

## Why We Need Christ

"You shall call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

The preoccupation of the New Testament is not just with who Jesus is, but with what he came to do. He is presented, not simply, as the Lord from heaven, but as the Savior of sinners. The two cannot be separated, for the value of his work depends upon the divinity of his person. So, in order to appreciate what Jesus did we need to understand who we are, as well as who he is. Why do we need him at all? After all, his work, supposedly, was done for us. Was it something we really needed?

***His competence lay in his deity, while our need lay in our sin.*** What we will do this morning is take a look at our need. It is only when we have clearly grasped who and what we are, that we understand the greatness of what he has done for us. That is to say, a medicine is appreciated only in the presence of a sickness. If there is no sickness, it stays on the shelf.

I want to begin by saying, "Sin is not a convenient invention of the minister to keep him or her in a job. Sin is a fact of human experience --everyone's experience. Everyone has been on either side of it --sometimes, on both sides at the same time. We are both the sinner and the "sinned against." We pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

History, yes, even United States history, has convinced most of us that the problem of evil is centered within people themselves, not merely society. It was once widely believed that evil was largely caused by ignorance and bad housing. All one needed to do was apply education and social reform and people would live together in happiness and good will. The idea was that we needed more of the university and less of the church; the reality is that we need both. Indoor plumbing is not bad; it just doesn't have the capacity to make *us* good.

Our hope for eliminating sin through education alone has been shattered by the hard facts of recent history. Educational opportunities have spread rapidly in the western world, yet atrocities have continued, and likely increased. Conflicts are perpetual and sometimes global, political oppression and racial discrimination continue; crime and violence have forced thoughtful people to acknowledge the existence within every person of a hard core of selfishness (self interest). In fact, though we are the best housed and best educated of nations, we boast the highest rate of violent crime when compared to nations such as: Western Europe, Canada, and Japan . In fact, our most recent experiments with "Let's throw the referee out of the game of business and banking" has amply demonstrated that greed is not as noble as we once declared it to be.

Nearly all legislation has grown up because human beings cannot be trusted to settle their own disputes with justice, and without self-interest. A promise is not good enough; we need a contract and a lawyer to interpret it. Doors are not enough; we must put locks and bolts on them. The payment of a fare is not enough; a ticket must be issued, inspected, and collected. Laws are not enough; we need policemen to enforce them, as well as regulatory agencies to keep us honest. And "body cams" to watch the people who watch us. So then, neither education, nor legislation will make bad people good.



Christmas Eve!

**All of this is due to sin. The thesis is this: We need protection from one another.** The Biblical writers are quite clear in saying that sin is universal. In the Temple dedication prayer, Solomon said, "There is no one who does not sin. Surely, there is not a righteous person on earth who does good and never sins." Psalm 14 says, "They have all gone astray, there is not one perfectly good person --not one." Now, that is not to say there are not plenty of "religious people" --our solution for everything is to "get more religious." It never makes us more righteous.

Again, the Psalm writer said, "Lord, if you should mark sins, who could stand? Do not judge your servant, for there is not a living person who is righteous before you." The prophets, also, insisted that all of us are sinners; "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone of us to his own way."

This is not just the fancy of Old Testament writers; Paul opened his letter to the Roman church with a closely reasoned argument which extends over the entire first three chapters. He concluded that all people, indiscriminately, Jews and Gentiles, heathen and cultured are sinners.

The Jew has the law --which he has broken. The pagan has his conscience --which he has violated. There is no real difference, all have fallen short of God's goodness and their own standards. John is very explicit, saying that, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and we make God a liar."

**The universality of sin is clear, but what is sin? What is the nature of it?** Sin groups itself into two categories: Wrongdoing that is negative, and wrongdoing that is positive. One aspect is regarded as a lapse, a slip, a blunder -- "whoops." The other aspect is viewed as a transgression or trespass, which is a willful crossing over a clearly marked boundary line. It is a stepping onto land that you know you should not be on --getting over on someone else's property. This positive aspect is represented in lawlessness. The law is set up as a line, then we deliberately step over the line.

Both of these ideas imply the existence of a moral standard. Sin is either an ideal we *fail to reach*, or it is a law that we break. James puts the failure aspect this way, "Whoever knows what is right to do, and fails to do it is guilty of sin."

It may surprise you to know that the Bible accepts the fact that people have different standards. The Jews had the Law of Moses, while the Gentiles had the law of their conscience. Yet, all people have broken the law that *they* know; all people have fallen short even of *their own* standard. It may be the law of Moses, or the law of Christ; it may be the decent thing to do, or the thing that's done; it may be the taboo of society. Whatever it is --whatever our ethical code, we have not succeeded in keeping it. We are all self-condemned.

So that, "with what judgment we judge, we shall be judged." Good-living people take this as a great surprise. They have their ideals and they think that they attain them --more or less. They do not indulge in much introspection. They are aware of certain character deficiencies within themselves, but they are no worse than other people. --And, they are willing to settle for that.

**All of this is understandable enough until we remember two things.** *First*, our sense of failure depends on how high our standard is in the first place. It's quite easy to consider yourself a good high jumper if you never raise the bar over knee-high. *Second*, God concerns himself with the thought behind the deed --with the motive behind the action. Jesus clearly taught this in the Sermon on the Mount. You cannot have Christianity without the Sermon on the Mount; it is the thesis of Christianity as given by Christ.

With these two principles in mind, it should prove healthy to look at the 10 commandments to see how far short every person falls.

