

I. Introduction

A. No comedy video today because we are not clever enough to come up with a funny clip about sin – especially sexual sin (which is what Solomon profiles in the first 7 chapters of Proverbs) – that wouldn't be a bit scandalous. And we just didn't want to go there.

B. I think we can all agree that there are plenty of provocative videos and sexual humor out there. And these things are everywhere, not just in the locker room banter or “the bad part of town” – whatever that means. By historical standards, Western culture has lost its moorings.¹ And those of us living in it only occasionally can see this accurately.

1. We now expect provocative pictures to be used to sell things like car tires and bubble gum. It doesn't strike us as weird because it's been done for the last thirty years.

2. We now expect TV shows to suggest that everybody is sleeping with everybody else – except the person they are married to – because that is standard fare today.

C. Things are so crazy that what is normal historically is now viewed as abnormal, unhealthy and unsustainable.

D. I occasionally spend time in Muslim countries, where the women are hidden behind Burqas and where there is virtually no advertising. It is shocking going into these countries and it is shocking re-entering the West. On one of my last trips to Africa I spent a week in Addis Ababa (where you are unlikely to see as much as a woman's wrist) and then I flew home via London. I didn't realize how sexualized everything was until I saw it again as if for the first time. You do not realize how dirty the water you're swimming in is until you swim in something else for a couple weeks and then dive back in.²

E. Which would be one thing if you came back here and everyone was happy and full of joy and life and marriages were thriving³ and there were lots of kids – lots of signs of people having sex. But that is not the case. It's actually a pretty Orwellian⁴ moment

¹ Most would tie this to the sexual revolution that began in the 60s. There has always been premarital sex. But it was understood to be a violation of the acceptable norm. Starting in the 60s, sex before marriage was declared good.

² There are a few data points to help us ground this discussion: 1) I'm just old enough to remember Hugh Hefner being arrested for publishing photos that would not merit a second glance today; 2) a few years ago I heard a lecture in which the presenter noted that in the late 1940s when the Frenchman Louis Reard introduced the bikini (which was named after the island where the first Atom bomb was tested because he wanted to make an explosive impact on culture. The point is, he could not find any women willing to model it – not even French models. So he was forced to hire a stripper. And no one would wear one in the US until after the sexual revolution of the 60s.

³ The sexual revolution has produced a lot of casualties. And as a general rule, people are not happier today. Addictions appear to be spiking, broken families (and no families) are rising, STDs continue to be a bane on life.; 3) a recent study was called off after scientists were unable to find any men who had not seen pornography.

⁴ In his 1950s novel, 1984, he talked about newspeak, where words came to mean the exact opposite of their original meaning.

1. People now talk openly about things that were not discussed in polite society even ten years ago – and were scandalous in ways we cannot grasp fifty years ago – but there are fewer babies;
 2. And, I would argue, less real intimacy than before.
 3. And there are now all of these words you can no longer use, like *fornication* and *adultery*, because they have been replaced with things like living together and affairs. The first is expected. Who would get married without trying things out? That is the responsible thing to do. And no one says adultery anymore. That conjures up Hester Prynne and *The Scarlet Letter* and harsh and hypocritical judgmentalism. Now we use the term “affair” – which sounds exciting, bold and livegiving and no more damaging than a hot fudge Sunday.⁵
- F. I raise all of this not just to sound old and hopelessly uncool – although I’m sure that is the take away by some. But because:
1. If we want to go deep, we not only need a strong offense (we need to lean in). We also need a strong defense. We need to pursue holiness.
 2. And also because sin generally – and sexual sin in particular – is a big theme in Proverbs. Solomon is writing for his young sons and so he feels the need to talk about sexual temptation. Indeed, the first eight chapters of Proverbs is a long introduction in which wisdom is represented as virtuous woman living in a palace and contrasted with folly – which is represented as a prostitute living in a brothel.⁶
- G. I think most people understand that God advocates a different sexual ethic than is currently in vogue – a more traditional or conservative one – so when I talk about sex I usually go out of my way to say what God is for.⁷ I say things like:
1. God is Pro-sex. It’s his idea. He created it. He designed the parts and the way they fit together. Pleasure is his idea. He told Adam and Eve to go forth and multiply.
 2. One of the books in the Bible – the Song of Solomon – is a celebration of erotic love. English translators have toned it down. The Hebrew is so earthy that single men were not allowed to read it.
 3. In Deuteronomy Moses advises young husbands to stay at home and “make their wives happy.” The context of that statement suggests, stay at home and stay in bed.

