

## Threads

The Sinfulness of Man

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## THE SINFULNESS OF MAN Romans 3:12, 3:23, 6:23

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to Romans 3. And let me also invite you to pull out the Worship Guide you received when you came in as well as one of these booklets that says "Threads" on the front. If you don't have one of these booklets, much like we've done the last couple of weeks, we are going to reference this during our time together today, and you'll want to have one of these. So if you didn't grab one when you came in, let me invite you simply to raise your hand and one of our ushers will bring one to you.

And just to give you a heads up, we've got a ton of ground to cover this morning, so we're going to be moving at a pretty rapid pace. We are now in the middle of a series we're calling "Threads" where we are encouraging one another to weave the gospel intentionally into the fabric of our daily conversations with everyone around us, and specifically in conversations with people who don't know Christ, whom we are praying will come to know Christ. We have people that we have identified – even written down their names – on the inside of this booklet who we long to see come to Christ. And we trust that God has put them in our sphere of influence for a reason.

If you are here this morning and not a Christian, let me let you in on a secret: You may be on someone's list that they are praying for and wanting to share God's love with. And we don't want to hide that, nor do we want you to be intimidated by that. This is the simply the overflow of belief in Jesus. When people believe that Jesus has died on a cross for sins and risen from the grave in victory over sin so that everyone who turns from their sin and themselves and trusts in Jesus as Savior and Lord will be restored to God forever -- will receive eternal life now and forever -- and will be saved from eternal death, then we believe the best way we can love you is by sharing this good news with you. It would be the height of hate to believe this is true and then not say anything to you about it.

### Encouragement ...

#### Be authentic ...

So we want to be intentional about sharing the gospel with you. And this is the encouragement: For followers of Christ in this series – and I put a few particular words of encouragement in your notes – one be authentic. The whole purpose behind this "threads" imagery is to encourage one another to fill natural conversations with supernatural truth, to talk about the supernatural gospel in the context of natural conversations. And this doesn't have to be forced, and it doesn't have to be weird. So the picture is not every other phrase saying, "Praise the Lord! Glory to God! Praise the Lord!" Our goal is not to be annoying, but to be authentic. The illustration behind "threads" is brothers and sisters working in a Muslim context in the Middle East who told me that their whole goal was to weave threads of the gospel into the fabric of everyday interactions with Muslims, like different colors in a quilt,

praying that one day they will see the tapestry of God's glory and grace in Christ that has been woven in front of them.

So we want to look for opportunities to fill natural conversations with supernatural truth, all the while embodying the life of Christ as we talk about the love of Christ. Embody the life of Christ as you talk about the love of Christ. It makes no sense to be weaving gospel threads into our conversations while being selfish, moody, ornery, angry, lazy, and a host of other attitudes and actions that actually undercut the gospel we're trying to share. People long to see a demonstration of Christ that accompanies our explanation of Christ. May we be authentic in our words and our actions.

### **Be obedient ...**

And let's be obedient. And this is where I want to pause and share a few of the stories that you have sent in over the last week. So I mentioned last week that I'm asking you to share stories of ways you are weaving gospel threads into your conversations, and what effect that is having. And here's the deal: Some think, "Well, I haven't had success yet in sharing the gospel. I've been sharing, but no one's really responded." And that's where I want to encourage you to redefine your understanding of success. Success is obedience. Success is not just when someone turns from their sin and trusts in Christ. Success is when you speak the gospel as God has called and equipped you to speak the gospel. And sometimes there is great, open response, and sometimes there's not. What matters most, though, is your obedience.

So some of you sent stories in even of small steps that have happened this last week. Small steps with co-workers who are going through difficult times and for the first time this last week they asked you to pray with them and for them. Others of you have had steps with bosses who for the first time you had a real conversation with, and you were able to turn that conversation to gospel truths. Stories of you weaving the gospel with co-workers, neighbors, and even former neighbors who are everything from devout Muslims to nominal Catholics to cultural Christians who don't know Christ.

So keep sharing stories and keep being obedient. I put two reasons for this in particular in your notes. One, because sharing the gospel leads to others' eternal salvation. So listen to this story from a member in our faith family:

My dad became a policeman as a young man with small children, eventually leaving that line of work for one with more freedom and less bosses, truck driving. He was a hard drinker and smoker, an alcoholic, not interested in parenting his children, and I was very vocal about my disgust with him throughout my teenage years. After I became a Christ follower in my mid 20's however, I felt compelled to humble myself and in obedience to Christ, ask my dad to forgive me for being the daughter I had been to him, explaining the "heart-change" God had just performed in me. This was the first "thread". He in return asked for my forgiveness, which was amazing since he had never, ever admitted any wrong-doing!

