

What is Sin?
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Isaiah 1:10-20

I grew up in the mainline Protestant tradition. My father was an American Baptist pastor and later a regional executive in the state of Pennsylvania, where the American Baptist congregations from the rural small town hollows to the big cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia ran a wide theological spectrum. So, I had a broad exposure to different forms of the Christian church, even within our own denomination. That included the more evangelical forms with their heavy emphasis on personal salvation. I even went forward at a Billy Graham rally once, something I have never admitted in public until today, so you heard it here first. A common theme of evangelical preaching and that of revival preaching especially, was the invitation to confess your personal sins, come to Jesus, and “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow.” It was an exclusive focus on personal depravity and personal salvation, with no mention, at least in my experience, of the sins that Isaiah was addressing that needed to be confessed.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

I had no idea at the time that these words about scarlet sins came from Isaiah, a Hebrew prophet. Since it was a “come to Jesus” moment when these words were often used in my hearing, I suppose I assumed maybe this was a personal invitation from Jesus himself (and maybe it was). My point in raising this this morning is that like the way in which so many biblical passages are used and abused, this quote is taken out of context and masks its real meaning. Is it really about confessing my personal sins and taking Jesus as my personal savior, and then everything is going to be OK? Certainly, that seemed to be the message, but hidden from my view was God’s call to work for justice for the oppressed, for the widows and orphans, who were the symbols in those days of all of the common people who were poor, downtrodden, powerless, and abused by the political and all too often religious authorities.

Now, I do not want you to misunderstand me. I am not saying, or even implying, that our personal conduct is not important or of concern to God. It is. My language. My personal habits. My actions. My treatment of others. All of these things and more matter to what I am as a person and as a child of God. Who I am and what I am matter. Who you are and what you are matter.

But as Paul Harvey said so often on his radio show of years ago, “here’s the rest of the story.” Isaiah is perhaps the greatest of the Hebrew prophets. It is no accident that Isaiah appears first among the prophetic readings, immediately following the Psalms and the Wisdom literature of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. What follows is the great prophetic works of people like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, Micah, and eleven others, encompassing about 30 percent of the entire Hebrew Bible. So in the Jewish tradition, the prophets were important. They

were the truth-tellers, the collective conscience of Israel, the ones who reminded both the religious and secular authorities of their moral responsibilities to care for the people, to live up to the ethical principles of the Torah, and not to enrich themselves or to abuse their power—a lesson that could be well-heeded in our national politics today. And their message has remained relevant. Remember that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who is often referred to as a modern day prophet, regularly quoted the prophet Daniel: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

If there was a common theme in the works of the prophets it was “justice and righteousness.” “The morality which the prophets had in mind,” our Baptist brother Walter Rauschenbusch wrote over a century ago, “was not merely the private morality of the home, but the public morality on which national life is founded. They said less about the pure heart for the individual than of just institutions for the nation....The prophets were the heralds of the fundamental truth that religion and ethics are inseparable and that ethical conduct is the supreme and sufficient religious act.

“We are accustomed,” Rauschenbusch continued, “to connect piety with the thought of private virtues: the pious person is the quiet, temperate, sober, kindly person. The evils against which we contend in the churches are intemperance, unchastity, the sins of the tongue.” We could easily update that list to fit the personal sins that bother us today. On the other hand, Rauschenbusch said, “The twin-evil against which the prophets launched the condemnation of Jehovah was injustice and oppression.”

Rauschenbusch went on to say that while the Christianity of his time was heavily concerned with personal sin, God’s concern, especially viewed through the expressions of the prophets, was social sin. As one commentator on the first chapter of Isaiah asked, “What is the relationship between personal and social holiness? Have we separated or prioritized the two?” Often, I think, we emphasize personal sin at the expense of God’s larger concern with social sin and the ultimate task of working for social justice, despite what Glenn Beck once said that if you attend a church that preaches social justice, you better get out of there. I don’t think so.

What did Rauschenbusch mean by social sin? He lists six, and while I don’t have time to go into great detail, I will summarize them. I think, especially in view of the “Affirmation of Values” statement that is printed in your bulletin this morning, our brother Walter can be a helpful guide in our determining how Seattle First Baptist Church can live out these values.

Rauschenbusch wrote that social sin was organized evil that exploits, manipulates, controls, and even kills in order to maintain its own power. And in the last chapter of his *Theology for the Social Gospel* published in 1917, the last year of his life, Rauschenbusch names the six social sins or evils that he says killed Jesus and that continue to kill Jesus in the lives of the people today:

1. Religious bigotry
2. The combination of graft and political power
3. The Corruption of justice
4. Mob spirit and action
5. Militarism
6. Class contempt

Do these have a familiar, even contemporary, ring to them?

1. **Religious bigotry:** The use of religion to demand conformity. There can be no clearer example of this than the proposed national policies aimed at excluding Muslims from the United States.
2. **The combination of graft and political power:** The use of political control for “selfish and predatory ends, turning into private profit what ought to serve the common good,” Rauschenbusch said. The president’s proposed new tax policies that would give trillions of dollars to the well-off while making the poor and the middle class worse off certainly would qualify, as would the favoritism that our city government gives to wealthy land-owners and developers who tear down existing affordable housing replacing it with gleaming towers that enrich their bank accounts.
3. **The Corruption of justice:** Rauschenbusch says that while the existence of injustice in society is bad enough, it is “worse when the social institution set up in the name of justice gives its support to injustice.” The legal system of his day, and of ours, was stacked against the poor and racial minorities. We need only look at the disproportionate rates of incarceration of African-Americans in our prisons to witness the corruption of justice in America today.
4. **Mob spirit and action:** The deliberate manipulation of the masses for destructive purposes. He says that it was this mob spirit and mob action that killed Jesus, egged on by the Pharisees and enabled by Pilate. I believe there is a new mob spirit in our nation today that threatens those who are different racially, religiously, sexually and those who are poor, the most aggrieved of the poor being among the more than 10,000 of our neighbors who will be homeless on the streets of Seattle and King County tonight.
5. **Militarism:** As Jesus stood outside the city before his final entry into Jerusalem, Luke says he wept: “If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had told the people, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.” Omar Bradley, one of our most respected American generals from World War II, once said, “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.”
 When the president presents a budget with a \$54 billion increase in military spending and a \$72 billion cut in social programs, it is easy to see that we are in the grips of a destructive militarism. And it is militarism that is literally killing thousands of Americans due to our neglect of affordable housing, food, education, treatment for mental illness, and help for those who suffer from the trap of drug and alcohol addiction. It is militarism that is killing the least of these, as Jesus called them in Matthew 25, just as it killed him.
6. **Class contempt:** Rauschenbusch says that class pride and class contempt is “the direct negation of solidarity and love.” The class system, he says, “is a sinful denial of the Kingdom of God, and one of the characteristic marks of the Kingdom of Evil.” He predicted in 1917 that if the economic conditions of his day went unchanged that we would ultimately see a rigid class system in America. As we witness the growing economic gap between the 1% and the 99%, the decline of living wage jobs, the millions in our prison systems, the unemployed in Appalachia, the millions of those who are homeless each year, including in our own city – such a system already exists and it is becoming increasingly stratified, primarily due to public policies at the federal, state, and local levels.

These are the social sins that Rauschenbusch said were corrupting our nation in his day, and I would say are corrupting our civil society today.

So what do we do? First, let's call sin sin. Let's get beyond the church's obsession with personal sin as the major barrier to our relationship with God and one another. Yes, confess. Yes, be reconciled with your neighbor. Yes, do your best to remove the personal obstacles that are preventing you from being the child of God that you have been created to be. It's all good! But let's also read our Bible and the unequivocal motifs it presents in both the admonitions of the prophets in the Old Testament and the teachings and example of Jesus in the New, especially in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, to stand in solidarity with the poor, the dispossessed, the marginalized, and the strangers in our land. Let us find the work that God calls us to do, individually and as a congregation, and be about doing it.

We have no better starting place than the Affirmation of Values in today's bulletin, which begins:

Faithful to our Baptist heritage, we strive for a world where people are welcomed regardless of, and with respect for, their religious beliefs; where the separation of church and state is vigorously defended; where freedom is a fundamental right that values the dignity of all persons without regard to their race, country of birth, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, or disabilities; and where compassion is the measure of our actions.

What follows is a prescription for study, prayerful reflection and action by the members of this congregation as we work to be faithful to God's call, as the prophet Micah so succinctly said, "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God." The words are simple. Our challenge is to give them hands and feet and good hearts. And then, if we do, perhaps, though our "sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow."