

What Happened to Us? | The Doctrine of Sin | Romans 1:16-25
To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers
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Preaching Draft | October 11, 2026

Published in 1936, *The Diary of a Country Priest* is a novel that takes the form of a private journal of a young unnamed priest. He's sensitive, physically frail but spiritually discerning. We follow his personal wrestling as he cares for his rural parish in France.

His parishioners don't struggle with spectacular sins. Theirs are the more subtle sins that run beneath the surface of otherwise respectable lives: pride, resentment, bitterness. The priest comes to see his work as a study in this mysterious and devastating power called sin—with its pervasive but often unseen influence, and its hidden depths. He writes:

... what can we then say of sin? What do they know about it? The cancer which is eating into [my people] is painless—like so many tumors.¹

What do we know of sin? Geologists teach us that the very ground which seems so solid is in reality only a thin film over an ocean of liquid fire, for ever trembling like the skin on milk about to boil...How far down would one need to dig to rediscover the blue depths.²

In our fourth sermon in our series, *To Be a Christian*, we come to the question: What Happened to Us?

The Bible's answer is straightforward: sin. The thing that decimates families and nations, turns brother against brother and sister against sister, ruins relationships and legacies, and is currently the number one problem in your neighborhood and life—is sin.

We turn to Romans 1 to better understand its mysterious and terrifying blue depths.

Saint Paul, the author of Romans, takes his readers on a tour of sin across the first seven chapters of Romans. We'll explore some of what he says in chapter 1.

But before he submerges us in this toxin, he sounds a crucial and happy note—a note I want to be sure we hear as we step into this heavy topic. Here is how our passage begins:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

For Paul, sin is rightly understood only in the light of salvation. We study the sickness, only in light of the solution. What God does to save us both illumines the depths of our problem and makes it bearable to now face.

So, two rings of this happy Gospel note as we begin:

¹ Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, 108-09

² Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, 75

First, the fact that Paul wants us to deeply understand our sin even after hearing this Gospel note, tells us there is still benefit from learning about our fallen condition. To understand your sin is to understand how your heart works. Studying sin is studying human nature. If we want to become humble and wise people, we need to understand our sin.

Second, this tells us that if we underestimate our problem, we'll underappreciate the solution. If you pull into the mechanic because you think you simply have some squeaky brakes—not at all aware that your brakes are about to give way—you won't appreciate the fact that his hour of service on your car likely saved your life.

When we come to the end of this sermon, we'll return again to this Gospel note in verse 16—and in light of what Paul shows us about our problem, I hope we'll be stunned by “the gospel ... the power of God for salvation.”

I. The Depths of Sin: *from rule problem to heart problem*

What is sin? Really? Is it rule breaking? Not living up to God's standards? Not treating people good enough? Not going to church enough?

Paul takes us on a downward journey into the depths of sin in this passage which helps answer this question.

He begins in verse 18 referring to sin as “ungodliness and unrighteousness” (18). He proceeds to say that sin is to “not honor God or give thanks to him” (21). And finally, he twice likens sin to an “exchange:”

and **exchanged** the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man (23).

they **exchanged** the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than Creator (25).

I think we see a movement here that runs deeper and deeper into the nature of sin:

Sin involves **rule-breaking** (“unrighteousness”): it's “missing the mark” of keeping the law; “sin is lawlessness,” as John says (1 John 3:4).

Sin is also **indifference** (“did not honor or thank God”). It is to neglect or ignore God. It's to live in his house, the world he created, as though he didn't exist—despite the fact that the entire creation is constantly bearing witness to the fact of an all-powerful Creator.

But at its root, sin is something more than rule-breaking and indifference. It involves an “exchange” of allegiance and worship: they **exchanged** the truth about God for a lie and **worshiped and served the creature rather than Creator** (25).

When Adam and Eve took the Apple in Genesis 3, before they broke a rule outwardly, a turning happened inwardly—in their hearts. They *exchanged* trust in God's voice for trust in the Serpent; they *exchanged* God's authority for their autonomy.

