

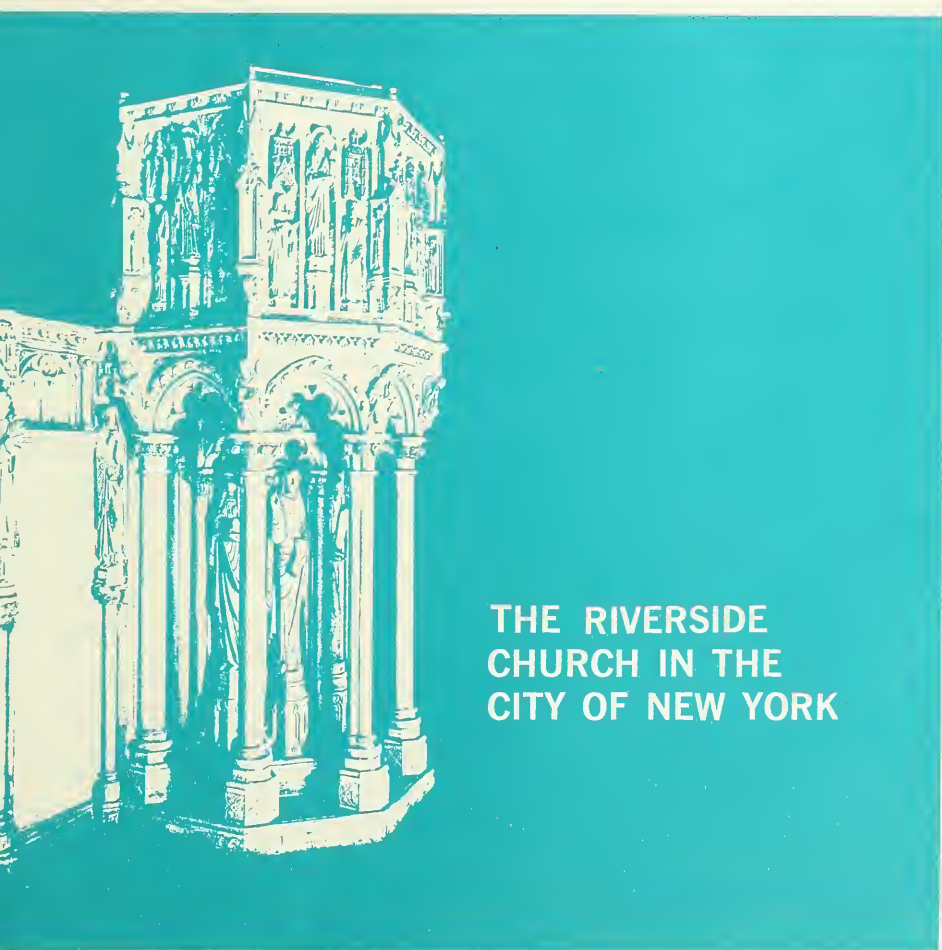
SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?"


*"...and you shall call his name Jesus, for
he will save his people from their sins."
Matthew 1:21*

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THE RIVERSIDE
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"WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?"

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There is an old snatch of dialogue still making the rounds that goes something like this: "What did the minister preach about this morning?" "He preached about sin." "What did he say about it?" "He was against it."

I find myself in an awkward position today. Men and women in my profession are expected to be against sin, but I come before you to speak on behalf of sin.

Lest you start thinking about having my credentials revoked, let me hasten to say that it is not my intention today to do the devil's work and promote sin, but to argue in favor of sin as a valid category in human experience.

Some may contend that such a subject is an unpardonable intrusion on the spirit of Christmas (whatever that is) now building in the land. I would remind all such of the angel's word to a troubled carpenter of Nazareth, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." The degree to which those words seem quaint forms the motivation for this message.

* * *

Sin has largely disappeared from our speech and thought. Whatever became of sin? This is my question to you today. It is no longer fashionable to think of man in moral terms, and sin is a moral term. It presumes the existence of a moral law. It presumes that man lives in inevitable relationship to God.

