

Division

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[0 : 00] So, this is the second of a series called, miserable as sin, okay? We're looking at the subject of sin for four weeks, it will not be next week because I'm not here, but we'll carry on again for the next two weeks after that.

And last week we kind of had an introductory sermon which looked at the theme from the position of peace, God's shalom, that sin is really the breaking of God's peace, the breaking of God's shalom, that relationship with Him.

And I said that we would look at some of the outworking of that over the next few weeks, so there's a little bit of overlapping and there'll be a little bit of repetition in some ways, but I hope coming at it from different angles.

And one of the reasons that I decided that we should look at this theme is because I think for many of us, and I absolutely include myself, sin doesn't matter as much as it should to us.

We've known, many of us have known about all our lives and the word and the concept trips off our tongues and off our thinking very easily. But it's to try and get us to that place, not to focus unnecessarily on it, but to be realistic and recognize the depth of the offense that sin is in God's nostrils.

[1 : 32] How offensive sin is and how wrathful God is against sin because He sees it in all its destructiveness.

He sees the damage it causes. That's why it's so significant to God, it's not some kind of disinterested venom against sin because He has just declared that sin is wrong.

It's because He is the God of love and His commandments are commandments of love between ourselves and God, and sin is what breaks that command, that love and breaks that shalom.

And He sees the offensiveness and He sees the damage that it causes. And we ought to be able to see and remind ourselves of the great destructiveness of relationship that sin brings between ourselves and God and between ourselves as people.

It causes a cosmic level, family breakdown, division, separation, loneliness, hatred, estrangement from God, estrangement from God as our Father, and estrangement from each other as equals.

[2 : 49] So really the theme this evening as a cascade down from shalom is division. I mentioned last week that we're not really looking at biblical definitions of sin as much as descriptions of sin.

What sin does, because that maybe brings it more into our own living and our own lives. We're created to live in harmony with God, with heaven and with earth.

And the reality is that sin divides. And that's what Jesus is saying when He speaks about the ridiculous accusation of the Pharisees. He was saying that He belonged to... that Jesus belonged to Satan.

He said, don't be ridiculous. A kingdom divided against its division, it can't stand. A house divided against it, it can't stand. A family divided can't stand.

A church divided can't stand. Because sin brings division and it brings brokenness and anarchy and destruction and opposition and isolation, and ultimately it brings death, doesn't it?

[3 : 58] And death is the most raw expression of division. Obviously with those that we are incredibly close to.

So there's a disruption. There's a rupture that sin brings into humanity and into our lives that is ultimately self-destructive.

It destroys us. It divides us from our God. It divides us from who we are as created by God. And it divides us from life.

So I want just for that little while to look at one biblical example, one story in the Bible, the story of Saul here. And I hope that as we do so you'll reflect in your own experience, and I will in mine, the

damage that sin causes.

And we see it first of all in his relationship with God. So there was sin caused a real division in the relationship between Saul and God. I don't have time to go into the previous chapters.

[5 : 05] If you do have time, then please read the two chapters before chapter 18. Well, maybe three chapters, 15, 16 and 17.

But if I go back even further in chapter 13, verse 14, and I hope I've got the right reference here. He says, but now your kingdom, God says, shall not continue.

The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you. That's what God says to Saul.

Saul had been clearly, in the previous chapters, he'd been chosen as king. He was king of Israel. He was God's chosen king, but he defiantly and consistently disobeyed God's commands.

When God told him to wait for Samuel to come and offer sacrifices after a defeat in battle, he couldn't wait. Saul was, Samuel was late. He was walking his way.

[6 : 11] Where's Samuel? I can't be bothered waiting for Samuel and obeying God's command. I'll just go and offer the sacrifice in stark contrast to what God had commanded.

And then on another occasion, he didn't obey God's command by destroying the enemy entirely. He kept some of the best stuff which he said was going to be offered in sacrifice, but he wasn't listening to God.

He clearly wasn't listening, and he didn't recognize who God was and who he was. He didn't grasp the sinful selfishness and darkness of his own heart or his need for God.

He went his own way. He was the king. He didn't really need to obey what God said. He could just manipulate it. He could change it. He didn't really need to look in his own heart.

And the moment he was faced with tough circumstances, with challenges in his life, he grew greatly impatient with God, and he said, well, I know better than God.

[7 : 14] I'm not going to wait for Samuel. I'll just do. I'll offer the sacrifice. I don't need the priest to come. I'll just do it. And he guessed what God was wanting. He ignored God's commands.