When Israel grew impatient waiting for Moses to come down Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, they *exchanged* allegiance to the True God for a man-made idol, a Golden Calf (Exod 32).

This deepening takes us to the essence of sin.

Sin, at its core, is not a rule problem; it's a heart problem. Sin is not just immorality or indifference; sin is idolatry.

Sin is the human heart placing anything—whether that thing is good or bad—over God as that which it most desires, trusts and lives for.

In this sense, sin is *relational*. It is ditching the old best friend for a new one; thinking more about the woman at work than the wife.

Only sin is the breaching of the most fundamental relationship—our relationship with God. And sin is therefore, like adultery, relationally devastating.

Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 3:20)

To better understand our own sin, we need to probe beneath our bad behavior and ask questions of our heart. Questions about this “exchange;” Questions about idols and allegiances.

Application: How do you know what idols are in your heart?

Ask yourself: what am I afraid of losing? What do I need in order to feel my life matters? What criticisms make me furious? What good thing has become God-like to me?

Tim Keller offered this helpful diagnostic tool: to smoke out an idol, ask yourself when something important to you is threatened or lost, do you feel *sorrow* or *despair*?

Sorrow is a perfectly fine Christian emotion. But despair—the sense that life would not be worth living if you didn't have your career or family or looks or reputation—suggests an *exchange* of ultimate allegiance. And Paul shows us in Romans 1 that this is at the heart of sin.

That's the depths of sin: *sin's not a rule problem but a heart problem. Sin is not merely breaking a rule, it's breaking a relationship.*

[T] Paul also shows us the *power* of sin.

II. The Power of Sin: *sin corrupts the whole race and whole person*

Sometimes we think of sin as a solvable problem—we just need more self-discipline. And sometimes we think of sin as someone else's problem—there are really bad people out there, but I'm not one of them.

Scripture however paints a picture of sin's power that affects the whole race and the whole person.

Sin Corrupts the Whole Race

First, sin corrupts the whole human race. When Paul says in verse 18, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against **all** ungodliness and unrighteousness of **men**,” he’s drawing on his overarching theme that sin is a problem for both Jews and Gentiles. By the end of Romans 3 Paul will have said that “**all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin**” (Rom 3:9) and “**all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**” (Rom 3:23).

How can this be?

Paul will later explain, in Romans 5, how sin spreads: it entered the world through Adam’s sin and then spread to all those born of Adam’s stock (Romans 5:12-21).³ It’s like a genetic feature we all inherit now. We are not born morally neutral and only then become sinners through bad choices. We inherit a fallen nature, and we stand implicated in Adam’s condemnation: “one trespass led to condemnation for all men” Paul will write (Rom 5:18).

This is what the church has come to call *the doctrine of original sin*. We are not sinners because we sinned; we sin because we are sinners—we have a corrupted nature.

Sin Corrupts the Whole Person

Second, sin’s poison infects the whole person: mind, heart and will: “**they became futile in their thinking**” (21). “**Their foolish hearts were darkened**” (21). Later, in a passage revealing a terrible inner-struggle, Paul speaks of sin enslaving the will:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but **sin that dwells within me**. (Romans 7:18–20 ESV)

Sin dulls our minds, distorts our affections, and enslaves our will. Its all-encompassing impact upon us leads to another doctrine the church uses to describe sin: *Total Depravity*.

Total depravity does not mean we are as bad as we can be. It means, rather, that every part of our being is touched by rebellion against God.⁴

Augustine summarized our fallen condition with a devastating phrase: **We are not able not to sin**.

How does this sit with you? Do you feel it’s too negative a take on human nature?

There are other theories: we do bad things because of bad parents, bad education, bad environments. We do bad things because of lingering vestiges of our animal nature we haven’t yet evolved out of.

³ Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [=Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom 5:12); and goes on, ... “one trespass led to condemnation for all men” (Rom 5:18).

⁴ See Mark Dever, *Nine Marks*, 4th ed., 96.

But these lines of thinking are just too shallow. Perfect circumstances don't free us from sin. A few more centuries to evolve in our moral courage won't free us from sin—we've had long enough.

It is as the weary priest in *The Diary of a Country Priest* admits one night in his diary:

Usually, my dominant feeling is that of the powerlessness of us all, poor feeble creatures that we are.⁵

May I suggest two surprising benefits to facing the power of sin—the doctrines of original sin and total depravity.

First, this is one of the most **democratizing truths** in the world. Regardless of class, race, gender, IQ, accomplishments, we all are brought to a level-ground by the doctrine of sin. It is as Luther wrote on a scrap of paper shortly before his death: "We are beggars. This is true."

Second, this is **freeing**—to recognize that you are helpless before the power of sin. Consider the alternative: "you can do it!" "Try harder." "Hate sin more." That's a creed for heroes; but the scriptural teaching on sin liberates us by absolute dependence on God—God's grace becomes hope for the waverer, the backslider, the hard-hearted, the fool.

Apply to church culture:

And the doctrine of sin, therefore, should have a good influence on a church's culture. We only become members of a church by first being flattened by our sin—therefore, there is no room for pride in this community. And even after being saved, in this life, the power of sin works mightily against our new natures—so we should be more understanding with one another, realizing what each of us is up against.

[T] We've seen something of the depths of sin—idolatry—and power of sin—it corrupts the whole race and whole person. What, then, are its consequences. Where does sin finally lead? What can we do about it? This takes us to our final observation: The Death of Sin.

III. The Death of Sin: *either sin kills me or God kills my sin.*

By "death" I mean two things: (1) the deadly consequences sin wreaks upon us, and (2) how Christ's death deals a deathblow to sin.

And the main point of this final point is this: *either sin kills me or God kills my sin.*

And notice how sin kills.

We read in verse 18 that "the **wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of man**" (1:18). This is present tense; it is different than the future wrath that comes upon sin at the final judgment.

The experience of present wrath is explained in verse 24 with the phrase, "**God gave them up**":

⁵ Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, 147.

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves (1:24).

This suggests that God lets go of the leash. Part of his judgement on sin now, is to let sin run its course.

And notice how sin grows worse: there is a downward spiral in our passage from idolatry to immorality:

The idolatry of verse 25, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,” leads to a catalogue of immorality in verses 26-31: ranging from **unnatural sexuality** to **covetousness, malice, murder, strife, gossip, boasting, disobedience to parents, heartlessness, ruthlessness**” (vv. 26-32).

There is an important insight here about the way sin sows misery. Once sin wins our hearts with a false god, it gets us to commit immoral acts in service to that God.

Do we understand how our inward idols lead to outward acts of sin?

If I love my reputation more than God’s truth, I will eventually lie to protect my reputation. If I love my social cause more than God’s Gospel, I will eventually violate God’s laws to see my cause succeed. If I love my looks more than God’s beauty, I will envy someone better-looking rather than celebrating God’s workmanship. If I trust in money more than I trust in God, I will cut corners and even oppress others to get money. If my idol is my job, I will put work before family and break God’s laws about the order of love in order to be successful.

Just as the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom; the fear of a false god—devotion unto an idol—is the beginning of foolishness.

“The idols in your life,” wrote Tim Keller, “are slave traders disguised as abolitionists.”

Idolatry leads to immorality, because what I love impacts how I live. Sin kills by causing more and more sin, as God lets sinful man pursue his idols.

To those who persist in sin without repentance, Paul says in Romans 2:

because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. (Rom 2:5)

Sin is going to kill me—first by perverting and distorting my heart, then by polluting my life, then by condemning me as a sinner before the final judgment of God.

Unless someone intervenes.

How God kills sin.

We return now to where we started—Romans 1:16,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (1:16).

