's selfishness. And sin is the enthronement of ourselves and the dethroning of God.

[2 : 41] And I think the results of that are not always clear cut. They're not always black and white. And it's not always, it's not necessarily a spiral downwards, but there is an end game.

So I want to look briefly at self-rule. I should stop saying briefly. I get a rough for saying briefly, but I am going to be trying. Brian will give me a rough. I go on, past half past. So self-rule and then one or two other things.

But self-rule, we see it in this parable, this great, this wonderful and powerful parable where the prodigal son says, give me my share of the property and what is coming to me.

I want what is due to me. I don't want to be under my father. I want to have my share of the estate. I want to be in control. And goes back to the prototypical rebellion in Genesis chapter 3, where Adam and Eve said the same thing.

We want exactly what you have, God. We actually want to be like you. We want to know good and evil as well and to have no rules and no regulations from you or anyone else.

[3 : 44] And there's two things really that that speaks. Self-rule speaks of two things, I'm sure, among other many things. First is a sense of entitlement and then a quest for freedom.

So there's a sense of entitlement from the prodigal here, isn't there? I want what is due to me. I'm entitled to it. I don't care if you're still alive. And I don't care if it's supposed to be for when you die, I want it now.

Adam and Eve, I want to eat the fruit. It's my, it's our right to do that. And I want a good life. I want all the benefits of life on my terms.

And that's the reality when self is on the throne, we have that sense of entitlement that life owes us, that other people owe us, and even God owes us.

Because we're at the center and everything else revolves around us. But of course that puts us, doesn't it, always onto a collision course with God and with others because we're not in the throne of the universe.

[4 : 47] And the world doesn't revolve around us, especially when things go wrong. When things go wrong and things happen out of our control, our self-centered desire to be in control of everything causes bitterness and disgruntlement and blame.

And that's the kind of culture we live in as people, I mean internally, because we find that that's a good, Adam did that, didn't he?

Adam blamed God, Adam blamed Eve. Things were out of his control. The prodigal came to that place where, well he blamed God, blamed his father for keeping him and not giving him his share of the state.

He maybe blamed the famine when it came and maybe he blamed everyone else who didn't come to his aid when he was eating, wanting to eat the pigs food. And so there's that sense of entitlement which brings great problems when we are enthroned as it did for the prodigal.

But that self-rule doesn't only give us a sense of entitlement but also a quest for freedom. Satan says, you know, you'll be like God. You'll know good and evil.

[6 : 04] How brilliant and freeing is that going to be? And the prodigal here, he wanted to go into a far country. He wanted to be in control of his own life. He wanted the freedom from the drudgery of work and being in his father's house.

He wanted to make his own decisions autonomy. And in both cases we have a picture there of relegating God and relegating others in the quest for freedom.

It's a dubious freedom. There's no absolute freedom. Our only freedom, our only true freedom is living as we were created to do in relationship with our good and loving maker.

But the deceit of sin is that it ignores that and it ignores the fact that we, in seeking freedom and being enthroned, become enslaved to our own desires and appetites and nature and nurture and bodies and minds.

But the prodigal, the prodigal was single-minded, the prodigal son here. He was obsessed in following his self-centered dream.

[7 : 12] He wanted to dethrone his father and he wanted to be in charge. And that's a picture of what self-centeredness does and sin as a result.

He ignored what it would do to his father, what it would do to his community, to his family, to his brother and to the work of the estate. It was a damaging reordering of love.

And that's what sin is. It's a damaging reordering of love away from God and others and focused on ourselves. That's where sinful selfishness comes from.

So that it becomes about my feelings, my longings, my desires, my decisions, my morality. It's subjective and individualistic. And we even see community and church through a me lens.

What can it be for? What can it do for me? So self-rule is at the core of sin and it's at the core of the destruction that sin brings into life.

[8 : 20] But I want to make a second point here. And this is slightly broader than this passage, but it involves this passage. Sin is about self-rule. And I will come to the end towards two things, to disintegration and then to the gospel, because the gospel needs to be at the core of all, of course.

But the second point I want to make is that sin is deceptively good. Sin is deceptively good. Verse 13 tells us that he went into a far country and he squandered his property and reckless or wild living.

And I think we misrepresent sin when we express it simply in terms of moral evil, which we all are repulsed by and is repugnant.

Most people, Christians or non-Christians, recoil from a very evil. But sin is much more subtle than that. It does involve that, but it's much more subtle than that.

It involves taking what is good and making it ultimate. Okay? Taking what is good, the good gifts of God, but making these things ultimate, just like probably the prodigal did.

[9 : 28] The things he did were maybe not necessarily immoral in and of themselves, but he expressed and engaged in them in immoral ways. God ourselves and God's good gifts, we can take them and we can use them to replace God and they can become ultimate things.

That's the deepest deception, isn't it? Isn't that the deepest? Because most people don't really understand or think about themselves as evil or wicked or immoral in these ways.

But we see that when we take the good things of God and make them ultimate things, they're bad saviours. They're bad gods. They're bad for worshipping.