⁵ What used to call “dirty movies” is now adult entertainment.

⁶ There is more than a little irony here because Solomon didn’t exactly have this area of his life under control. As we know, he had 7 wives and concubines. Now in his defense, things were different:

⁷ The church has not always done a good job of getting this message out.

4. God is not a prude. The restrictions he has placed upon sex – reserving it for one man and one woman in the context of a life-time commitment – are not in place to rain on our parade but because He loves us. Far from being an angry scold trying to keep anyone from having fun – far from looking down in an effort to find someone looking at porn or some young couple fumbling around in the back seat of a car so he can smite them – whatever that means – God wants to protect us so we can experience life at its best.⁸

H. God loves you more than you love you. He wants the best for you.

1. Sin does make him angry – but that is because it hurts people he loves. And sexual sin gets a lot of ink in the Bible because it can cause a lot of hurt. Things with a lot of upsides have a lot of downsides. Sexual sin: 1) Can bring a lot of shame; 2) It can harden our heart – making us numb and dumb; and 3) by its very nature it often pulls others down a well.⁹

I. So, the topic is sin, with a bit of focus on sexual sin, because of: who we are; what we struggle with; what Solomon wrote about in Proverbs; and our desire to go deep.

II. Let me step back for a moment and reframe this.

A. Over the last month I've argued that we need to lean further into God – doing so because: this is what we were made for and consequently this is how life works best.

B. A subtext of this series has been the idea that continuing to do what we've done in the past may not be enough to keep us where we are at given how much faster culture is moving. And besides, in the best scenarios, more of the same leads to more of the same. If we want a more vital relationship with God we need to lean in even further.

C. I then argued that we need wisdom – that is, godly character – and that this will require discipline – a willingness to suffer now for long term gain. These came via Proverbs.

⁸ And by the way, the research supports this. For all the focus and fascination on sex in this culture: 1) we are not having enough children; and 2) people are not happy. Study after study shows that the happiest people – and the people having the most sex – are those in marriages in which they did not have sex until they got married.

⁹ Dr. Rosaria Champagne Butterfield writes: Sexual sin is a ruthless taskmaster. Abortion requires the death of an unborn child. Adultery requires the betrayal of vows before God and the destruction of “one flesh.” Pornography requires sex slaves and casts women and children in the sex trafficking industry. Butterfield, *Ministering to the Sexually Broken*, TableTalk, Nov. 2015.

D. Last week I spoke about learning to listen to God and challenged you to create some space for God to speak to you. I ironically heard from many of you via email – which I chose not to give up, though I would have liked to. Some found this torturous. Others found it very life-giving. I had done this before, so it wasn't that bad, although I was in Portland for an event, and it was odd to be in a hotel room and never turn on the TV. We have one TV in our house. It's in the basement and so you have to really want to watch something to head down there, so it's never on casually. But at a hotel I often just turn it on as I walk in. It was odd to be there for a few days and never turn it on.

However it went for you, I hope you'll carry some of those fasting practices forward.

E. Today I want to talk about sin because: it keeps us from going deep; it's a big theme in Proverbs and in fact, it's a big theme in the entire Bible.

