

We believe in sin and salvation

February 5, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning we are going to look at two statements from our statement of faith because I really think they belong together. And while we could take them on one at a time, I think we're smarter to address them together, because as a pair, they answer some of the most fundamental questions of human existence:

Is sin something we need to worry about? If it is, are there consequences for sin? If there are, then how do we deal with them? Or more pointedly how do we get out from under God's wrath against them? What can people look forward to if they do? And what will happen to those who don't?

Those are fundamental questions that shape our sense of right and wrong, our hope for the future, our confidence in the face of death and the way that we conduct ourselves in the world today. So let's get right into it – statements five and six.

Now, if there was one thing that I would change about our statement of faith, it's this: I would flip the order of statements five and six because logically I think we need to talk about the problem before we talk about the solution. So let's just make that flip in our heads this morning as we read them together. First six and then five:

6. We believe that man, in consequence of the fall, is utterly sinful and therefore lost, and the unsaved will be raised for final judgment.

5. We believe that the salvation of man is solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, that the saved partake of eternal life now and will share in that glorious resurrection that is to come.

That's what we believe as a church. Now, what does it mean?

Let's start with statement six. We believe that human beings, because of the Fall, are utterly sinful and therefore lost.

Heavy stuff right? But important stuff for us understand. Like I said at Bible study the other night, you don't want the doctor to tell you that you have cancer, but you need the doctor to tell you if you do. This is one of those things. We might not want to talk about sin but we need to know what's going on.

So let's start here – we believe in the reality of sin. We believe that we are accountable to God for what we do, right and wrong. There are people who would say 'oh, sin, what an archaic idea – that there is a God who holds us accountable' – unlike those people, we believe that there IS a God who holds us accountable for all that we do in life. And not only that, we also believe that we are all guilty of sin in relation to God. We all do and think and say things that

He says NOT to do and say and think and we all refuse to do other things that He has called us to.

There was a verse in the James readings this week that's very important here – James 2:10 - 'For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.' When we refuse to let God be God in our lives, in any way, then we have broken the whole Law of God, because we have not loved Him with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. So whether we've killed somebody or just envied what they have, we're equally guilty of falling short of the glory of God. We as a church believe that sin IS a thing and that we are ALL guilty of it.

Not only that, sin has touched all parts of our lives – that's the 'utterly sinful' part. There is no aspect of our being that is not affected by sin.

Now let's talk about that because that's a big statement and it's a complex statement.

A lot of us like to say that human beings are fundamentally good and in a sense, I agree with that. We all bear the image of God and when things go wrong, we do tend to band together and help one another. I don't think that we could have a society unless we as a society had the goodness and decency to honour and respect each other as human beings. So in a sense we ARE good.

Now that's generally true on a social level, but on the spiritual level, not so much. This was the thing that I wrestled with before I came to faith. I knew I was a *socially* good person – I volunteered, I went to church, I opened the door for old ladies – but I couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't *spiritually* good. I refused to honour God in ways I wouldn't think twice about honouring people. And even then, I did all these socially good things and yet I knew I wasn't doing them for altruistic purposes – I was doing them to try to make myself look good. This is what 'utter sinfulness' is all about – even my good deeds were tainted by self-interest and sin. (Isa 64:6 ... *all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away*).

That's what we mean when we say that we are 'utterly sinful' – not that we are unable to do good things; rather that all of our being, even the good things, are tainted by sin. We are all 'utterly sinful.'

And the reason for that stems from the very first chapters of the Bible. Genesis 1 and 2, God graciously created us and gave us all the things that we needed to thrive. Genesis 3, Adam and Eve looked around at all God gave them and said 'God, we trust ourselves more than we trust You' and they ate the forbidden fruit. That's the moment that we call 'the Fall' because it's the moment we as human beings fell from perfect innocence and fellowship with God into sin and selfishness.

Now notice, the issue here is not primarily that they ate the apple or whatever. The issue is that they experienced the goodness of their Creator, they experienced the fullness of relationship with Him and then said 'You can't tell us what's right and wrong. We're better off without You.' Yes, they ate the forbidden fruit, but behind that action was the conviction that we're better off without God.

That's sin – the decision to follow our own will instead of God's and to believe that we know better than Him. And while we weren't literally there at the Fall, we've all done the same things that led to the Fall. We've all gone our own way, we have said 'God, I'm not letting you define right and wrong for me' and so every one of us is utterly sinful because of the Fall.

And the bad news about that is that that makes us all 'lost.' Lost to God, separated from Him. The parable of the prodigal son I think is helpful here because it illustrates what being 'lost' means – it means essentially telling the father to his face that you wish he was dead ('give me my inheritance now') and then going off on your own to party only to realize too late that that wasn't such a good idea. That's what being lost is and we're it.