So when aging comes, when trouble comes, there are no answers. When we make the point and the reason for living, a relationship or sexuality or our ambition or our work or our career or our personal ambitions, it's a terrible burden to put on these things because they can't save us.

They can't give us ultimate meaning in life. They can't give us the wholeness and the shalom that we were created to enjoy because we were created to live in relationship with God.

[10 : 46] These things can't deal with the sin and the emptiness and the autonomy that we are living under. Autonomy can't bear the weight of glory of being image bearers of God.

We can't live, we can't climb onto His throne. We can't allow other things to climb onto that throne. We and these things are not God.

The good gifts of God are not what we are to make ultimate. So it can be deceptively good. In other words, we can take the good things but we can make them ultimate. And that is destructive.

We can also take the bad things and have great fun. Okay? Remember that. We can have great fun doing all the wrong things.

You know, it's a pious nonsense to suggest that sin is easy to avoid because it's so overtly evil and wrong. It's a great verse in Hebrews 11, 25 which speaks about Moses making a choice and saying he chose not to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a while because he could see something greater and better.

[11 : 56] Now, it doesn't say that he chose to avoid the misery of sin and the awfulness of sin but the pleasures of sin because they were pleasurable for a while. There's great enjoyment and pleasure in sin.

It's temporary but it's real. It's anticipated for many people. That's why so many people do the lottery. But it's real because we have appetites for wild living and for laughing at others and at ourselves for excitement and danger, for lust, for the forbidden fruit, for coveting, for temptation. You know, temptation wouldn't be temptation if it wasn't attractive. It wasn't pleasurable if it didn't draw us to do the wrong thing. It's enticing.

It comes as an angel of light in all kinds of different ways. That's why God speaks so much of the Christian life as a battle, a battle that we need to be alert about how we live for ourselves and how we live in consideration with others.

But if you feed these sinful desires and appetites that we have, even legitimate appetites, if we feed them in an illegitimate and selfish way, the deeper the entanglement becomes, the greater the thrill we need, the more we need to spend to get the same level of excitement and the more desperate we become because it's a spiral downwards.

[13 : 16] It's pleasurable but it's deathly. So sin, taking the bad and having fun. But sin, and I'm still on that theme of being deceptively good, sin can be taking the good and making it ultimate.

It can be taking the bad and having fun, but sin can also look tremendously self-righteous. Also you've got in here the story as well as the prodigal, you've got his brother, elder brother.

And the elder brother here representing the religious Pharisees that muttered against God's grace, they didn't need it, they kept the law. And there's a stunning effect of what Jesus is saying here is exposing the deception of their own hearts and exposing law-breaking of the worst kind.

It was loveless. They actually hated God and their neighbors in the guise of being good, moral, religious people. Sin can look very self-righteous and can look very patting ourselves on the back. Whereas what God is saying here, the self-righteous moralism, this judgment of others, this outward moral behavior was masking a smoldering resentment to God.

[14 : 31] The service to Him was drudgery in the hope of some kind of earned reward. It was enslavement. That self-righteous kind of good outward living is feeling that you're missing out on the fun that everyone else is enjoying.

There's no celebration. There's no joy of faith. You're dismissive of the experiences of others who've been saved by grace. What do they know? What should I get to do with anyone like that, the

jokers who have earned nothing, who don't deserve forgiveness, a little bit what Rob was saying earlier.

It's about earning. It's about religious behavior and outward acting. The wholeness of grace, the wholeness that grace offers and promises is despicable and an affront to the self-righteous who are deceptively good.

Deceptively good. But that is really the ugliest reality of all with selfishness. It comes as an angel of light to be self-righteously religious.

It's taking the bad and having great fun, or at least perceived great fun, and it's taking the good and making the good ultimate.

[15 : 49] But the worst is that self-righteousness. It's like someone wearing a dirty boiler suit to a wedding. It's not wearing the grace clothes of the people of God.

And it's an ugly affront to the gospel, and it's hugely destructive and tremendously broken.

So sin is deceptively good. It's an evidence of self-rule. And it travels towards disintegration. And that's really the theme this evening is disintegration.

We've looked at division and we've looked at this piece and we see that this story of the prodigal is a story that's leading towards the disintegration of a life without God.

That's what God is saying. You know, sin at best, when self is enthroned, when we live without God and we enthrone ourselves and we allow selfishness to rule our lives.

[16 : 49] Sin and that pleasure is always temporary and it's ultimately unfulfilling. There's always a morning after. There's always the reality of regret, the coming of night, other people moving on, the onset of illness and old age.

Old age is a great disintegrator, isn't it? Marvelous picture in Ecclesiastes chapter 12, 1-5. If you have time, go and read that about the picture of the disintegration of the body even in old age, which we know in Christ will be redeemed, but yet is a picture of ultimately the judgment and reality of sin in humanity.

So the prodigal, his life as a picture of disintegration, isn't it? He spent all his money. His resources that fueled the selfish hedonistic lifestyle had gone.

The laughter had ended for him and he'd used up all his get out of jail cards free, get out of jail free cards even. He used them as well. He had two lots and they were all used up.

So he had nothing left and above and added onto that there was a famine. So the external circumstances militated against him just at the wrong time and he had no resources, he had no roots, he had no foundation personally or morally or spiritually to deal with this adverse circumstance and situation.

[18 : 19] And worse than that, there was nobody left around him. Nobody came to his aid. The prostitutes and the revelers were long gone and he had only been using them anyway.

And in this famine, it was each to their own, no one had time for this washed out loser who had just lived for the next party. We have a picture of a shell of a man drained of all meaningful life, a shadow.

And he denied all that would have built his character and made him whole from the inside out. It's a picture of him imploding. This is a story of him imploding, disintegrating in a pig's trough.

That's the picture of sin and selfishness we have here. And really God has said that's what sin does sooner or later. If you don't see your need for rescue, if you think sin is just a bit of a joke, or if you feel that you're good enough, that you're religious and moral and upright, you've missed the whole point of the gospel.

And you're not hearing what the Holy God is saying. And the reason I'm focusing on this is because the more we understand this, the more we will soar to great heights of grace and understanding.

[19 : 48] You can't understand grace and the love of God without recognizing the rescue that he has worked on our behalf.

Sin is a powerful, malevolent disease that destroys people, that brings disintegration from the inside out and ultimately from the outside in.

It takes away body and soul from the living God and from life itself. It disintegrates. It disintegrates. That's what it does. That's its work. But the gospel brings us to our senses. I'm not going to spend any time on this, but I want to leave you with an image, two images actually.

I just want to finish by asking you to visualize two things about God that matter more than anything in this picture, this great story of the prodigal son.

[20 : 47] Open our eyes spiritually and see two things. In fact, three things. See the open arms of the Father. That's the great picture of this story in verse 20.

Great picture. And he arose and came to his father when he was still a long way off. His father saw him and felt compassion, ran and embraced him and kissed him. And they had a celebration together.

This father running to the disintegrated son with the open arms of love and compassion to him, still joy and celebration into their son's life, a right good party.

Is that how you envisage your God? A God with open arms wanting to take us back and make us whole.

Give us wholeness. Give us shalom. Give us his peace and his healing. That's the picture of the gospel. And it is that picture because of the open arms of the Son nailed to the cross.

[22 : 00] That puts sin, does it not, into perspective. The destruction in inverted commas, and that you watch what I say, but the destruction of the life of God the Son on the cross willingly and freely.

The justice that is met and the grace that is revealed in his amazing sacrifice and answer to our sins.

The glory of the solution, the seriousness of it taking as Trinitarian God to be nailed in a cross outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

The open arms of the Father, the open arms of the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit from that as we come to Him by faith, transforming us with His peace and working in us towards wholeness again.

Stilling within us a grace and a love for God and the ability to overcome the ongoing battle that you and I every day, you need and I need to admit it against selfishness.

[23 : 11] That puts God in the throne and enjoys the true freedom of loving Him and loving one another before anything else. That's the redemption of our self-identity.

That's where we find wholeness. It's not enthroning ourselves and looking after number one. It's worshipping the living God and serving one another.

So the gospel is the great answer of the Trinitarian God to selfishness and to the disintegration of sinful selfishness and the disintegration that it brings, the misery that it brings into our lives.

It took God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit working together to bring us that freedom. Are we going to abuse that by not praying, by not thinking we need Him, by just sort of saying, well, we can cope on our own, by thinking we've got sin licked?

It simply isn't the case. We have that great need on a day-to-day basis to allow His transforming power to help us to see the open arms of the Son and the open arms of the Father in celebratory joy.

[24 : 33] And that should mark our Christian lives. And I hope that it does increasingly as we think of and see God in this great picture that Jesus gives for us of the gospel in the prodigal Son.

We were lost and divided and at dis-peace and disintegrating and ultimately, as you'll see next week, dying. But Christ brings life.

So let's pray and thank Him for that. Father God, we ask and pray that You would teach us to understand You better and understand what You say better, that we would not be naive, that we would not be simplistic, that we would not be stupid and narrow-minded in our thinking about sin as if simply it is that overt, dark evil that is obvious to all.

We know that its ultimate horror is in self-righteousness or in taking Your good things and making them ultimate, as well as then also doing the things You hate.

But the lovelessness, the lovelessness for others and the lovelessness for You is of course at the core of our commandment breaking.

[25 : 51] So Lord, help us to see that these things are not good, that they are not healthy, that they are death indeed. And help us to run to You to every day recognize the battle we face with remaining sinful selfishness that militates against Your glorious freedom and grace.

Help us to buy Your power, make the right choices with the Holy Spirit guiding us to do what is right, not what is wrong, good, not what is evil. As we saw this morning, that great summary help us to be those who are wise when it comes to good and innocent when it comes to evil.

Help us, we pray Lord, forgive us when we make a hash of things and when we are attracted to all the wrong things and when we feed wrong appetites and are enslaved by them.

Lord give us new freedom and new grace and new power to live for You and for You alone. In Jesus' name, amen.