1. Sin is an animating force from Genesis 3 up until the last couple chapters in Revelation.

III. I want to make a three big points today.

A. The first I've just made: God loves you more than you love yourself and His counsel on sin is the best advice we can hope for. It's not a bunch of ugly threats from someone who is cranky. Many assume this starting point because they have a very skewed view of God. Let me remind you – joy is his basic character. God is the happiest Being in the universe. And that is what he wants for us. And when we head in that direction, sin loses a lot of its allure.¹⁰

B. Second: Sin is a bigger deal than we understand. Sin is a complicated, nuanced, deceptive and many-faceted issue that we underplay.

1. The idea that sin is a big deal is not hard to make. In the Hebrew Old Testament there are six different nouns and 3 different verbs used to describe and define six. In the Greek New Testament there are five nouns, five adjectives and 3 verbs all translated by the English word *sin*. Some represent sin as a debt, others as a burden, some as a shortfall and still others as a stain. When you put both Hebrew and Greek together the list includes: evil, offense, wicked, crooked, deceive, lawless, guilt, violate and more. All of these words are needed because there are different angles to it.

2. What they all have in common is that they are bad. Really bad. We are often casual about sin. "Boys will be boys" and lines like that. We brush sin off as harmless fun. God does not. According to his view: 1) Sin runs deep;¹¹ 2) it corrupts everything; 3) it causes a lot of pain; and 4) it has eternal consequences – it keeps us from God.

¹⁰ Dallas Willard writes, "Failure to attain a deeply satisfying life always has the effect of making sinful actions seem good." If we label all joys and pleasures as unspiritual, it can actually weaken us in our efforts to live godly lives. John Ortberg, *Grace, An Invitation to a Way of Life*, p. 60-61.

¹¹ Paul writes about this in Romans 7:15,18f

3. When you fold together what we get in Proverbs and what we find in the rest of the Bible, you realize a few things:
 - a) Sin cannot be captured by a list of bad things. It has little to do with petty crimes and school boy pranks. It's not a list of vices, it's rebellion against God on high.
 - b) And it's a losing hand.¹² Turning towards sin is self-destructive behavior no one with a clear heart and mind would do.
4. And this is the big point I want to make. Sin not only makes us smaller than we are, it makes us “numb and dumb” to what is actually going on. And this is part of the reason Solomon is not hopeful that a fool is going to turn things around.
5. I have a sin file, which is not as much fun as it sounds.¹³ It's filled with articles and illustrations about sin. And between the file and my reading in Proverbs, I came away with a handful of reasons why sin is such a big deal. The first three are points I've made over and over:
 - a) First, sin runs deep. It's not a flesh wound. We are not called sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. It's a deep infection.
 - b) Consequently – number two – sin cascades through every part of us. This is what theologians refer to as total depravity. The term does not imply that we are as bad as we can be. We are not. No matter how bad we are we can imagine being worse! But every area of our life - the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual aspects of us – have all been affected by sin.

¹² In the Book of Proverbs we get many warnings about sin. They come our way in these pithy little riddles that contrast things like wisdom and foolishness or laziness and discipline. When you take it all in you realize:

¹³ I was reading this week about a guy who was in a Christian book store when this rough-looking guy came in. He described him as a Hell's Angel type - lots of leather, skull and bone tattoos. And he was quite nervous explaining that he really wanted to buy a nativity set that was being displayed in the window that was listed as sold. He wanted it for his sister who was sick. And the owner said, well, it's already sold. The guy insisted that he had to have it, so the owner said he'd call the person who had bought it and see if they'd part with it. When the owner stepped away the biker turned to this guy and said, “They're causing me to sin here, man.” At which point the writer explained that he might want to save his sins for activities more enjoyable than wanting a nativity set.

c) Third, sin is defective good. This is where I usually cite *The Screwtape Letters* where Screwtape – the senior demon writing to his nephew (Wormwood), who is just learning how to be a demon – reports that, try as they might, the R & D department in Hell cannot actually make anything. All they can do is damage things God has made and try to sell them as improvements. Which is why, though sin can be fun at first, it cannot satisfy. The deep intimacy and unifying bond of sex becomes little more than lust or pornography. That is broken good. It cannot sustain joy or pleasure. It ends up demanding more and more and returning less and less. As one writer said, sin, “always takes us further than we want to go, keeps us longer than we want to stay and costs us more than we ever wanted to pay.”