The Gospel is the good news that our sin was put into Jesus, so that Jesus' righteousness would be put into us:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).

Sin is deeper than we think, stronger than we imagine, and deadlier than our worst fear. It is from this vantage point that we understand why the Gospel is so wonderful.

How is the Gospel the “**power of God**” for salvation? It's the power of God because in the Gospel, God acts to rescue me from sin—it's His power, not mine.

It's for “**salvation**,” because in the Gospel my sins are forgiven and therefore I am delivered *out from under* the wrath of God—there is no salvation apart from that.

It is “for all who **believe**,” because belief, or faith, is an act of desperate trust; if you were to tell a sinner that to be saved, they needed to obey God's rules, you would simply sink them deeper into despair. Salvation is not *because* we obey God; it is because we *trust* God—we cast our hope and lives onto his care.

Let me conclude with a **few implications** for dealing with sin in everyday life.

First, don't just fight sinful behavior; expose the idols beneath it. Don't just ask, *what am I doing wrong?* Ask, *what am I worshiping, protecting, trusting?* This week, when you find yourself getting angry, envious, or defensive, stop and ask: what am I protecting? What is my heart trusting? What am I afraid of losing?

Perhaps your anger reveals you've made an idol of control. Perhaps your envy reveals you've made an idol of success. Perhaps your resentment reveals you've made an idol of being liked.

Then confess that false heart-allegiance to God, and meditate for a moment on what Christ has done for you—then take a concrete step of obedience.

Second, take sin seriously, but abandon the illusion you can defeat it yourself. Admit powerlessness. Come out with your hands up. Wave the white flag. Desert the army of your own strength to join God's Army.

Practically speaking, this takes the form of three habits: regular confession—putting sin into the light by telling on yourself to another believer and praying together for deliverance. Heartfelt repentance—saying sorry to God and meaning it. And amendment of life—working on changes that will help you avoid situations or thought-patterns that lead to that sin.

Third and finally, fight sin with a greater love. Remember the key word in Romans 1 is “exchange.” We give our hearts to the wrong things. So how do we reverse this exchange?

Fear of consequences has some effect on curbing bad behavior, but a superior love is far stronger for making this reversal of heart allegiance.

Look to Christ. Look at the one who loved you while you were still a sinner. Look at the One who will never leave you nor forsake you. Look at the one who laid down everything to win you back. Christ—he is the forsaken lover who is wooing us to come back.

Ask the Holy Spirit to cultivate in your heart an growing affection for Jesus—and affection that makes you sadder to grieve his heart, and more passionate to please it.

Close: We began this morning with the question: *What happened to us?*

The answer is sin. We turned away from God. We exchanged his glory for idols. We became enslaved to the very things we thought would make us free.

But that is not the last word.

The last word belongs to the gospel: **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”**

Sin is powerful. But the gospel is the power of God.

And here is the wonderful news: the God we abandoned has not abandoned us. The God against whom we rebelled has come in Jesus Christ to rescue us.

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

And that includes sinners like you and me.

Small Group Questions for Doctrine of Sin

1. Paul describes sin as exchanging God's glory and truth for created things (Rom 1:21-25). How does this deepen or challenge the way you normally think about sin? What are some good things in our lives that can become idols when we give them ultimate importance?
2. Our anger, anxiety, envy, and defensiveness can reveal what our hearts worship. Think about a recent emotional reaction. What might it reveal about something you are trusting, loving, or fearing more than God?
3. Paul says that God “gave them up” to their sinful desires (Rom 1:24). What does this teach us about sin's power and consequences? How have you seen the pursuit of something that promised freedom or happiness actually lead to greater bondage or misery?
4. We cannot defeat sin merely through greater self-discipline; we need God's saving power (Rom 1:16-17). What is the difference between fighting sin in your own strength and fighting it through faith in Christ? What is one concrete way you can practice dependence on God's grace this week?