Over the years, he heard the gospel numerous times, from me, from pastors, from Godly men who were recovering alcoholics, to no avail, or so I thought. But I know now these people over the last 30 years were used by God to keep weaving a tapestry of grace in front of him.

Yet dad still didn't yield to Christ. Three years ago, my dad was forced to go into a nursing home, being unable to care for himself anymore. At that point,

my husband and I became his "care-givers", providing his practical needs and visiting him as much as we could, trying to help him see that chances were slipping away for him to be ready to meet God...but he would either change the subject or say he didn't want to talk about it.

A few weeks ago, he started to sharply decline, and two weeks ago, on Sunday, Feb. 3 (the first Sunday of this series), my husband and I went to spend some time with him. Unbeknownst to one another, both my husband and I had put dad's name at the top of our lists. So on that Sunday, my husband and I talked to dad about Jesus almost the entire time. But still, my dad was unwilling to repent.

Then Tuesday afternoon, the nursing home called me to say my dad was very ill, and his white blood count was extremely high. I drove to the hospital ER, and spoke immediately to the doctor. After sending my dad for a CT scan of his abdomen, he called me out of his room and told me "it's bad news." Dad had a perforated bowel and there was a big decision to make. My dad could take a chance on making it through surgery, but with his severe emphysema he would likely never come off of the ventilator. If he elected not to have surgery, he would pass away within 24-48 hours.

I told my dad what his two options were and he said, "I don't want to have surgery." I said, Dad, you know that you will meet Jesus very soon, don't you?" He said he did. I then asked him if he wanted to receive Christ's forgiveness and salvation from the penalty of his sins, and for the first time in his life, my dad said "YES"! So dad prayed...he told God that he knew he was a sinner, and he asked God to save him based on Christ taking his place and punishment on the cross.

Dad went into a coma about 90 minutes later and died the next afternoon. What an encouragement to never, never give up praying and never stop weaving gospel threads! By the way, my 78 year old unsaved uncle was in the ER room with us when dad and I prayed, and when we said Amen, he was wiping his eyes...more threads in his life! God is surely a merciful God of unfathomable magnitude!

Sharing the gospel leads to others' eternal salvation. So don't give up and don't stop. And knowing that not one person on your list is guaranteed tomorrow, share the gospel with urgency. Eternity is at stake here.

But sharing the gospel doesn't just lead to others' eternal salvation. Sharing the gospel leads to our personal satisfaction. Is there anything more glorious, more joyful, more exhilarating in this life than seeing someone we know and love (even someone we just met) have their life turned upside down for eternity? What is more satisfying than this? To see my friend a couple of weeks ago turn from sin and trust in Christ, with tears of eternal joy swelling in his eyes and my eyes! To hear this daughter's joy in seeing her dad saved. And praise God, I've heard other stories this week about some of these people on these lists coming to Christ and your joy as you share about that! And even just the process -- as we just talked about, just being obedient to God in sharing the gospel -- there is joy in obedience!

The call to share the gospel is not just for others' good; it's for our good. I'll share one great story here. A mom writes:

Our family was eating at Zaxby's, and my 10 year old son told us that he had an idea for a Bible Study. He wanted to share the gospel with some of his friends. So there at Zaxby's, he called us to prayer. We put down our food and held hands and he said a few sentences from his heart to God. He was straight to the point, "Lord I have this idea. I want it to be about you. I pray for the courage to do it if it is from you." That's not an exact quote, but it's pretty close to what he prayed.

Then on the way home, he said, "Mom I keep hearing in my mind 'It's O.K. you can do this.'" I encouraged him. I told him he couldn't go wrong sharing God's Word because it's God's purpose for his life.

When we came home he went straight to work. His idea was to share the gospel through Legos. He calls it "LEGOs for the LORD." He wanted to read straight from God's word and have his friends build things that were illustrations of what they were reading. He wanted to do the gospel of Mark because that was the book we were reading together as a family, but he also wanted to start from the beginning of creation, so he read John 1 as well. He pre-made some of the legos. For example, he made the letters W O R D in white Legos. (You can see a picture of this on the screen.) He made trees and animals, a cross, throne, mini figures, etc. He then took them apart, put them in zip lock bags, and wrote an instruction sheet for each one. Then he built a stack of colored Legos that would help him explain the gospel. He called and invited 6 of his friends to come over. He followed up with reminder calls the Sat before his first Bible Study on Sunday (last week). He had a list of snacks for me to make. That was the only thing he needed from me. The rest he had all planned out.