6. I have made these points over and over. In light of our topic today I want to highlight two points about sin that I’ve said far less about in the past.

a) First, it makes us dull and small.

(1) Ephesians 4:17 reads: So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

¹⁹Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

(2) There are two 20th century Brits who set out to show this in their fiction writing. The more famous example would be J.R.R. Tolkein, who in his epic novel about Middle Earth, *The Lord of the Rings*, has a character who is grossly miss-shapen by sin. That character is Gollum, who got his hands on the ring of power, and the allure was overwhelming. But over time it gave him less and less and took more and more and by the time we meet him he’s a dwarfish, malformed, weird creature. Sin made him small and dull.

(3) The second illustration of this is by Tolkein's friend, C.S. Lewis, who wrote a book called *The Great Divorce*. And in it a group of people from Hell catch a bus up to heaven. But after they get there they do not like it because they are so deformed by sin they no longer can appreciate beauty. For starters they are so light that they can't bend the grass and it pokes into their feet, making it hard to walk. The story is vintage Lewis. When I first read thirty-five years ago I not only didn't get it, I thought it was misleading to the point of being harmful. Now I think it's brilliant. It's a story so you can't push on all the details too hard or they break down. But the premise is, sin malforms us and we no longer like what it best.¹⁴

b) And – key point – in the list of insights about sin – we do not see it. Because sin dulls our senses and makes us small, we cannot see the effect it is having on us.

(1) Proverbs 12:15 reads: The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.

(2) There is this mistaken notion that we cannot understand something unless we embrace it, and that personal knowledge and experience is always good. But sin has a blinding not an enlightening effect. As a perfect person, Jesus had more insight into life and sin than we do.

¹⁴ One of the more famous chapters involves the account of a man who is tormented by a red lizard.

(3) One writer described the effect of sin to the effect of drinking salt water. Let me read this illustration from a sermon I heard years ago by Bryan Chapell: On July 30, 1945, the battle cruiser *USS Indianapolis* was returning from a mission delivering enriched uranium to allied forces in the Pacific. It did not make it home. A Japanese torpedo hit the cruiser on its way back. It sank in minutes. In only 12 minutes, 300 of the 1,200 men died. Nine hundred went into the water, enduring four days and five nights without food, without water, and under the blazing sun of the Pacific. Of the 900 men that went into the water, only 316 survived the lack of water and the sharks. One of those who survived was the chief medical officer, who recorded his own experience. He wrote: “There was nothing I could do, nothing I could do but give advice, bury the dead at sea, save the lifejackets, and try to keep the men from drinking the water. When the hot sun came out, and we were in this crystal clear ocean, we were so thirsty. You couldn't believe it wasn't good enough to drink. I had a hard time convincing the men they shouldn't drink. The real young ones...you take away their hope, you take away their water and food, they would drink the salt water and they would go fast. I can remember striking the ones who were drinking the salt water to try to stop them. They would get dehydrated, then become maniacal. There were mass hallucinations. I was amazed how everyone would see the same thing. One man would see something, and then everyone else would see it. Even I fought the hallucinations off and on. Something always brought me back.”

(4) If you are thirsty and are foolish enough to drink salt water it will only make you thirstier – which will make drinking the salt water seem like that much better of an idea. That is what sin does. It robs us of clear thinking and makes even more sin look like a good idea.

(5) I think this is one of the reasons why Solomon is not optimistic than a fool is going to turn their life around.