And what's more, I discovered something really fascinating this week and I'm actually a little embarrassed that I've never noticed this before. I'm actually a little embarrassed that none of my teachers have ever pointed this out before – when Jesus says '... [I] have come to seek and save the lost,' He's literally using a word that means bound for destruction. The Greek word for 'lost' is literally 'destroyed' but as a metaphor it came to be used as the opposite of the Greek word for 'found' and so that's where our 'lost' comes from. But that idea of 'bound for destruction' is tucked into that word 'lost.'

Which is actually quite appropriate given the next part of our statement - We believe that man, in consequence of the fall, is utterly sinful and therefore lost, and the unsaved will be raised for final judgment.

Not only do we believe that we have all sinned, we also believe that we will all be held accountable for that sin. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says "10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

And death itself doesn't excuse us from judgment – saved and unsaved alike will be resurrected from the grave to give account for what they did in life. Revelation 20:12 gives us a glimpse of what that will be like -

12 And I saw the [resurrected] dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.

14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This is why we take sin very seriously. I don't want you standing before that throne saying 'nobody told me this was coming.' Rebellion against God, sin, is devastating and we are all guilty of it.

Do you want me to stop here? We've done one statement in our statement of faith. We need the other one too. (Sin) That's the bad news. Here's the good news.

Not only do we believe that we, as a consequence of the fall, are utterly sinful and therefore lost, [and will be thus] will be raised for final judgment.

5. We [also] believe that the salvation of mankind is solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, that the saved partake of eternal life now and will share in that glorious resurrection that is to come.

We believe that we are all guilty of sin but we also believe that Jesus died to save sinners like us. He didn't just come to seek and save the lost - He came to face judgment in our place, for our sin, so that WE could be forgiven and delivered from God's wrath. We believe that the only remedy for sin is God's salvation.

Not only that, we also believe that our salvation is solely by grace through faith in Jesus. When Jesus went to the Cross, He carried my sin and your sin and every person's sin from Adam and Eve to the last baby born. He died to bear the cost of our sin and to give us the blessings that His obedience deserved. It's HIS perfection that secures our salvation. Which is good, because we can do nothing to earn that salvation – even our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.

Theologian Stanley Grenz puts it really well: "Humans are totally depraved [ie., utterly sinful]. Sin has spread to every aspect of our existence, leaving no nook or cranny of our being untouched, no capability unaffected which otherwise might have enabled us to facilitate our own salvation. Because all human effort is ultimately insufficient, if we are to be saved the initiative must come from God and by His [undeserved] grace."ⁱ

That's why the Holy Spirit that we talked about last week is so important. If we are going to experience Jesus' salvation, we need the Holy Spirit to come in and give us new birth and new life to allow us to take hold of Jesus by faith.

Our old life of sin is so hung up on itself that we are incapable of turning to God. But God, because of His great love for us, made a way for us to be saved, by grace, through faith. Not because of what we've done, but because of what Jesus has done, dying on our behalf and in our place. We believe that salvation is by grace, through faith. Enabled by the Holy Spirit, we are delivered from sin and born again to new life.

Our statement of faith goes so far as to say that because of that we partake in that eternal life now – that is, we live with a foretaste of what eternity will be like. Revelation says in the end ‘God will be with us and we will be His people;’ if we are saved, we are living that now. Jesus – Emmanuel – God with us – is living with us now; God the Holy Spirit is living in us guaranteeing to us the promise of eternity. 2 Corinthians 1:22 says that God has put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.ⁱⁱ

So we believe that when we receive the grace of God by faith, when we admit our need for forgiveness and turn to Christ to receive it, we begin to experience eternal life. And then we go on to experience eternal life forever. That’s the last part of our statement – we will share in that glorious resurrection that is to come.

I want you to see in these statements that together they address how we deal with sin and the consequences of that response. We all sin but we can respond differently. If we are unwilling to acknowledge our sin, to turn from it to turn to God, we are lost. That means that when we die, we will rise again to judgment to bear the cost of sin ourselves. If on the other hand, we are willing admit our sin and receive the grace of God, then we are found and we will experience eternal life until we die then be raised again to eternal, eternal life. All by grace through faith. Which of those is your response? Sin and judgment or salvation by grace?

I’ve been moving pretty quickly through this message and I haven’t given you a whole lot of Scripture because there’s one passage of Scripture that pulls this all together really nicely. That’s Ephesians 2:1-10. Turn with me to it in your Bible; we’ll look at it briefly. Ephesians 2 starting in verse 1. Top five passages in all the Bible; probably top three when it comes to salvation and faith.

Let’s just read through this with our statement of faith in mind.

NIV Ephesians 2:1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,
2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.

In other words, as a consequence of the Fall, which is the way of the world (doing things with no care for God), we are utterly sinful and therefore lost. I mean, Paul uses here the language of ‘dead in your sins.’ That tells us how serious sin is – the Devil wants you to think that sin is harmless but being sinful and lost is being spiritually dead – and it tells us how helpless we are to save ourselves. Without Jesus, we are so tied up in our own sin, doing our own thing that we are essentially dead to God and unable to save ourselves. That’s why, if we were to be saved, it would have to come by grace. But as it is, verse 3, when we gratify ‘the cravings of our sinful nature (ie. our utterly sinful sinful nature) and follow its desires and thoughts, we are, like the rest, objects of wrath, bound for judgment, destined for destruction.’ That’s what we believe – statement six! The unsaved will be raised for final judgment.

4 But because of his great love for us (not because of what we did but because of His unfailing love), God, who is rich in mercy,

5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions (in other words, salvation is SOLELY by grace through faith in Jesus – we were dead in sin! Entirely unable to help ourselves, to live the good, godly lives that would honour our Creator – but God is so rich in mercy that HE made us alive in Christ – He enabled us to partake in eternal life now--it is by grace you have been saved.

6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

7 in order that in the coming ages (after the final judgment, after we have all been raised and those who have believed have gone on to eternal life) he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

God expressed incomparable grace when He made us; He acted with immeasurable patience when we spit in His face; He acted with incomparable love when He sent His Son to redeem us and He will demonstrate His immeasurable goodness when He raises us to eternal life to life with Him forever.

And in case you didn't get it the first time, Paul repeats -

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

8 For it is [solely] by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

We were dead in our sins, bound for destruction, unable to help ourselves but then God sent His only Son to save us and then sent His Holy Spirit to enable us to take hold of that salvation – it is the gift of God, solely by grace, through faith in Christ Jesus.

10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:10 NIV).

Our works have nothing to do with earning our salvation but they are the inevitable response of a truly grateful heart.

And this actually raises an issue that you may have thought of from before. Because in the Revelation passage I read before it said - The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. It actually says that twice (that was verse 12 and then again in 13) each person was judged according to what he had done.

But we believe that we are saved solely by grace and Paul says the same thing so what's going on here? Are we saved by grace or according to what we have done?

I remember having this conversation with Sharon Maksymchuk years ago. When you get to the judgment seat of God, they're going to ask you one question: what did you do with the grace of Jesus? If you took hold of that grace by faith and let it motivate you to acts of goodness, then you're going to hear them say 'well done good and faithful servant, enter into my house forever.' If you believed in Jesus but then took it for granted and didn't really let that change you in any way, I don't think you want to be in that situation. And if you just said 'Oh, I'm counting on my own works to get me into Heaven' or 'sin, what an archaic idea that God would hold you accountable,' well, I hope you brought a fan.

God saved us by grace so that we would extend that grace into the world and those actions, motivated by love, demonstrate that we took this seriously. We are saved by faith; what we did in response, what gets written in the books, demonstrate what we believe.

We believe in sin and judgment but we also believe in salvation by grace.

What do we do with this? How do these truths shape our lives?

Well, one, what have you done with the grace of Jesus? Have you turned from sin to trust in God, taking hold of His grace by faith and letting the Holy Spirit change you from the inside out? Then you are saved, partaking of the eternal life now and looking forward to that glorious resurrection that is to come. If not, I would encourage you to think about and pray about these things very seriously.

Two, let this shape your worldview. I know that it's important and valuable to give people the benefit of the doubt and assume that all people are essentially good, but if you take God at His word when He says that all people have sinned and fallen short of His glory, it makes total sense of the world. You know those magic flashlight/lens things for kids where you're looking at a garbled image and then you take the lens and look through it and it shows you what's behind the static? I think if you were to take one of those and look at every conflict, every injustice, every instance of my interests before yours in the world, you'd find sin at the heart of every one. It just makes sense of the world and enhances our need for a Saviour.

And finally, three, this should really light a fire in us for evangelism. The people that we know who are not saved are lost. Their good works, no matter how good or how many, are not going to save them. They need to hear about sin and judgment and salvation by grace. So I would encourage you – be brave in sharing your faith with others. And even more importantly, be intentional about praying for them. They're not going to be saved by their works but they're not going to be saved by your presentation of the Gospel. The only thing that will save is the work and conviction and new birth of the Holy Spirit, so pray for them, that God would do a mighty work, and then boldly share the Gospel, trusting the Spirit to give the birth.

We believe in sin and judgment, salvation by grace.

BENEDICTION

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 - Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

ⁱ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the community of God*, 412.

ⁱⁱ 21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2Cor 1:21-22 NIV).

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory (Eph 1:13-14 NIV).