

About 3 weeks ago, totally out of the blue, Jill asked me a different kind of question: “*What is Sin?*” I smiled and said “Wow! Really?” She said “Well, I just wondered because I don’t hear you talk about it much.” I laughed and responded that I thought I talked about it a lot! But she was correct: I do not use that word very often. She said that I should do a sermon about it. I thought that was a good idea, and told her that I would get to it in January. All that brings us to today. Now I realize that this might take a bit longer than one 18-minute message. But hopefully this can be a start for us today.

Before getting back to our Scripture lesson from Genesis, which was chosen because it is actually the very first time we see the word SIN in the Bible, before digging in to Cain and Abel I need to explain one big problem with the whole idea of sin and sins. What is the problem? Well, it goes like this. Almost 40 years ago I was with my parents and my only Grandmother that I ever knew. She was an old Baptist from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I guess she liked a TV preacher named “Rev. Ike” if anyone remembers that guy. But she had heard that I was going to be doing a sermon at my home church, and she decided to ask me a crucial question: “Richard, are going to preach about the sin of long hair?” Well, my hair was pretty long then, back in 1978. I did respond to her by saying “Well Gramma, probably not. The way I see it, Jesus had long hair, and hitler had short hair, so I don’t think I will go with that idea.” The sin of long hair!

Do you know what the biggest problem is with the idea of SINS plural? Well, the problem seems to be that everyone has a different list! Here my Gramma thought that “long hair” was a sin. Women not wearing a dress but a pants-suit was a sin. People playing cards or dancing or going to a movie, all of these things were sins for many people. Frankly, from a fairly young age, probably in high school, I started to hear about everyone’s

differing lists of sins, because high school kids sometimes have their own lists, which often come from their parents. But even back then I thought “Boy, this whole sins thing seems to be a fairly inexact science!”

So we have a bit of a problem: First, does the whole thing boil down to a list of things you shouldn't do? Is it about a list? Who has the correct list of what is a sin and what is not? Doesn't it make sense that if people seem to have very different lists of sins that maybe we have more work to do with the entire concept? It has to be more than just the thoughts of an individual about the nature of a sin. I have 50 things I would like for us to think about, but we cannot go into that great depth right now. But allow me to lay out a few things for us that might be helpful. BTW, this thought popped into my head last week and I think it is a good one: what would you do if your child or grand-child or neighbor or someone approached you and asked “Is such and such thing a Sin?” I asked one person from our congregation what she would do to try to answer that question, and she said “I would ask Google!” That answer makes sense these days, but we need to go beyond that.

First of all, in the Bible we have a key Greek word that we translate as “sin.” The word “hamartia” actually means to “miss the mark.” It's like you are shooting an arrow at a target, and it comes up short. You miss. That doesn't sound like that big of a thing, and yet people like St. Paul are going to say very frightening things about the idea of Sin. Sin leads to death. Sin is automatically in us. Paul says lots of things about sin. I was reading the thoughts of a religious teacher who explained that sin is actually a religious concept. It is not simply a moral issue. It is not simply a legal issue. Is speeding a sin? Is jay-walking a sin? I don't know. I read these helpful words: “A sin is actually an offense against God.” That is a good thing to know, although

it is again pretty foggy for us to think about what it is that offends the Creator of the Universe! Once again, there is more work to do here.

The first time we ever see the word SIN in the Bible is in Genesis 4, the story we know as Cain and Abel. This story seems simple enough. It starts out telling us that after God has taken Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, they quickly know each other, and Eve has a baby. She names him Kayin which basically means “Got One” because she says that now she has “got one just like the LORD.” She very quickly as another baby boy, and she names him Hevel. This is kind of a terrible name. Why? Well, what is Hevel? It is a biblical Hebrew word, and we know what it is, especially today. We have already seen lots of Hevel today. When? Every time we exhaled outside. What do we see? A cloud of vapor. What happens to it? It quickly vanishes. Unfortunately the same thing is going to happen to this brother!

We are told that the two brothers grow up to be farmers, Kayin or Cain is a crop farmer like his father. Hevel, or Abel takes care of sheep and goats. We’re told that both offer a sacrifice to God of their work, and God likes the sheep better than the corn. So Kayin gets mad, the first time we see this in the Bible. A good translation from the original story says this:

“Why are you so distressed, and why is your face fallen?”

“Surely if you do right there is uplift,

“But if you do not do right Sin couches at the door-

“It’s urge is toward you, yet you can be its master.”

Well, we know what happens next. Kayin says something to his brother and takes him in the field and kills him. We all

know this story. It sounds normal enough. But do we realize how terrible this really is? From the opening words of the Bible, there have been no deaths in Creation. And then we see this story and we realize that the first death in the Bible is not from natural causes. The first death of all comes by human hands, and actually from a family member! What does that say about human beings? There is painful irony here regarding humans. Adam and Eve ate the fruit, possibly because they wanted to be like God and live forever. But instead of living forever, their babies grow up to kill. What does that say about us?

We should notice that when God speaks to Cain, he tells him ***“If you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master.”*** At least according to this, it is suggested that we have been given the free will to control ourselves. We have been given control of what we do. But what will we do?

Let me close this up for now by suggesting that we really let something soak in: This Bible of ours tells us in a very early story that death comes into the world, not from old age or natural causes, but from HUMAN hands, and human will. I am not suggesting that we take every word of this story literally, but I am asking us to take it seriously. We humans have some issues. We tend to think that if only everyone else would straighten up, then the world would change. But it seems that we are all in the same boat here. And we must ask the question, what is human nature? Are we by nature good, or neutral, or are we bad? This is a tough thing for us to deal with, but we cannot just wander off and watch TV. Again I ask us all, what do we say when a younger family member or neighbor asks the question, “Is this action a sin?” Will we have at least some understanding to say something helpful? Let’s do the work. See you next week for the conclusion! AMEN.