And God speaks about that very clearly in chapter 15, verse 22. He says to Saul, has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord.

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to listen than the fat of rams. So he wasn't listening. He didn't hear what God said about his own heart, and he didn't hear what God said about his own need of a redeemer.

He didn't hear what God said about following his commands. He was going his own way. And you know what it's like, isn't it? You know, is there anything worse than somebody telling you what you've intended to do?

Second guessing your intentions. That's annoying, especially when they're wrong. But imagine Saul was doing that to God. He was second guessing God's intentions.

[8 : 25] And he was saying he knew better than God. And we see that as we read through these early chapters, or these chapters before chapter 18, that there was this division was growing between God and between Saul.

And really, that's what I want to get across in many ways this evening and in these series about what God says about our separation from him.

Because what happened is made clear in chapter 18. It left him vulnerable when he didn't obey, when he didn't recognize what God was saying about the seriousness of being independent and being in control and being really on the throne of his own life.

Sin was lurking at the door. And it's that great image from Genesis 4 verse 7. Cain and Abel, sin is lurking at the door.

It's a really powerful picture. And what we have in chapter 18 is really the door opening wide. Sin was lurking at the door, and we see the consequences of Saul not appreciating what God said and what God taught about the damage and the disintegration and the division that sin caused.

[9 : 43] Because a problem arose, a challenge arose in his life, which exposed him. He was faced with the popularity of David. And in the popularity of David, Saul's heart was exposed tragically because sin was unchecked and was lurking at the door.

It came back to bite him big time because he hasn't dealt with sin in his heart, and he was disobedient and he was still really rocking on on his own without God in his heart.

We see the desperate consequences, and I'm going to come back to that. But I just want to slight aside here, because verse 10 is a difficult verse.

It says, the next day a harmful spirit came from God and rushed upon Saul and he raved, standing there doing music, within his house. Okay? A harmful spirit came from God.

Is the Bible therefore saying we're not really responsible for our behavior and for our sin? Because it's God who brings a harmful spirit. We argue that God is sovereign, don't we?

[10:53] Does that mean we, how can we be responsible? The text suggests that it's God who brought this terrible harmful spirit. Well, it's a difficult verse.

It is a difficult verse. But I think there's Hebrew language issues there, the way they use language and Hebrew colloquialism, and I think it would, it's better understood as being, which would be in line with the book of Job, that God permitted, God permitted this to happen.

Okay? God allowed evil to chastise evil, and he was using what was an evil reality for his own purposes.

I don't think this is referring to an evil spirit, the spirit in the Old Testament as a wide range of meanings. It can mean the Holy Spirit, it can mean an evil spirit, or it can mean a personal frame of mind, you know, you had a bad spirit, an ugly disposition of mind.

And I think that's what we're being faced with here is that so, God, because so continued to be disobedient and continued not to listen, it's as if God permitted that rage and that bad spirit and that ugly disposition just to blossom, if that's a bad image to use, because blossoms are nice kind of image.

[12:25] And it was, in other words, it was a natural consequence of His own rebellion and sin against God in His own heart. He's responsible, and at the same time, God is judging Him for what He has done and for allowing sin to lurk at the door.

In other words, He's His own worst enemy here. There's an old commentator from last century, Jameson, Fossett and Brown. They summarized the point well, they say, His own gloomy reflections, the consciousness that He had not acted up on the character of an Israelite king, the loss of His throne, the extinction of His royal house, made Him jealous, irritable, vindictive, and subject to fits of morbid melancholy.

It was the result of His own rebellion and His own disobedience. He had a divided heart. He was faithless, and His fellowship with God was meaningless because He didn't take seriously His own heart, became increasingly paranoid and isolated, little joy, and a heap full of regret.

Now, this might be a kind of minister's question. I don't know, maybe you're not asking this. But some people, I will, we saw a believer, we saw saved. Well, I'm not going to answer that.

You'll be pleased to know. I don't want you to ask that question, but I want you to ask the question is, what is the Bible saying to me about Saul's heart, about my heart?

[13:56] What about my heart? You know, that's what Jesus always directs us to do. We can't answer the question about Saul. We'll say, well, no, one day. He stands before God. We're not told.

But the question is, what about our heart? Because I want the light of the Holy Spirit to shine powerfully and inwardly in our own hearts. Do we understand the cross and the solemnity and yet the joy and the beauty of the cross?

And do we see that our outworking of grace depends on our outworking of examining and knowing the darkness of our own hearts?

And when we are faced in our lives with tough circumstances or with the popularity of somebody else or with their beauty or with their gifts, how do we respond to sin lurking at the door?

It desires to have us, to master us. And so when trouble comes and difficulty comes, it's often where we find and understand what is at the root of our souls, where grace is placed.

[15:08] When the heat comes, where is the root of our lives? Is it fixed and focused on Jesus Christ and His grace? If sin doesn't matter, can I say it again?

As I said it last week, I don't think grace matters terribly much and God doesn't matter as God came to expose and to speak about the seriousness of what sin does.

It breaks His shalom and it divides us. So we see that in His relationship with God. We also see it in His relationship with others. And Saul's story is a really sad story.

And we should listen to the story that God gives us in His Word because His life was one of brokenness and division with those closest to Him, His people, His nation, His family, Jonathan, and here spectacularly with David, none of whom were His enemies.

How did this unrepentant sinful heart bring about separation from others? How did sin reveal itself in that divided way?

[16:24] Let's look at it for a little minute what happened with Him and with David. He had that identity crisis, didn't he? His sense of worth, his sense of importance was all based on his position.

I'm the king of Israel, I'm the chosen one. On his popularity with the people and his privileged position, that's where his identity lay, that's where he found his sense of importance.

Wasn't in God's grace and God's forgiveness and God's choice of Him in a humbling way, it was rather than his identity as the king.

So any threat to that opposed his sinful, selfish heart and it brought that division. He compared his life with others rather than listening to God.

And as we see in the earlier chapters, he kept resisting and ignoring and disobeying the living God and it led to division.

[17:31] Sin leads to division. And this division was triggered by a song. Sin was looking at the door and when the song started, the door opened.

Saul has struck down his thousands, David, his 10,000s. And we are given his response. Saul was angry.

He was really angry. He was jealous. Verse 9, he kept an eye on David from that day. He had a jealous eye for what David was doing and it led to uncontrollable rage, fear, hatred, conspiracy to murder.

And that's what sin does. It's a snowballing effect if we don't deal with it by falling on our knees at the cross.

Sin is devastating and God says it's divisive and this is a very clear illustration of that. And just for a moment, I want to focus on one of these tumbling consequences of not dealing with sin in his heart.

[18:46] And that was anger. We're told that Saul was very angry and anger almost inevitably causes division between ourselves and God and between ourselves as people.

It's one of the great marks, I think, of our society today. I've mentioned that before. There's a huge amount of rage in our society. We talk about love and about acceptance of belonging, but actually you'll find just lurking under the surface a huge amount of anger, angst and rage.

And so the question is, what are we doing with our anger and with our rage? Because it might not evidence itself in the same way that Saul did.

I certainly hope not. But it's a very real emotion that we are faced with every day in our lives.

Because it will... And this is very much where I want the point of the series to be.

I want it to be a self-reflection of where our hearts are with God, where my heart is with God and where your heart is with God.

[20:00] So the question is in our understanding, how do we respond? For example, when circumstances are tough, but they became tough here for Saul.

When... How do you respond when things don't go your way and maybe haven't gone your way this week? When you're looking at God and saying, God doesn't answer my prayers and He's not answering my prayers the way I want.

Or when we think we're doing our very best as Christians and yet we just seem to be struggling at every point. Our prayers aren't been answered. We're not as popular, as influential, as significant as other people in our workplace, in our university, in our church, in our homes.

What do we do when other people fail us, when there's tensions in our marriage with our children, when our kids are ugly and they stretch us to the very end of our tether, when our wives or husbands annoy us, when we're tired, when we're in pain, when a project at work fails miserably? And we haven't the control over our circumstances when they are difficult and troubling. How do we respond?

[21:26] Do we respond with great anger, with raging, with shouting, festering, playing, probably most significantly, the blame game?

Blaming God and blaming others, it's always somebody else's fault. It's always somebody else's fault. And that immediately brings division, just as Saul questioned, in many ways, God's intentions and God's motives and overruled them.

So also, we find ourselves divided from God and divided from one another when we don't allow or when we allow sin to crouch at the door of our hearts and we don't deal with our own hearts.

Because sin's bedfellows, or division's bedfellows are jealousy, fear and hate, and we see it all in this particular chapter.

And the result is division. The result is separation, unhealthy division, horribleness, isolation, Saul from his God, from his family, from his David, from his kingdom, none of whom, as I said, were his enemies.

[22 : 55] And we need to sometimes, I think in our lives, look at the consequences for not dealing with sin in our hearts.