1. **"You shall have no other gods before me."** This is God's demand for exclusive worship. We exonerate ourselves on this one because we have not worshiped the sun, moon, or stars. We have not worshiped Baal, or bowed down to Buddha. But we do worship gold in the form of investment, and make gods out of wood and stone in the form of property and possessions. We idolize people; it was out of astonishment that John Lennon said about the Beatles, "We're more popular than Jesus Christ." Their thinking was: "Isn't that crazy?" We could add, "And so is the Indianapolis Speedway." What makes a thing wrong is when it displaces God –and most often it does, even when we say "it doesn't." The fact is, there are times for everyone that these things do displace God. For example, if the new, improved Church were to stand back and take a good look at its gods, they would be greed, glamour, greatness, and power. Perhaps, entertainment, as well. All have been cleverly incorporated into our new, improved version of Christianity. It is a great nuisance trying to keep them out.

Sin is fundamentally the promotion of self at the expense of God. To keep this commandment, Jesus said we must "Love the Lord our God with *all* of our heart, mind, and soul." No one has ever fully kept this commandment.

2. **"You shall not make for yourself a graven image."** And we have never made a metal image with our hands, but what mental images do we hold in our minds? This commandment implies that we are not to let our worship become external and physical; we must keep it internal and spiritual.

When we pray, have we really prayed? When we worship, have we really worshiped? When we read the Bible, has God spoken to us? This commandment says our relationship with God must not be "out there," where a statue may stand, This is not something you "study or examine" out there at arm's length. It must be within. Our relationship with God is not a thing to be "put on display" to impress others. "They who worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth." It is no good to approach God with our symbols, evangelical language, and religious imagery, **if our hearts are far away.** No one has fully kept this.

3. **"Do not take the Lord's name in vain."** And we do not swear, but to take God's name in vain is a matter of thought and deed, also. When our behavior is inconsistent with our belief, or our practice contradicts our preaching, we do take on God's name for nothing --we take it "in vain." To call him Lord, and take no orders from him, is to take that name in vain. To call him Father and fail to trust him, is to take his name for nothing. We say that God has great power, but we act as if those in congress have more. Whenever we talk one way and act another, we take his name in vain.
4. **"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."** The Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday are a divine institution. It is not just a convenient social arrangement; it is God's plan. He made the Sabbath for man. Man's body and mind need rest and diversion from work (we call it recreation), while man's spirit needs the opportunity to worship, to consider, to think, to meditate, to heal"
5. **"Honor your father and mother."** It is not our job to discover what is the weakest, most foolish thing our parents ever did. Children must allow their parents a "wee bit" of humanity, hoping that their own children will one day, do the same for them. No one has perfectly kept this commandment.

6. **"Thou shalt not kill."** Jesus said, "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer." Again, it is the feeling behind the deed that gets the attention. If looks could kill, most of us would be dead.
7. **"Thou shalt not commit adultery."** Again, it is the thought, "everyone who looks at a woman (or man, if the Bible were written today) lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." When President Carter said, "I have committed adultery in my heart," I didn't think it was a good political statement; but, I knew it to be a true and honest statement. Of course, President Carter turned out to be a true and honest person; a peacemaker --that rarely works in politics. Perhaps, the two don't go together! I can tell you, Jesus didn't pick politics as his "modus-operandi." Why do you think that is? Yet, we're all thankful for the people who try to please us all --we wish them luck.
8. **"Do not steal."** There are many ways to do that. Tax evasion, not working when you're being paid to, taking from the company, paying an unfair wage. Most shop lifting is done by employees. Now, many of us feel the C.E.O.s have found a "legal" way to steal from the stockholders. Arthur Hugh Clough wrote: "Thou shalt not kill, but need'st not strive officiously to keep alive. Thou shalt not steal --an empty feat; when it's more lucrative to cheat."
9. **"Do not bear false witness against your neighbor."** To kill is to rob a person of his or her life. To commit adultery is to rob a person of his or her home and honor. To steal is to rob a person of his or her possessions. To bear false witness is to rob his or her reputation.

This commandment applies in our courts; it includes perjury, slander, and libel for the "big timers." However, it also includes many, many misdemeanors. Idle-talk, exaggeration, distortions of the truth, dropping a hint, embellishment, listening to rumors you know to be false, not correcting untrue statements, spreading "conspiracy theories". Where do these people get this stuff? It includes "tittle-tattle" in its crude state, or its refined state. And remember, "people say" is not evidence to support truth --it's just a little saying to use when you have no support for what you're saying. We do it by our silence, as well as by our speech. Everyone has broken this commandment.
10. **"Thou shalt not covet."** This is a "capping off;" it turns us inward. Civil law can not touch us for covetousness, only for theft. Covetousness lurks in the heart and mind. It is what lust is to adultery, and what temper and hate are to murder.

So much takes place beneath the surface of our lives --in the secret places of our minds, concealed from others, and often from ourselves. A full three-quarters of the iceberg is below the water line. Yet, God's eye penetrates to the deep recesses of our hearts, "All things are open and bare before the eyes of him with whom we have to do."

This was the reason for the law --to show us our need. For "through the law comes the knowledge of sin." That is how we are; that is why we need Christ. Not just to save us from hell, but, as Christians, to save us from our sin. It is the missing part of much Christianity. "And thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins." This is why we need Christ. He came to do exactly what I needed him to do for me. Christmas is a must because of our desperate need. Plan now to make Christmas count this year.

"Unto you a child is born, a Son is given; thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins."