

# Chapter 9

## Sin in Community

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### SABBATH

#### Sin and its Consequences

Even though members of the community of faith have received Christ as their Savior and Lord, they still experience real struggle with sin in their lives. Christians abide “in grace” (Romans 5:2) and “under grace” (Romans 6:14), but they are not immune to sin’s destructive influences (1 John 1:9; 2:1).

The Word of God offers various perspectives on sin. The Hebrew word *chatha* and the Greek word *hamartia*, usually translated as “sin,” both mean “missing the mark,” or “falling short of a standard.” In 1 John 3:4, we learn that sin is breaking the law of God. In another text, Romans 14:23, Paul argues that it is a violation of faith. At the same time, the root, or the core issue of sin concerns deep and fundamental aspects of our being. Sin corrupts and darkens the human heart (Mark 7:21-23; Romans 1:21), the command center of our entire being. As sin creates a separation from God, it degrades our minds

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(1 Timothy 6:5; Romans 8:7-8) and our spiritual discernment (1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:4). Not even our affections are spared the negative influence of sin (Titus 3:3; John 3:19).

Sin is reflected in behavior, but it is fundamentally a question of being, rather than doing. Sin is disruption of community; it is failing to be in fellowship with God and with other human beings.<sup>1</sup> The highest purpose of human life is communion with God and faithful reflection of His character (Genesis 1:26-27). Whenever we do not maintain this communion, sin takes over. We become dissatisfied with our role in God's creation and we endeavor to determine our identity and the purpose of our lives by ourselves. But sin is also manifested in the breakdown of human community. Living apart from God, we also violate our role in the community of faith. Pride and selfishness become our guiding principles.

We are all born into this dysfunction and are habitually rebellious against God. Sin is universal and affects us all (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:23; 5:12; 1 John 1:8-10). This means that all families, all churches, all relationships, all communities, are afflicted by the bane of sin.

**What patterns of sin do you notice in your life? In what ways are these patterns of sin manifestations of a broken community with God and others? To what extent have you become comfortable with or tolerant of your sins?**

<sup>1</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 187.

## SUNDAY

### Our Sin Affects Community

As the disruption of the communion with God, sin brings disastrous effects into our personal lives and the lives around us. The story of the Fall (Genesis 3:10-13) records the beginning of the sin's corruption of every important relationship in human life: communion with God, interaction with other human beings, harmony with the rest of creation, and self-acceptance. Ever since sin entered the world, its influence has been destroying communities and God's purpose for community has continued to decline and even disappear.

The destructive influence of sin is manifested in our communities primarily through pride and its myriad expressions. Pride is our core problem (Proverbs 16:18; James 4:6), and, therefore, it degrades all our relationships. It seeks to possess power, to have the last word, to determine principles of right and wrong, and to use God as a sanction for its actions.<sup>2</sup>

Pride and its sinful manifestations create conflicts in the community of faith. Life in the community of faith is fundamentally oriented toward others; this is how the Bible teaches us to relate to our fellow brothers and sisters in the church (Romans 12:10; 1 Corinthians 10:24). But, pride and selfishness are not other-oriented. They are self-oriented, so they erode and destroy the community. A prideful person enters the public sphere with a predominant drive for self-adulation, self-protection, and self-comfort, and such blatant and pernicious worship of self creates friction and resistance in other members of the community. It

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<sup>2</sup>Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology & Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 49-55.

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clashes ferociously with the pride of other believers.

It is in our nature to insist that the reason why our community is not what it can be, is the sin of other members. It is somebody else's fault, certainly not ours. But, this, of course, is erroneous reasoning. Because we are all sinners and because sin lives in all of us, we all harm our community. Our community will begin to heal when everyone owns the destructive influences, repents of them genuinely, and begins to build a different legacy.

**How are your sins affecting the community of faith at Sligo? How does pride manifest itself in your life and, through you, in the life of the Sligo community? Take time to pray for forgiveness and strength to leave the destructive attitudes and conduct behind.**

**MONDAY**

**What is Conflict?**

A nervous and agitated brother in the church snapped at you for no particular reason. Some church members talked behind your back, gossiping and spreading rumors in order to destroy your reputation. You felt compassion and lent a considerable sum of money to a fellow church member, but he continues to act as if it never happened. Certain members of our community act around you as if you are not worthy of their time and attention. You have been burned conducting business with some church members. As you led a casual conversation on a specific topic, a fellow church member insensitively excoriated your opinions and humiliated you in public.

We all have similar experiences. Some of them escalated into conflicts among us that may not have been resolved to this very day. These momentary and long-term conflicts weaken the fabric of the community of faith.