Not someone else dealing with sin in their hearts, but us in ours. Because we see that if we don't deal with it, the consequences are often anger, jealousy, envy, insecurity, fear and hatred, which divides us from people.

Pride divides us from people. And we're called to be united and we're called to be one with God and with each other.

So if we underestimate sin, and if you underestimate sin, and if I underestimate sin in my own heart, I guarantee, I guarantee that we have a problem with sinful divide in this, in your relationships, either with God or with one another.

And we're vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one. It's simply too easy to accept division as the norm.

[24 : 06] It's too easy in the church context to accept division as just, well, that's just what life is. It's too easy to be separated from people by misrepresenting them or judging their motives or being envious or jealous or bitter or whatever it might be about them.

And it's easy to question God when things go wrong because it's a cheap shot to do. But there is, and I finish with this, a glorious alternative, isn't there?

And we must make this significant reality of who we are. The glorious alternative is Jesus Christ and the matter of the cross, because the cross matters.

And it's significant and central to us, because what is the cross all about? The cross is all about reconciliation. It's about reconciling us to God and reconciling us to one another at the fruit of the cross.

Sin separates. It's not a vague sentiment. Sin separates us between our father and between our brothers and sisters.

[25 : 21] The cross is what enables us, as we understand who we are and are forgiven and accept His grace, that it brings reconciliation now, not just some ethereal time in the future.

It brings reconciliation now, and we are to work through that reconciliation with one another also. The science is judgment of our death, the ultimate separation to open the way of unity and love through His resurrection power.

So what am I saying? What am I saying? I'm saying our business is with God. Your business is with God. Your business is with God, the glorious King of Love.

That's where you must go. That's who you must wrestle with when you're faced with all the temptations to be divided and separated. When sin is looking at the door, that's where you must go. That's where the Sannists went. He went with all his struggles and battles and sense of injustice. He didn't believe in revenge.

[26 : 28] He said, vengeance is God's mind. He brought all of these things as we were singing to the living God when we're tempted to anger, jealousy, silence, blame, hatred, division, gossip.

Go to the living God. He needs to change your heart. This is not just something that is a ritualistic way of living.

We can confidently do the impossible when we take it to the living God because He is there to transform us. Let's get out of our rut if it might be something in our heart of easy divide in this because we're new people and we are people who are to recognize that we are His children.

And that's why He tells us beautifully in Ephesians 6 about the armor of God. The protection from sin lurking at the door is the armor of God. It's the Holy Spirit.

The Word of God is prayer, is knowing His promises, is being in His company. And we wear that armor and that keeps us united.

[27 : 32] And so we rest. We rest in Him. And as we do so, we're resting in a different truth. And the different truth is that there is a right division.

There is even a right anger. There's a just division between evil and good. And we know that.

But it's not for us to take revenge. It's not for us to meet out justice. We will be wronged, but we trust in the God who will right all wrongs and who will one day remind us of a just division, a just accountability, a separation between heaven and hell, between those who are His children and those who are strangers.

So we live reconciled now, and as we live reconciled now, the door is opened to people questioning why we are different and why we live like this and why division is such an anathema to us and why we are united to God and united to one another.

That is how His kingdom comes. And that is our responsibility. So as we look at our lives, we need to consider our relationship with God.

[29 : 00] Are we united to Him? Are we reconciled or are we separate? And to one another, as a mark and as a recognition of how much we are allowing God, the light of God, into the darkness of our hearts to transform it and to renew it and to change it so that we are not conforming but we are being transformed.

Amen, let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that You would help us to recognize that at the very heart of all the brutality and the division and the war and the hatred and the abuse and the gossip and the vitriol and the anger and the blasphemy and the misery that is so often in this world, the insecurity of walking down the street, knife culture, gun culture, all of these things that just bring such division and such fear and such hatred.

May we recognize and see it maybe in a microwave in our own hearts rather than simply tutting at the macro reality of a world outside us.

But may we see how often we are divided from You, how often we blame You and how often we go our own way and tell You that we really know better than You.

Forgive us when we don't obey even with what we think are good motives and help us rather to be in Your presence and in Your company crying out to You when we don't have the answers relating to You in prayer, pleading with You in our lives and seeing the impossible happen, seeing that forgiveness and that grace and that joy and that spiritual reality uniting us with God and with one another.

[31 : 02] Help us, we pray. And may this place, may this community, we have people who are so fused together in the love of Christ that it speaks powerfully to a world of where there is so much insecurity and hatred and sadness and division.

And may we see with God's eyes the hurt and the pain that sin causes. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.