I witnessed God do mighty things last Sunday. Two boys came. No doubt exactly who God wanted to be there. (She watched as her 10-yr-old son shared the gospel with these two boys through legos around her kitchen table, and she said) I am so thankful for the passion, courage and follow through that God has given my son. He plans to do this every Sunday afternoon through June.

Don't tell me there's not joy in this! God, give us all faith like this 10-yr-old in our faith family, saying, "What do I like to do? What do others like to do? And how can I share the gospel with them in creative, intentional, consistent ways? For joy!" Oh, let's not waste our lives in casual, comfortable, cultural, keep-Christ-to-yourself religion that misses the whole point of Christianity.

### **Be bold ...**

Let's be obedient, and let's be bold. Remember, this is why the Spirit of God is in us for. The Spirit of God empowers us to speak. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be witnesses -- testifiers -- to truth and love. The Spirit of God is in you, Christian, not to make you silent, but to cause you to speak!

The Spirit of God empowers us to speak, and the gospel of God has the power to save. Do we believe this? The beauty of the gospel -- the good news of what God has done in Christ for sinful men and women -- when we speak this, there is supernatural power accompanying it to draw sinful men and women to Christ. Nothing else we speak has this kind of power. It's why Paul said in Romans 1, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*" Christian, this gospel was

spoken to you, and you believed. So speak this gospel to others, and they will believe. They will believe! Keep speaking it, and 10-year-old friends and 80-year-old dads and devout Muslim, nominal Catholic, cultural Christian neighbors and co-workers will believe!

Do we believe this? I think many times we don't. Our default is almost to think, "Oh, they don't want to hear this. They'll never respond to this. They have no interest in the gospel." But these kinds of thoughts, Christian, deny the power of Christ in the gospel.

## **The Sinfulness of Man** ***Knowing this Gospel Thread ...***

And they lead directly to the thread we are diving into today: The sinfulness of man. So last week we talked about the character of God: The holy, just, and gracious Creator of all things. And we talked about how to weave His character -- His holiness, His justice, and His grace as our Creator -- into the fabric of everyday conversations.

### **We are each created by God, but we are all corrupted by sin.**

So now let's think about this second thread, this second component of the gospel: The sinfulness of man. It's there in your notes, and it's in the Threads booklet: We are each created by God, but we are all corrupted by sin. This truth is answering the question, "Who am I?" that is on the front of the Threads booklet, and is central in every world religion.

So what does the gospel say about who we are? And specifically, what is wrong in the world? Any reasonable person can look around us in the world and realize, "Things are not the way they're supposed to be." And every religion, every worldview -- from atheism and agnosticism to Islam and Hinduism -- has to answer that question.

And the gospel diagnoses the human condition with a paradox that I'm convinced rings true in all of our lives. See the dignity and the depravity of man in this one statement: We are each created by God, but we are all corrupted by sin. So we are created by God -- in the image of God, the Bible says -- in a way that separates us as men and women from animals and nature and everything else in creation. We have the capacity for rational thought, for moral choice; we have a conscience by which we discern good and evil, and an ability to choose between the two. We have a capacity for hard work and artistic creativity. We are innovative and imaginative. We create, we construct, we draw and build, dream and dance, write and make music. And we have a capacity for social relationships; we long for love.

Yet amidst all of these dignified traits, we have a capacity for sinful thoughts and sinful motives and sinful deeds. Yes, we're able to think, choose, create, and love, but we're also able to hate and covet and fight and kill. John Stott said,

Human beings are the inventors of hospitals for the care of the sick, of universities for the acquisition of wisdom, and of churches for the worship of God. But they have also invented torture chambers, concentration camps, and nuclear arsenals. This is the paradox of our humanness. We are both noble and ignoble, both rational and irrational, both moral and immoral, both creative and destructive, both loving and selfish, both Godlike and bestial.

And it's true of all of us. And this is key; this is so huge. How we diagnose the human condition, including the human problem, will have everything to do with how we discern the solution to the problem, and how we identify what we most need.

### **We have rebelled against God.**

And so follow with me. See how the gospel diagnoses the human condition: People created by God, but corrupted by sin. What does that mean, "Corrupted by sin?" Well, it means that we have rebelled against God. At the end of quite an exhaustive treatment of the sinfulness of man, Romans 3:12 says, "*All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*"

Now that is a stinging indictment of humanity. Some would say it is an unfair indictment. No one does good? Really? Well, the key to understanding what that means in the end of that verse is going back to the beginning of the verse, when the Bible says, "*All have turned aside.*" And this is where we realize what it means that no one does good. It means that none of us has glorified God as God. We have all rejected Him as God. In each of our lives, we have rebelled against Him as God.

This is the picture of the very first sin in Genesis 3. It's almost like Adam and Eve said, "Even if God said we're not going to eat from that tree, we're going to do it anyway. He's not Lord over us. We can do what we want." This is the God who beckons storm clouds and they come. The God who tells the wind and the rain when to blow and fall and they do it immediately. The God who says to the mountains, "You go here", and to the seas, "You stop there", and they do it. Everything in all creation responds in obedience to the Creator until you get to man, and you and I have the audacity to look at God in the face and say, "No." We have all turned away God to ourselves.

And this is the essence of sin: Self. God's order is that we put Him first, our neighbor next, and self last. And sin is the reversal of that order: Ourselves first, our neighbors -- often for selfish gain -- and God somewhere (if anywhere) in the distant background. We have all turned away from God's ways to our ways. We have all turned away from God's worship to our worship.

Now we probably wouldn't put it that way -- no one would naturally want to say, "I worship myself" -- but just look around at our lives and just listen to our vocabulary. Literally, there are hundreds of words that start with self: Self-centered, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-advertisement, self-gratification, self-glorification, self-pity, self-applause, self-will, self-motivation and so on. Apparently, we need a rich vocabulary to express the extent of our preoccupation with ourselves.

Now this manifests itself in many ways, but I want to point out two general ways that I put in your notes. One way our rebellion against God is shows itself is that it is manifested in self-indulgence. This is what I'll call the irreligious. Many people rebel against God by living life however they want, according to their own rules. They delight, in a sense, in breaking all the rules, and in doing whatever they want. They are indulging in whatever pleasures, whatever pursuits, whatever possessions, whatever it is their hearts desire. And this self-indulgence plays out in all kinds of ways, particularly in a wealthy culture like ours.

But then there's an equally sinful, maybe even more dangerous, expression of our rebellion against God that is manifested in self-righteousness. These are people who I'll call the religious. Whether in Christianity or many other religions in the world, these are the people that try to do whatever God wants. These are the people who strive for good (and for God) by keeping all the rules. And many supposed Christians fall into this category. Many

professing Christians live their entire lives assuming, believing that if they live morally, then God will bless and save them. If they pray, if they read, if they worship, then God will bless and save them. But don't miss it: Even this is actually rebellion against God, because this involves living in an attempt to save yourself. You're just doing it through good works for God.

And self-righteousness like this misses the gospel just as much as self-indulgence does. And all of us fall into one – or both – of these categories. The core problem in all of our lives, whether we love to break the rules or we try to keep the rules, is that it's all about us. We have turned away from God to ourselves. And we thought this would be good for us; we thought this would be wise for us.

Whether in self-indulgence or self-righteousness, we thought this would lead to our good, but what we didn't realize is that what we thought would lead to freedom has led each of us into slavery. Jesus said in John 8:34, "*I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.*" Romans 6 later talks about how apart from Christ, we are slaves to impurity and lawlessness, to this rebellion.

And it makes sense when you think about it. Here's an easy example. An alcoholic: Slave or free? A slave, right? Without question. The alcoholic begins drinking, thinking that this is the path to freedom and satisfaction, but before they know it, that path to freedom and satisfaction is actually enslaving them, leading to their ruin.

Now that seems easy to recognize, but all sin is the same way. For some it may be lust, for others it may be pride, for some it may be anger, for others it may be the effort to climb the corporate ladder, or to have the nicer possessions, or to experience the greater luxuries. We run after things in this world, temptations in this world, thinking that we're free, thinking that this is where we'll finally be happy in her or in him, in this achievement or that accomplishment, in this state or that situation. But what we don't realize is that we're blinded to our own bondage. We are engrossed in a bottomless quest where the drinks will never fully satisfy, the lusts will never fully gratify, the ego will never be stroked enough, the anger will never be pacified enough, and all our pursuits of joy and freedom in the passions, pleasures, and possessions of this world are only symptoms of a deeper slavery where we are rebelling against the only One who can satisfy our souls.

And lest you think that you are immune to these things, this is even more vicious when it comes to self-righteousness, where we've convinced ourselves that if we pray enough, worship enough, and do enough good things, then this will cancel out the other.

### **We are separated from God.**

No matter how much good we do, the reality is -- and it's the second part of this thread there in your notes -- no matter how much good we do, the reality is that we are separated from God. Look down a bit further in Romans Chapter 3, and underline Romans 3:23: "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Because of our sin against God, we are separated from God.

This is the point of the imagery on the back of this Threads booklet. It's obviously all drawn out here, but if I were drawing this from the beginning -- and this is why it's numbered the way it is -- I would start with God as holy. He is perfect, pure, and infinitely good. And then, with the reality that we have rebelled against God, we are separated from God. All of us, in our sin, are separated from God.

And we know this – instinctively, inside our hearts – we know that the way the Bible diagnoses the human condition is true. Think about the effects of sin in our lives, and the varied ways that sin has separated us from God. You look back at the introduction of sin into the world in Genesis 3 with Adam and Eve, and you will see the varied effects of sin. I put them there in your notes, and these are emotional reactions to sin that are familiar to all of us. One is guilt. As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, the Bible says they realized they were naked. There was an immediate loss of innocence. And such guilt is a universal emotion that we have all experienced, knowing right and wrong, and knowing that we are guilty of wrong in our lives.

Now there are a lot of people who try to deny that there is any such thing as right and wrong, but even they are trapped by the conscience God has written on their hearts. They set out to prove there is no such thing as right and wrong and that all ethics are relative and arbitrary, but they wind up saying it is right for you to agree with them and wrong for you to disagree with them. No one can successfully erase the sense of “ought” that God has written on every human soul. Everyone senses that he or she “ought” to do certain things and not others. And the failure to do what we “ought” to have done we call guilt.

And there are all kinds of ways we try to overcome guilt. Intellectual ways: We convince ourselves that we’ve just placed unrealistic expectation on ourselves. Of course, we fail and do wrong, but we’re only human and it is unreasonable to expect that. So lower your expectations and you’ll have less guilt. Or one of the other common approaches of our day is to say that our moral principles are outdated. “You can solve your guilt problem if you stop living in the ethical dark ages. Greed is not a bad thing; it’s part of ambition. Exalting your self is the name of the game; it’s right to work hard and promote yourself, so don’t feel bad about it. Lust is natural for men and women, sex is expected regardless of marriage.” And the list goes on and on. We solve our guilt problem by redefining what is right and wrong.

Then there are physical ways. We may use drinking or drugs to escape our guilt. Or maybe it’s not that extreme. Maybe we get so busy so that we don’t have time to address our guilt. Maybe we devote ourselves to games and hobbies and sports so that we can make light of our guilt. Maybe we keep the TV or music on all day or night as a constant barrage of sound and sight that guards us from the silence of a guilty soul. Or maybe, most dangerous of all, as we’ve talked about, we cover up our guilt with religion. Maybe we recognize what intellectual and physical strategies for covering guilt generally ignore: That the ultimate cause of guilt is that there is a broken relationship with God. And so the means for dealing with guilt, then, is appeasing God with good works. So we placate God with our religious performance, thinking that we can balance this thing out. Yet deep down inside, despite all our zealous efforts, we know that guilt still separates us from God.

And not just guilt, but shame. A second emotional reaction to sin in Genesis 3 as Adam and Eve immediately tried to cover themselves. Our honor before God is lost; we who were created in the image of God have seen that image marred by sin.

Leading to a third emotional reaction of fear. Adam and Eve found themselves hiding from God, afraid of appearing before God in accountability for sin. This is a fear that’s echoed around in the world in different ways. In animistic and tribal peoples, I’ve seen this expressed in dances and prayers and festivals and sacrifices to keep various spirits and gods appeased. Witch doctors and priests hold spiritual sway over entire peoples who are captivated by fear. And it may look different among us, but there’s no question that fears of sickness, pain, disease, disaster, fears of failure, loneliness, and emptiness, and ultimately the fear of death that pervades many of our lives. Woody Allen joked about it. He said, “It’s

not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." But later, with his comedic guard down, he said, "The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror, and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless."

Again, we do all that we can to do deny these effects of sin – to cover them up – to say that our sin is not that big a deal, but the Bible is clear that what we think is a relatively minor issue is actually an infinitely major problem. We think, "Well, we're not that bad." This exposes the deception lurking within our hearts that sinfulness is relative, and certainly there are many worse sinners out there than me. You know terrorists and murderers and a whole host of other people are far worse than me.

But this is where we realize that we are making a huge error in our thinking. We are thinking about sin as it relates to each other instead of sin as it relates to God. But the reality is, one sin, no matter how small we might classify it, against an infinitely holy God is infinitely serious before God, causing infinite separation from God. One sin – any sin – involves looking in the face of God and saying, "Your law is not good, my judgment is better, your authority does not apply in my life, I am above your jurisdiction, and I defy you; I insult your holiness." This is what's involved in one sin, and we have committed millions of them in this room. What we think is a relatively minor issue is actually an infinitely major problem.