Disagreements in the community are to be expected; many of them are due to our inherent diversity or simple misunderstandings. But, not every disagreement becomes a conflict. Conflict is dispute that arises when other members of the community refuse to give us what we want, and we do not want to accept, overlook, or go along with their refusal. By its nature, conflict is a clash of two or more individuals who refuse to compromise on their self-centered inclinations. In James 4:1-2 we learn that the main cause of conflict among us is that our passions or pleasures that fight within us demand their own way and do not get it. Our incessant desires demand to be satisfied and they dictate the course of life to us. When they are frustrated and denied, they often react belligerently and lash out at anyone who is responsible for denying them.

Therefore, we see that our conflicts are a consequence of sin. Since pride and self-centeredness are so deeply ingrained in our hearts, conflicts arise in our relationships. Our sinful self and its perennial demand to have its desires satisfied are the reason why we quarrel and fight, even in the community of faith.

**Think of the last conflict you had with someone in the Sligo community? How did you respond to the conflict? What does your response to the conflict**

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**say about the principles that guided you at the time of the conflict? How did self-centeredness manifest itself in you and the other person(s) in the midst of the conflict?**

## **TUESDAY**

### **Unhealthy Responses to Sin and Conflict**

Since we are called by God to live in community, and since all of us are sinners wired to pride and self-centeredness, conflicts will inevitably arise among us. We cannot escape conflict in the community of faith and should not be surprised by it, just as we should not be surprised by sin in community.

But, the reality is that the community of faith continues to be surprised by and unprepared for sin and conflict in its midst, and we react in unhealthy ways. The same sinful nature in us that is still undergoing transformation by the grace of God is causing conflicts among us and leading us to respond to them in unhealthy ways.

Pride manifested in self-righteousness pushes us to root out sin in others or win a conflict, disregarding the ways of God's grace and ignoring love, compassion, and patience. We go around and intrude upon people in the community with whom we have no close relationships and to whom we did not demonstrate unconditional love, seeking to *get them right*. We insist on continuing confrontation or escalating differences of opinion in order to prove the point that we are right and the other person is wrong. Under the guise of service and ministry to

others, we actually serve our own pride and self-righteousness by trying to demonstrate our moral and spiritual superiority.

Pride manifested in the desire for self-preservation and comfort pushes us to ignore or disregard sin and conflict. We may feel it is just too sensitive, too difficult, too messy, and too painful for everyone involved to confront sin in others and attempt to resolve conflict. We know from our own experience how destructive and contentious sins and conflicts can be, and it makes us crave peace and tranquility—at all costs. On the other hand, we are often so consumed with ourselves and our own concerns that we have neither time nor energy to get involved in the lives of others. Therefore, deliberately or inadvertently, we let the torments of spiritual struggles remain shrouded in secrecy and conflicts fester and corrode the community.

The Bible continuously warns us not to disregard sin and conflict in our midst (Matthew 18:15; Luke 17:3; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:25-26; Hebrews 3:12-13; James 5:19-20). Biblically speaking, the community of faith does not have an option of ignoring or disregarding sin and conflict in its midst.

**What is the greater temptation for you: to self-righteously pursue sin in others, or to ignore and disregard it? How would you evaluate the Sligo community's attitude to sin and conflict in its midst? Which unhealthy attitudes does our community manifest?**

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## WEDNESDAY

### Dealing with Sin in Community

Jesus gave us the principles to deal with sin in community. In Matthew 18:15-17, He teaches His disciples in all historical periods what to do in case sin is discovered in the midst of them. Jesus' instructions are challenging, because they go against the spirit of our time and against our natural inclinations.

According to verse 15, the responsibility for addressing sin in the community is on each member of the community. Jesus says that those who have been sinned against, and those who have sinned against others (Matthew 5:23), are first to speak about the sin to the other party personally, face-to-face. This specific instruction, however, does not mean that the community members should not address sins that do not involve them personally (Galatians 6:1). The community has a responsibility to regain a sinning brother or a sinning sister by lovingly confronting sin in its midst. We cannot justify, ignore, or disregard sin, if we are to obey Jesus.

If face-to-face interaction does not produce results, the number of those involved in dealing with sin should still be small. We are to seek help of no more than one or two persons. On one hand, involving other persons is a gesture of humility, for they are called upon out of acute awareness that either party in the conflict may not understand the situation accurately. They are needed to provide a different perspective on the situation, help establish

facts, and remove any possible misunderstandings. On the other hand, the number of those involved should remain small because everything should be done to communicate the intent to love the person, regain them, and preserve their reputation.