Nowadays we do not locate man's miseries in his alienation from God, we locate them elsewhere. Educators insist that man's critically central problem is

ignorance; therefore, his foremost need is education. Psychologists insist that man's critically central problem is the lack of a mature, integrated self-understanding; therefore, his foremost need is therapy. Political activists insist that man's critically central problem is the inequitable distribution of power; therefore, his foremost need is political reform or revolution. Social engineers insist that man's critically central problem is a disabling environment; therefore, his foremost need is for drastically improved surroundings. Dialectical materialists insist that man's critically central problem is the lop-sided distribution of economic wealth; therefore, his foremost need is the socialization of production and the abolition of capitalism.

Let me take pains to point out that the key term in all of these references is "critically central problem." Ignorance, inner-disorganization, powerlessness, negative environments, gaps between haves and have-nots contribute enormously to man's miseries and woes. They must be dealt with -- by the church and others. But they are not, separately or together, man's critically central problem.

From the Biblical point of view, man's critically central problem is his sin. "Thou shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." Whatever became of sin? It has largely disappeared from our speech and thought.

* * *

It is my impression that we have welcomed its disappearance. Why not? Who needs it? Now that we are liberated and sophisticated, who would wish to go back to that? To be specific, who would want to go back to a day when the church held power over people by first defining them as sinners and then controlling their access to divine grace?

Indeed, it can be argued that the church has a "vested interest" in sin. Just as trial lawyers have an interest in automobile accidents. Just as

teachers have an interest in ignorance. Or doctors in disease. Or the police in crime. Or detergent manufacturers in dirt. Just as health salons have a vested interest in obesity.

If sin is only the creation of the church for ulterior purposes, then the sooner we have done with it, the better! .

Again, who would want to go back to an illiberal past when calls to penitence and faith were deemed sufficient. We've come a long way from that. We are more enlightened in our understanding of the forces that warp and defoliate life. We know now that there are oppressive powers at work that must be isolated, addressed and overcome.

Sin can be left to the Rescue Missions, the itinerant evangelists, fundamentalist sects and "Prepare to Meet Your God" road signs. We have more relevant fish to fry!

Contending for sin as a valid life category in today's world is like opting for running boards on cars, or kerosene lamps, or the one-room school house, or unpasteurized milk!

Sin has largely disappeared from our speech and thought. We have welcomed its disappearance.

* * *

My main point, however, is this: We should mourn the passing of sin and opt for its return. We Christians must not surrender sin as a category of human experience in order to reach an accommodation with a sophisticated age. Other aspects of the Biblical world view may be expendable. Demon-possession, to suggest one. But it is all together critical that we retain our belief in the existence of sin.

There are many reasons why we ought not to be ashamed of the gospel on this point. Let me suggest a few. Without a reference to sin we cannot truly

understand life -- our own or anyone else's. Walter Grundmann, writing about sin in the highly respected Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says simply and flatly that "Sin is the reality which, with creatureliness, determines the nature of the world." 1

Even such negatives as poverty, powerlessness, slum housing, and racism are traceable to someone's pride or greed or benign neglect. Systems do not come into being mysteriously. They always happen through people.

What's more, even those who have been affected by poverty, powerlessness, slum housing or racism know that but for their sin they would be better and other than they are. Which of us does not know in the lucid moments of introspection that he has made a substantial contribution to his own misery!

The papers carried a story a few weeks back about a 34 year old cleaning woman who was raped at P.S. 186 here in New York City. Her assailants, later apprehended, turned out to be two young men, 15 and 16 years of age. Liberal interpreters of society would be quick to suggest that these teenagers were made to do what they did because of the provocations of their environment. I suggest that at bottom that is a pessimistic, even fatalistic, view of man. It is a condescending disparagement of ghetto people.

The Christian view maintains that human beings can rise in triumph over the grimmest of environments. We are never altogether passive before the surgings of our passions. It is not a service either to those who have been victimized by poverty and racism, or to society, to insist that they could do no other given their surroundings. I believe that Frank Capra, a surprising source for a minister, was speaking a lot more sense than we generally stumble upon in the daily press when he said that, "Fate is just the apothecary that fills out the life prescriptions we ourselves prescribe." 2 Without a reference to sin we cannot understand life. Our own or anyone else's.