Turn over that Threads booklet again and put this all together. Number 1: God is holy. He is perfectly good, perfectly pure, and incomparable in glory. We – number 2 – have rebelled against God, and number 3, are separated from God. You say, "Well, why doesn't God just forgive us and bring us back to Himself? After all, He's loving, right?" Well yes, of course He is infinitely loving, and we'll get to that, but look at this next characteristic of God. Number 4: He is just. He is a good judge. Proverbs 17:15 says He justifies the innocent, and He condemns the guilty. He's a good Judge, and because He is just, He must condemn the guilty.

So are you and I innocent or guilty before this God? We are guilty. Every one of us guilty of sin before an infinitely just God, and therefore deserving of infinitely eternal condemnation from God. That is what His justice requires. This is why we said last week that forgiveness is for God the profoundest of problems. For at the moment He says to guilty sinners, "You are innocent," He compromises His own character as just and righteous and holy. Remember: If a judge on a bench in our courtrooms today said to guilty criminals who came before Him, "You are innocent," we would have that judge off the bench in a heartbeat. Why? Because he's not just. So why we would think that God, the perfectly good and right and just Judge of the universe, could do anything different than say, "Guilty, infinitely" to infinitely guilty sinners.

### **We are dead without God.**

That, then, leads to number 5: We are dead without God. Dead. Turn over three chapters and underline this verse in your Bible; memorize this verse: "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Now obviously we'll get to that second part in a moment, but focus for this moment on the first part: "the wages/the payment of sin is death." Oh, what we thought would lead to freedom has only led to slavery. What we think is a relatively minor issue is actually an infinitely major problem.

And ultimately, in our sin, what we thought would lead to life has led each of us to death. This is expressed in two primary ways. One, eventual physical death. Remember that physical death was not a part of the original picture in Genesis 1-2. Physical death entered

the world as a result of sin. We die because we are sinners. But even that is not primarily what Romans 6:23 is talking about. Romans 6:23 is not merely talking about eventual physical death; Romans 6:23 is talking about eternal spiritual death. In our sin, we are separated from God, not just now, but forever. Because we have committed even just one sin before an infinitely holy God, and because He is just, we warrant an infinitely eternal sentence. We are dead without God; dead in our sins, Ephesians 2:1 says.

And don't miss this; please don't miss this. As a result of our deadness in sin, we are completely unable to save ourselves. How can someone who is dead bring himself to life? How many of you one day, before you were born, decided, "I think I'd like to be born right now." It's impossible, right? It's impossible to give yourself life. Someone else has to do that for you.

Now we are getting to the core of the gospel, ladies and gentlemen. You cannot save yourself. We cannot save ourselves. No matter how much we pray, how much we read or study the Bible, how much we go to church and worship, no matter how much good we do in the world, we are dead without God. And we need Him to give us life.

And praise be to God, this is what He does for us! Number 5 on the back of that Threads booklet: We are dead without God, eternally condemned by a just God, but then, number 6, God is gracious. In Titus 2:11, the text says, "*The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.*" God is gracious. God shows free and unmerited favor to the guilty. This gracious God has sent His Son, Jesus, to pay the price for our sins, to die in our place, so that you and I might turn from our sin and turn from ourselves and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord, and be restored to God forever!

Oh, I know I'm getting ahead of myself to what we'll talk about next week and the week after, but I'm praying that today some of you might hear this and get this for the first time. I pray that some religious professing Christians would actually get this for the first time today. That some people who may classify yourselves as irreligious might get this for the first time today. Get this: We have rebelled against God, turned away from God to ourselves, and we are separated from Him. Now we have guilt, shame, and fear in our lives all intended to wake us up to this reality. And because God is just, we are condemned before Him in our sin. We are dead and no amount of work on your part and no amount of work on my part can overcome our deadness. But that's the beauty. God has done in Jesus what we could never do for ourselves. So today, I urge you to turn from your sin and yourself and trust in Jesus. Trust in His love for you and His good and gracious Lordship over you.

Oh sinner, God does not offer to meet you in the middle today. God comes all the way to you, and by His grace, if you will believe, He will bring you from death to life. Right now, in your heart, embrace your sinfulness. Stop denying it, stop trying to overcome it, stop trying to cover over it and embrace it. And in the process embrace the Savior who frees you to experience eternal life.

I hope that we are seeing how significant it is to diagnose the human condition rightly in order to understand the gospel truly. If our problem is that simply that we've messed up, and we've done some wrong things, then any old religion with a list of good things to do will suffice. But if our problem is that we are dead without God, then only the gospel of God's grace coming to us will suffice. So then, we must weave this gospel thread clearly and consistently.