7. OK, so – point one: God loves you more than you love you and he wants what is best for you. Point two: Sin diminishes us. It hardens our hearts, creates a callus on our soul (whatever metaphor you like). The point is, it makes us less than we were and it makes future sin easier.¹⁵

C. Point Three: The Good News about Sin is that there is a solution.

¹⁵ By the way, this happens to both individuals and cultures.

1. Our culture attempts to help us deal with sin in one of a handful of ways: 1) It suggests that the way to get better is with more education; 2) it attempts to take away any rules, suggesting that whatever we do is fine; and 3) it suggests that what we are doing is a lot better than average.
 - a) I mentioned my sin file. In it was an article about Richard Reid, the shoe bomber. You might remember him. He was the guy who tried to blow up an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami back in 2001. There were 197 people on board. Before that he had developed quite a police record for attacking and robbing people. My point in bringing him up is that his father described Reid as, “not a bad lad.” He robs and steals, beats people up and then tries to kill 197 people by detonating a bomb, but “he’s not a bad lad.” I’m not sure what you have to do to be considered bad. We apparently all have a right to be called good, no matter what we do.¹⁶
2. By the way, religion attempts to help us deal with our sin by suggesting that we try harder. Sometimes it has things we can do as penance – to make up for our sin. Sometimes it has things we can do to be better.
3. The Gospel sets a way forward that is counter intuitive. It does not let us think we are good or that our mistakes do not matter. It does not suggest that we try harder. What the Gospel instructs us to do is turn directly into our sin and own that we are broken, sinful and damaged.
4. It encourages us to declare that our heart is a bedlam of sin and a zoo of lust. But that God is gracious.
5. What the Bible promises us is that if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

IV. Let me repeat, the good news about sin and guilt is that there is a solution. And that is where we are headed in just a moment. Let me make two points clear:

- A. This way forward only works for those willing to call sin sin.
 1. Now because we are broken we will not always prevail. Some may claim to be without sin, but John said (I John 1:8) “If we say we are without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
 2. If your problem is that you made a mistake, well, I don’t have anything for that. If you are a good person who just occasionally and innocently makes some mistakes – if you are a mistaker not a sinner – I can’t help you. But if we will confess our sins, God will forgive those.

¹⁶ In “Just Your Average Shoe-Bomber,” (*National Review*, Jan. 28, 2002), psychiatrist Theodore Dalrymple notes that when he speaks with career criminals and asks them how they got started, they often claim, “I was easily led.” (Or they may say, “I fell in with the wrong crowd.”) The suggestion is, they are not to blame. However, when he asks them, “So, would you be easily led into the study of mathematics or grammar,” they laugh, realizing that they have been caught in a lie. And that, in fact, they are attracted to evil and repelled by good.

B. Secondly, I am not suggesting that way forward is passive acceptance of sin. “I can’t help it, all I can do is sin and then confess.” That is now what we are called to. So Let me frame it this way from Proverbs.

1. Remember, Solomon describes four different types of people there: the naïve, the fool, the Mocker and the wise. As they go through their day, they will all face temptation. And because they world is broken, some of it will be bad.
 - a) Not all desire is bad, but some is. There are desires to we are tempted to fulfill in unrighteous ways.
2. The naïve will – by definition – stumble into sin and be damaged. Which is why Solomon is writing and says – Proverbs 4: Get wisdom. Be in a real hurry to understand how the world works, which starts with insights from the God who loves you more than you love yourself and knows what is best.
3. The fool will seek out the temptation.
4. The mocker will seek to lead others astray
5. The wise will do whatever he or she can to avoid the sin. And in the area of sexual sin, the path forward is to flee. We are not told to stay and fight. That doesn’t work. Joseph modeled the path forward – turn and run.
6. But we are to fight it. We are to do what we can to be holy – not so God will love us, but because He already does.
7. And the good news is, the more we do this the stronger we get and the less appeal sin has.

V. We need to confess our sins. And that is what we are going to do together right now.

A. Brilliance Song / Corporate Confession