Moreover, without a sense of sin society tends to

get divided into hardened camps that become increasingly intractable. Blocks of people with certain interests in common set themselves up against other blocks of people. One block blames the others for whatever is going wrong.

Too bad there isn't a corporation listed on the big board that deals in scapegoat manufacturing. That would be a good buy. There is presently a bull market in our country for scapegoats. We sit tightly locked within our ideological camps taking ourselves far too seriously. Whose mind holds all the truth? Who is not inherently weak and frail?

It takes a sense of sin -- in a community, a nation or a world -- for those frozen ideologies to thaw out. It is only out of an awareness of sin that those who hold such ideologies become pliable, reformable, reconciliable and changeable.

When there is a sense of sin in the land people know then that there is a law above all camps, and a righteousness that transcends the vying personalities of a given situation.

Wilbur Miller, the courageous minister who recently led an assault on the Carnarsie schools in the interest of his people, spoke a prophetic word while reviewing those circumstances. He declared that the important thing in that crisis was not who was right and who was wrong, but what was right and what was wrong. With that statement he lifted the Carnarsie stalemate out of ghetto politics and set it up against the tribunal of God!

The uncomfortable aspect of sin is that we are always asked to confess our own and not the other person's. To repent of our own and not the sins of the other block. But it is there that pliability and change can happen.

Finally, without a sense of sin our lives stay shut to the exciting offerings of the gospel. The liberation of the gospel -- the joy and the excite-

ment -- are available only to those who see themselves for the sinners that they are. This is why millions and millions of church folks never quite understand why others become so excited about what God has done for them in Christ.

The gospel is frequently misinterpreted because we do not grasp the problem that it intends to solve. The clue, I think, is in our text, "Thou shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." Nothing less!

Are you ready to take it straight from John Calvin? He comments on the angel's words to Joseph in this way: "The first truth taught us by these words is that those whom Christ is sent to save are in themselves lost."³ That's it. That's where it starts. Jesus is not offered to the world as an optional extra to help us round out some previously arrived at notion of religion.

Floyd Filson, a recognized Biblical scholar, comments thusly on our text: "The geneology of Matthew might suggest a political, nationalistic leader; this name (Jesus) points to a ministry of spiritual redemption."⁴

From this pulpit many years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a powerful sermon entitled, "The Peril From Which We are Rescued." It was a sermon on sin.

Sin is essentially a rejection of the claims of God by self-assertive man. Jesus kept telling people that God's "new" wanted to break in and that sin was what was keeping them from letting this "new" come alive in them.

Even God cannot get through to one who deifies himself. Hence the scriptural observation, "God resists the proud, (what else can He do?) but gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6)

To confess our sins is to make available to our

parched and hardened souls the riches of the gospel. I don't know how to put it any better than that. The doors to grace swing on the hinges of contrition and trust.

The elder brother heard the music and the dancing from a nearby barn. It was the prodigal returned who knew how warm and welcoming the father's house could be!

* * *

"Thou shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." Whatever became of sin? Let me be more personal as I close. Whatever became of your sin? Have you rationalized it away? Have you blamed it on someone else? Have you grown accustomed to its face and taken its presence for granted? There is a better way to deal with sin. God has given us a Savior. That's why Jesus came -- to take a burden off our hearts and set us free!!

CLOSING PRAYER

*Bless us, gracious Father, with accurate
self-sight*

*Lest we think of ourselves more highly
or more lowly than we ought.*

*Grant that we who know where mercy dwells may
be among the first to admit their sin.*

*For we would live in the freedom of the
forgiven.*

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Grundmann, Walter, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, p. 316, G. Kittel, Editor, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1967.
2. Capra, Frank, Frank Capra The Name Above The Title, p. 330. MacMillian Company, New York 1971.
3. Calvin, John, Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 1, p. 98, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1956.
4. Filson, Floyd, The Gospel According to St. Matthew, p. 54, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1960.

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