But you may be wondering, "How do we do that? Do we just go to people at work and say, 'You need God to save you from your sin and yourself.'" The reality is that most people don't think they need to be saved from anything, and at that moment, the only thing they'll want to be saved from is you!

### ***Weaving this Gospel Thread ...***

#### **Speak respectfully to and about all people as individuals created in the image of God.**

So what does weaving this gospel thread look like in our everyday conversations? And here's a list of ways that we'll run through quickly. But remember, the purpose here is only to get us thinking of more ways, many ways, to talk about the sinfulness of man. But even before getting there, start here: Speak respectfully to and about all people as individuals created in the image of God. So we've talked about, "We are each created by God," and this is a reminder that yes, we are sinful, but there is much evidence of God's goodness in all of us. So we speak to and about other people as individuals fearfully and wonderfully made by God Himself. This applies to the way we talk to and about our spouse, our boss, the president of our country, and terrorists in other countries, for that matter. We undercut the gospel when we speak disrespectfully to and about other people. Gossip always undercuts the gospel.

#### **Look intentionally for opportunities to encourage others by the grace of God.**

And look intentionally for opportunities to encourage others by the grace of God. God's grace is all over other people – all over non-Christians all around us – so build up other people as specially created by God. Let your speech continually reflect an acknowledgement of God's grace in the people around you.

And then, yes, as we've talked about, though we are each created by God, we have been corrupted by sin. All people have been corrupted by sin. We are slaves to sin, dead in sin, and blinded to truth. Do you ever feel just overwhelmed when talking with someone else about the gospel? Maybe you are talking with them about sin and our need to be saved, and they just don't see it? They're blind in their sin, and they won't listen when you talk about sin. And you start to feel hopeless. You start to think, "Nothing is getting through."

And oftentimes, at this point, you're tempted to give up. But this is where I want to encourage you: Don't give up. Because this gospel that we share is not intended to be an easy sell. This is the whole point: We're speaking to people who have rebelled against God, are separated from God, and are dead without God. We would expect people in such a condition to be hard to the gospel, and this is where we find ourselves completely dependent on God to do that which we could never do. Only God can save; only God can soften the heart. Only God can open eyes, and He does when the gospel is proclaimed in the power of His Spirit.

#### **Share confidently in view of the regenerating power of God.**

So third exhortation undergirding really all of these exhortations: Share confidently in view of the regenerating power of God. The God who has the power to create has the power to re-create! And this should give us great confidence in sharing the gospel. Ladies and gentlemen, you can go the hardest hearts in your office, the men or women who want nothing whatsoever to do with God, and you can go to the darkest unreached people group on the planet, whose mindset and culture is set against Christianity in every way, and you

can speak this gospel, and in the power of the Spirit of God, He will bring people from death to life. He will do it! So don't be afraid to talk about sin.

### **Talking about our rebellion ...**

So how do we do it? Well, when it comes to talking about our rebellion, acknowledge the reality of sin in and around you. It is a helpful way to speak to call sin what it is: Sin. We've come up with all kinds of terms to replace sin in the names of what is politically correct or psychologically accepted. We call worry obsessive compulsiveness; we call adultery an affair. We call sinful anxiety simple stress, and we blame evil on conditions and disorders and but sin is sin. Let's call sin sin.

And not just reality, but acknowledge the root of sin in and around you. When something goes wrong in your life or someone else's life or in the world around us, and you're talking about it, maybe even talking about how to fix it, don't let the conversation stay on a surface level. Talk about the core. Every sin is rooted in the heart. Yes, there may be a particular action, something that's said or something that's done, but at the core of that action, there is a heart that is saying, "I want what I want more than what God wants. And I don't believe His Word. And I don't desire to obey His Word." There's belief and desires at the root of sin. So acknowledge that root of rebellion in our hearts that keeps us from obeying God.

This is so important with our kids, right? And it's so important in our culture. And speak about sin like this honestly, and specifically speak honestly about our propensity to sin. Your propensity to sin, my propensity to sin. Whether your child or colleague is caught doing something wrong, say to them, "I'm prone to sin, as well." And be careful not to be selective in the sin that you talk about. It's real easy to talk about sins that you don't struggle with, to talk about this or that form of self-indulgence, all the while blind to your own self-righteousness. So talk about sin in all of its forms. And talk about sin in light of its force. What I mean by this is talk about sin with humility, because you know, you have experienced, and you are prone to its disastrous effects.

