

Humanity – Our Need For A Saviour

Ruth Rhodes | Romans 3:9-23

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Thank you so much for being here this evening. You have perhaps inadvertently come to a talk on sin, so especially thank you for being here tonight. We're in our sermon series, as Tom already mentioned, and we're looking tonight at humanity's need for a saviour. And the verse that we're looking at is this one.

“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

That's from Romans 3, verse 23. And if you don't know me, I'm Ruth. I'm actually an English teacher. And if you cast your mind back to GCSE English, think of tonight like close reading, word level analysis. We are going to dive in, zoom in to these 12 words, because it's amazing actually how much God communicates in just 12 words. My goal tonight is that what we learn brings out the best in us - but we're not glossing over the worst. I'm especially qualified to speak on this tonight (thank you Tom), because I am a sinner. And I know a saviour, so I can help with that too.

I was really tempted to start by giving everyone a piece of paper and a pen and asking you all to write down the top 100 ways in which you have sinned since breakfast. But I didn't have enough biros, so I scratched that idea. But I do want us tonight to be honest and to be real. Let's zoom in the first word we're going to look at tonight – “**all**”. “For **ALL** have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

That's key. It's not “*them out there* have sinned and fallen short of glory of God.” It's not “*unbelievers* have sinned and fallen short...”. It's not “*they* have sinned...”. It's “**all** have sinned and fallen short...”. That's me, that's you, that's the person you're sitting next to, it's the person in front of you, it's all of us. And it is good for us to start with that, with us as a church, because Jesus warns us so brilliantly about the dangers of hypocrisy. About the danger that we look at the speck in one another's eyes and don't see the log in our own. We are really just one sinner next to another sinner at the foot of the cross. Puffed up pride does not make a church powerful. Arrogance makes us unteachable. But humble humility, fully recognising our need of Christ, that makes us attractive.

So, I was driving to work on Friday (two days a week I work in Bristol). And if you've ever driven through Bristol, you know there'll be like four lanes of traffic in the same direction. And it's really critical to be in the right one. And often being in the right lane on one road is absolutely essential for the next road. And if you get it wrong, you can end up miles out of your way. So, I was driving into work on Friday. I've been driving into Bristol for work since January. So, I've gotten pretty good at it now. And I know which lane to be in at all times.

So, I was driving on my way into work, contentedly in the correct lane. But other people were zooming up the other lane and then indicating at the last minute and nipping in. Is there anything more annoying than that? So, after a while, I got so fed up that I did that classic thing (nod if you know this) I got really close to the car in front so nobody else could sneak in, because I wasn't having any more of that. So, I kept the other cars out. I was feeling quite pleased with myself. I had Hillsong worship on, and I was in a really good place. About seven, eight minutes later, in Bristol, that time in the morning, about 20 yards up the road, the traffic had really filled in now. There were cars all around. And just listening, soaking in the Hillsong worship, I realized I was in the wrong lane. I never do that. I was in the wrong lane, and I had to do that really awful thing where I put the indicator on and waited ages for someone to be nice and let me out. And I thought, "oh yes, I see."

Sometimes we're just in the wrong lane, right? And later in that journey, as other people indicated to move out, I held back miles and let them out. And I thought, "this is actually a much more pleasant journey." We all let one another out. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." We're all in the wrong lane at one time or another.

Okay, word number two: "**sinned.**" It's unpopular. It's uncomfortable, isn't it? The best way that I had sin described to me (this was many years ago), a preacher said, "Just imagine that you die and you're up to Heaven and God says, "we're just going to watch a film of your life. We're going to watch everything you ever did and everything you ever said (both to people, and behind their back). And we're going to see everything you ever thought." Thoughts really matter to God too - in fact, Jesus brilliantly said, "don't just

think it's just adultery. If you look at a woman and lust after her, you've committed adultery in your heart." And, God says, "we're going to invite all your friends and family with popcorn. Let's go!"

*All those bits that you have done or said or thought that you don't want other people to see - that's the sin in your life. Margaret Feinberg says this lovely thing: "Prayer is the place where I'm invited to present the parts of myself that no one else sees to a God who already knows and loves me anyway." But there's another word. And I think my understanding of sin has grown and I begin to see that there's more to it. And in these 12 words "All have sinned and fallen short..." - it is not just our actions, but our *inaction*. Not just our words, but what we *didn't say*. Not just our thoughts, but what we *never even troubled ourselves to think*.*

Much about our world is suffused with sin with injustice with inequality, and often we are participant in that. To illustrate this, I want to give you an example which is intensely personal. I want to talk about our clothes, perhaps because I know how much I fall short on this. I know that I put convenience before conscience. I put a bargain before the bar of my good God's perfect standards. I put my needs before the needs of others. And I do it again and again. And perhaps 'clothes', because since the fall, when God gave clothes to Adam and Eve to hide their shame, they have been symptomatic of the sin that we are in.