It would be great if these steps were to result in acknowledgment of sin and genuine repentance. But, if they do not help, we should not let the sinner *just be* and give up any further attempt to restore them. As hard as it is for us to contemplate or practice the art of reconciliation, we should follow the instructions of Jesus when it is necessary to involve the entire community in dealing with sin among us. Having to deal with sin in public enables the community to see the odious nature of sin and recoil from it; it raises the reality of grace and the possibility of repentance, and it teaches the entire community how to deal with sin.<sup>3</sup>

**Why is it important for us as a community to take the instructions of Jesus on responding to sin seriously? What sins are considered worthy of community action? Of the more limited, one-on-one, approach? Which instruction mentioned in Matthew 18:15-17 would be most difficult for you? Explain your answer.**

## THURSDAY

### Dealing with Conflict in Community

In their concise and practical book on conflict resolution, Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson share some sound counsel.<sup>4</sup> They offer four general principles that we need to keep in mind if we want to bring peace out

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<sup>3</sup>Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 178.

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<sup>4</sup>Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, *Resolving Everyday Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011)

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of the discord in our communities.

*Bring God Into Your Conflict.* In the heat of a conflict, we are usually fiercely engrossed in using all our verbal skills and arguments to win the dispute and prove our superiority. Our attention is completely horizontal. Against our natural inclination to keep talking in the midst of a conflict and demonstrate how great we are, we have to stop, lift our hearts up, and ask ourselves what would demonstrate the greatness of God. What would bring glory to God (1 Corinthians 10:31)? In our conflicts we either demonstrate that we have a big God or that we have a big sense of self. What brings glory to God in our conflicts is trusting God, obeying God's will, and emulating the character of God.

*Own Your Part of a Conflict.* In our conflicts we quickly tend to assign the blame to the other person, maximizing his or her culpability and minimizing our own. However, if we want to resolve our conflicts, we need to begin by acknowledging our own contribution to these conflicts. Jesus teaches us in Matthew 7:3-5 that we cannot even see our conflict properly, until we recognize our contribution to it. To fully own our part in a conflict, we have to admit it to ourselves, confess it fully and specifically to the other person, change our behavior, and ask for forgiveness.

*Help Others Own Their Part of a Conflict.* This step in dealing with conflict is difficult and sensitive and should not be done by persons too eager to correct others. Often we are very reluctant to confront others, but we have to do it out of obedience to God and love for our fellow believer who may be "caught in a sin" (Galatians 6:1). Our mission is to mend and restore,

not to deride and humiliate. We should approach the other person face-to-face, listening carefully, and prayerfully discerning the methods that are appropriate to the situation and the needs of our fellow believer.

*Giving Forgiveness and Arriving at a Reasonable Solution.* Offering forgiveness enables us to move beyond solving a problem to restoring a relationship. We are capable of truly forgiving others only as we remember how God forgives us (Ephesians 4:32). Forgiveness is a difficult and costly action when we decide not to hold the offence against others. It involves entrusting the offence against us to God and granting forgiveness whenever the other person repents. Only then full restoration of the relationship is possible.

**Are you in conflict with anyone in the Sligo community? If yes, how can you apply the principles from this section to resolve the conflict?**

## FRIDAY

### Investing in Love

To a significant extent, we are all products of our environment and culture. In a church as diverse as Sligo, with more than seventy different ethnic backgrounds and some 140 languages, it is not too difficult to upset someone, especially if we do not understand their cultural background. Misunderstanding and false assumptions are bound to happen in the midst of such diversity. However, in Jesus Christ we are all one true family tied to each

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other, not by our blood but by His blood, and we must learn to live in harmony.

We need to accept the reality of human weakness—our own and that of other members of the community. When we take this reality into consideration, we are not as surprised by sin and conflict among us. To be sure, we do not celebrate or relish sin and conflict, but we are not bent out of shape when they happen.

Genuine love for one another teaches us not to be distraught when difficulties happen in the community of faith. It teaches us to have patience and makes us bold to take risks with other sinners. There is no other attitude or power that binds us to one another into a true community as *love*. Love is *of God* and *from God*; it alone covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8) and fulfills the law of God among the people of God perfectly (Romans 13:8-10). Our efforts to be at peace may not be reciprocated, or the process of reconciliation may be difficult, frustrating, and protracted. Permanent and steadfast commitment to love others, even those with whom we are in a bitter conflict, keeps us from descending into a life of defeat by anger, enmity, and vindictiveness.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when we love unconditionally, we emulate God who loves us with such love in order to change our incorrigible hearts. Finally, relentless love preserves and unifies the community of faith and prepares it ahead of time to deal with sin and conflict.

Sligo members and Sligo community have to invest in love. When we seek God and trust Him to empower us to pursue love and nurture love in

our hearts and our community, we choose “a more excellent way.” Wonderful things will take place among us when we love each other faithfully and unconditionally.

**Practically, what would it mean for you to invest in love? How can we do this in the Sligo community?**

**Is there a member of the Sligo community with whom you need to reconcile? How can you begin that process?**

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 107.