### **Talking about our separation ...**

Sin destroys, which leads to talking about our separation. Then, speak humbly about the seriousness of sin. Don't joke about sin in your life or anyone else's life. Don't treat sin lightly in any form or fashion. Don't joke about temptation. Let your conversation be permeated with the seriousness of sin. When something does go wrong, don't minimize those consequences. Highlight the consequences to remind yourself and to communicate to others, yes, there is consequence to sin. And look for opportunities to talk about the infinite consequence of sin – the infinite chasm that separates us from God.

Remember that illustration I used this fall of Azeem, an Arab follower of Christ and friend of mine, who was sharing the gospel recently with a taxi driver in a Muslim country. The driver believed that he would pay for his sin for a little while in hell, but then he would go to heaven. So Azeem said to him, "If I slapped you in the face, what would you do to me?" The driver replied, "I would throw you out of my taxi."

Azeem continued, "If I went up to a random guy on the street and slapped him in the face, what would he do to me?" The driver said, "He would probably call his friends and beat you up." Azeem asked, "What if I went up to a policeman and slapped him in the face? What would he do to me?" The driver replied, "You would be beat up for sure, and then thrown into jail."

Finally, Azeem posed this question, "What if I went to the king of this country, and I slapped him in the face? What would happen to me then?" The driver looked at Azeem and awkwardly laughed. He told Azeem, "You would die." To this Azeem said, "So you see that the severity of punishment is always a reflection of the power of the One who is offended. If you sin against a man, you are guilty and deserve punishment. If you sin against an infinitely holy God, then you are infinitely guilty and you deserve infinite punishment." The driver understood, and then Azeem was able to tell him the magnitude of what Jesus did on the cross.

And then let the effects of sin inform the way you talk about salvation. This is the beauty, and we'll talk more about this two weeks from now, but we looked at three effects of sin: Guilt, shame, and fear. And the gospel addresses all of them in wonderful ways. So let these three emotional reactions to sin become starting points to build a bridge to the beauty of the gospel.

So in conversations about guilt, look for opportunities to build a bridge and begin talking about forgiveness in Christ. In conversations about shame, look for opportunities to talk about honor in Christ. In Christ, our sins are not just forgiven; our honor before God is restored. We go from dirty to clean, from shame to honor, from despair to joy. And then, in conversations about fear, talk about freedom in Christ. You are free from those fears. So talk about the gospel in terms that address sin and its various effects.

### **Talking about our deadness ...**

Finally, in talking about our deadness, what does this look like? Well, in obvious ways, whenever the topic of death comes up in this world, which it inevitably will, how do we speak? Russ Moore said, "At a funeral the church is perhaps at its most theological." So how do we talk about death? How do we respond? First, respond to the death of non-Christians. And my encouragement for us is to talk about the death of people who didn't know Christ, first, with appropriate honor. So in no way to denigrate someone in their death. Even the worst of people, as we've seen, are created in the image of God and given grace from God.

So speak with appropriate honor, yet biblical honesty. This means we have to guard against this dangerous temptation that comes out, particularly here in the religious South, when it comes to death, to start talking like everyone goes to heaven. Biblically, it's not true. People who die in their sin and have not trusted in Jesus as Savior and followed Him as Lord, die eternal spiritual death.

Now obviously, no one but God ultimately knows the state of a person's heart. So speak with personal humility, knowing that like the thief on the cross or the 80-yr-old dad mentioned earlier, maybe they trusted in Christ, even in their last minutes. But knowing that if they didn't, then they died apart from God. So speak with heart-breaking anguish over the death of a sinner separated from God, and with life-giving resolve to urgently spending your life to spread the gospel to others like them.

And then, respond to the death of Christians with profound sorrow. So to have confidence in the gospel does not mean we are glibly happy when a brother or sister dies. No, we are profoundly sorrowful, and we weep, knowing that death is a result of sin in a fallen world, and we hate sin and we hate death. But at the same time, speak with abiding joy, because this person knew the King who had conquered death, and even though they died, John 11:25, even now they live. So speak with sincere worship to God and with unshakeable hope before others, because you know this world is not all there is.

And then, talking about our deadness, constantly point to our dependence on God. We live in a self-sufficient, self-sustaining world, and anyone who lives like they can't do it on their own, like they need God, looks different than everyone else. This is weakness in many eyes. It goes against the self-made mantra of our day. But it is gospel. Let the words, "I need God for this..." or, "I need God to do this..." be an everyday occurrence in our language, for this is the picture of the gospel.

Constantly point to our dependence on God, and constantly point to our desperation for God. We don't have breath at the end of this service if He doesn't give it to us. And that changes the way we talk. Weave this thread/share this gospel in order for others to be saved from their sin.

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