The clothing industry in the world is notorious for having child labour, and for the appalling working conditions of the, predominantly, women who work within it. There are 60 million factory workers worldwide working in the garment industry, and just 2% of those earn a living wage. And I ask myself what I'm doing about it. I'm so tempted to brush it off in my own wardrobe, but Martin Luther King Jr. reminds me that "we must learn that passively to accept an unjust system is to cooperate with that system and thereby to become a participant in its evil." I can't brush this off. Maybe I like to think, "well, it's too far away. What can I do about impoverished parts of the world? I know that Oxfam tell me that 9% of the world's population, (that 720 million people) live in poverty, but what can I do about that, right? That's too far away".

So, let's bring it closer to home. Within the UK, the ONS in 2020 said the richest 10% in the UK hold 43% of the wealth. The poorest 50% hold 9% of the wealth in the UK. "But what can I do about council estates in Liverpool, right? That's not me, is it?"

So, let's bring it closer to home. Let's come into Bath, this beautiful Georgian city in which we live, this amazing place where God is doing great things, where there's also great wealth, and where there are two areas within our city that are within the top 10% of the most deprived areas nationally - where you can cross a postcode boundary and take 10 years off a person's life. It's not right.

There's a great line in one of the songs that we sometimes sing in church, which is, "break my heart for what breaks yours." And I think that's often what God is calling us to - to just join him with the things that are breaking his heart. Because as we look back at our passage, we've fallen short of the **glory** of God. Our glorious God, our perfect God, our good God, our just God. He designed and he desires a perfect world. And this isn't it yet. Sin broke what was perfect. And we are all victims of that. And we are all perpetrators. It's humanity. All of us, that's me, that's you, that's the person next to you. We need a Saviour.

And thank God he gave us one. What did he send? A self-styled influencer? A domineering dictator? A media mogul? No. He sent Jesus - baby, refugee, carpenter, itinerant preacher, miracle worker, Son of God, sacrifice. If we minimise sin and its devastating effects, then we also minimise the cross. Jesus, on that cross, faced the enormity of our sin and beat it. So, when we're honest about sin, it's often when we're the most grateful. And we also find ourselves equally unable to save ourselves, equally covered by grace, and equally loved by Jesus.

Here's another couple of verses from Romans. This is from Romans 6 in The Message translation, which captures what Jesus did on the cross. "Sin didn't and doesn't have a chance in comparison with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. And when Jesus died, he took sin down with him. But alive, he brings God down to us."

Sin is a matter for all of humanity, but it's also deeply personal. Jesus died for all humanity. Jesus died for you. Here's the thing, with sin and 'falling down'. Sometimes I think we think as Christians, when we were converted or when we were baptised, that was the end point, and we were done with sin at that point. All *have* sinned. And yet, all of us *still do*. I think sometimes we also like to think the longer we've been a Christian, the less we will sin. But that just isn't true.

And understanding this is important, I think, to avoid two big traps with sin. One is hypocrisy that we've already mentioned. The other is a sense of hopelessness where we might be tempted to think, "I'm not a good Christian, so I better just quit." Instead, really the more we know Jesus and the closer we are to God, the more we'll see his goodness and the more we will realise that we really are not. The more we understand the heights of his glory, the more we'll see how much we fall short.

So, this is not about condemnation but it's about a continual desire to keep working on being more and more and more like Jesus. It's about progress. Not towards some human measure of perfection, but towards Christ-likeness. And it's going to take us a lifetime. So, if God, by his Holy Spirit, is revealing new areas of sin or falling short in your life, then it means you're connected. and we're working on it with him. That's discipleship. That's the apprenticeship, learning while on the job of life to be more like our maker.

How do we respond then? How do we try and align ourselves whilst also realizing how often we fall short? I wanted to share this. This is one of my favourite verses in the Bible. This is from Micah 6:8, which says “he's shown you what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

“Act justly.” That means working towards a just society, believing in justice and seeking after that in the same way that God does. To “love mercy” individually in our relations with one another, to show love and compassion and mercy. And always “walking humbly” with our God, in step with him. Acknowledging our failures, leaning into his relentless forgiveness, and walking in his footsteps towards being a better, more faithful disciple. But with his palpable presence, his nearness, his protection and love helping us to do it. The next verse as it happens in Micah is this, “listen, the Lord is calling.” (6:9).

I'm coming into land but there's just a couple more things I want to share with you. This is Michael Yaconelli in his book *Messy Spirituality*, and he's talking about *unfinishedness* because we are very much unfinished. He says “Jesus understood unfinishedness very well, which is why he was comfortable leaving 11 unfinished disciples. When he died, the disciples were confused, depressed, afraid and doubtful. They faced a lifetime of finishing, just like you and me. Messy spirituality reminds us we will always be a work in progress it also reminds us that the unfinished life is a lot more spiritual than we imagined.”

And finally, to pair with our verse tonight “for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...” Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory.” I like The Message translation from Romans 12 – “Take your everyday, ordinary life, your sleeping, eating, going to work and walking around life and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.”

I'm just going to pray as we finish. Jesus we thank you so much for what you did on the cross we thank you that you save us from the sin that we are in help us Lord without condemnation but with realisation and reality to just grapple with the sin that we're in to be honest and hold before you the things you already know knowing you love us anyway and you're calling us to be better more connected more trusting more faithful unfinished yet traveling with you Jesus we place ourselves before you afresh tonight so grateful for your love help us to see what we might change that we might be transformed into your image to better reflect your glory. Amen.