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Sermon: What's Your Favorite Sin?  
Reverend Dr. Alan Baughcum  
St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore Ohio  
February 22, 2026

Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Rom 5:12-19

I am not good at picking out titles for my sermons. Mostly I just take a line from one of the morning's scriptures as my title. I did not do that this morning. I was not trying to be flippant, but I did want to provoke you to think about sin, especially during this season of Lent.

A lot of people think that the Scriptures are about sin and only about sin and sometimes only about one sort of sin. Some people would have us focus on violence and war as the primary sin about which we should be concerned. There are people very concerned about sexual sins, perhaps mostly about same sex relationships which they regard as sinful. I disagree, but there are such people. There are people who want to talk about economic sins, where powerful rich people keep others poor and powerless.

Well, the Bible talks about sin. Jesus talks about sin. I am going to jump ahead in my sermon for just a second to say that I am one of those folks who thinks the Bible is basically about one sin, a sin that can show up in a variety of ways, a variety of sins. Please listen as I try to make the case for that argument.

Let's turn to the scriptures, first the reading from Genesis. The story of the Garden of Eden and how we do not live there anymore is a story about a lot of things. What I want to emphasize this morning is that it is a story about trust.

God commanded that "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

But Adam and Eve disobeyed. It wasn't just that Eve disobeyed. They both disobeyed God. There is no reason to focus only on Eve. Both were present and both disobeyed.

They listened to and talked with the serpent ... well, Eve talked while Adam listened next to her ... and they ate the fruit.

(Admit it, you probably think the fruit was an apple. If you were from the Near East, you probably would have thought it was fig or a citron. A citron looks like a large lemon with a bumpy skin. Mostly we know it for its candied peel used in fruitcake. It is the fruit from which lemons and limes originated.)

Why did God not want them to eat the fruit? Who can say for sure? It may have been that God had a view of the entirety and purpose of creation, as its creator, that human beings,

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from within creation would never have. God may have been trying to protect both humans and creation by keeping humans away from something they were not able to understand.

Regardless, Eve and Adam did not trust God enough to consider that God's commandment might have been motivated for their own good. They decided to trust in themselves to make decisions about their own well-being. With the knowledge of good and evil, they thought they could take care of themselves.

Once human beings had disobeyed God by trusting in their own judgment instead of God's, God knew that they could not be trusted to live and care for the garden where God had put them. They had to leave. And they were going to have to make their own living instead of relying on the abundance of God's Garden.

The first humans knew they had messed up. The minute they disobeyed, they became aware of their nakedness and covered themselves. Perhaps that is a way of describing their awareness that they had messed up by eating the fruit. All of a sudden, they had new knowledge, knowledge of their disobedience and their vulnerability.

Their disobedience was not just in eating the forbidden fruit. That came after their first mistake, trusting their own judgment instead of the instructions given them by God. They placed their trust in themselves instead of God.

It is not an accident that the first commandment in the ten commandments God gave to Moses was "You shall have no other gods before me ..."

Jesus made the same point when he shortened the meaning of God's 613 commandments in Torah into two, the first of which is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." God comes first.

It is after we decide to elevate ourselves into being the ultimate judge of our lives that we give ourselves permission to break all the other commandments. Who cares what God thinks or says? I can make my own decisions. And that is the sin of idolatry, putting God second to ourselves.

Now, we all have our favorite sin ...that is, our favorite sin to denounce! Yes, murder, theft, adultery ... all bad! But we can give ourselves permission to engage in those sins only after we have committed the first sin, putting ourselves ahead of God. We can only justify ourselves in our sin by ignoring God and God's commandments.

So how well do we do when we decide that we are our own gods and can dispense with God's commandments? How well do we take care of ourselves without God's commandments? Kind of a spotty record if you ask me. We fall short even when we try to remember and obey God's commandments. Paul writes (Romans 3:23) that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

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Sin is essentially the failure to trust God, our failure to trust God. That failure of trust, failure to put God first, leads to disobedience of God's commandments. The lack of trust is fundamentally based on the notion that we can take care of ourselves on our own. It is a kind of idolatry of self, pride in self, pride in our supposed self-sufficiency.

When Paul says we have sinned, I think that is what he means. It means that everyone of us, at some time in our lives, have decided we can go it alone, without God ... just like Adam and Eve.

Early in my tenure in my first church, I preached a sermon about sin. (I am against sin, just for the record! Just in case you had some doubts about the preacher.) Afterwards, one of the women of the church told me, "We don't do sin here." She was not interested and did not think that the church should be interested in hearing sermons about sin. I just nodded. I probably should have but I did not suggest to her that believing that sin was irrelevant to her life and all our lives was itself a sin, a sin of pride.

Let me tell you what I have discovered in my life. I cannot even get out of bed in the morning without trust in God. I need God walking with me every minute of the day. I know better than to believe that I have all the answers, or that I can live my life without God's guidance.

Who ... make that whom ... do we trust? Do we trust in ourselves? Or do we trust God?

Paul taught that we should trust Jesus. Jesus trusted God. That perfect trust by Jesus led to Jesus' perfect obedience to God. Even when it was clear that trust in God and obedience to God would mean being crucified, Jesus was obedient. Yes, he checked it out with God in his prayer to God in the garden of Gethsemane ... "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (See Mt 26:39b.) But he was obedient. Jesus trusted God all the way to crucifixion on the cross.

God used Jesus' perfect trust to demonstrate God's power over death. God raised Jesus on the third day to eternal life at the right-hand of God in heaven.

Paul teaches in his letter to the Romans that Adam and Jesus are comparable, though not equal, in the reach and power of their behavior. Through lack of trust in God and sin, we, just like Adam, will not live in this life in God's perfect garden. But we do live in the good and beautiful world of God's Creation. Yes, in God's Creation, we will experience death.

However, through Jesus' trust in God and obedience, we, just like Jesus, can experience life now in the Kingdom drawn near and can enjoy eternal life after death in God's Kingdom in its fullness. We can experience the faithful life modeled on the virtues of Jesus. We can live righteously:

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“Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:18-19)

But Paul's comparison and contrast of Adam and Jesus do not mean that they are somehow equal or that their behaviors have equal consequences. Disobedience of God leads to sin and death. The grace of God is greater than the condemnation of death. Obedience and trust in God's grace leads away from sin and towards righteousness. Righteousness by virtue of God's grace leads to eternal life while death from sin is, literally, a dead end.

This season of Lent is a time for us to contemplate these things. It is a time of self-reflection. For some it is a time of giving up something. For some it is a time of adding, adding a mission or ministry to help others.

Mostly it is a time for us to contemplate ways in which we have separated ourselves from God. It is a time to clean house, metaphorically, to prepare a place and to welcome again the love and grace of our Savior on Easter Sunday at the end of Lent.

I hope that everyone will remember at least this one message from this sermon. Every one of us has or will come to a moment when we just don't think we can go on. Maybe it happens when our spouse dies, or when a child dies. Maybe it comes when we lose our job. Maybe it comes when our investments fail, and we face a bleak future. Maybe it comes when we get a grim medical diagnosis.

I say to you that God's grace is bigger than all of that, bigger even than death. Remember how much bigger Goliath was compared to David? Well, God is bigger than Goliath.

Remember how big and powerful Jim Crow laws were in the United States and how crushing was the system of apartheid in South Africa? God is bigger than racial hatred and oppression.

When we are going down for the third time in stormy waters, remember who is walking on the sea above our drowning lives. We need to trust that Jesus is up there walking on those stormy seas, reaching down to lift us out of and over and through life's troubles.

Let us pray:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures where we cannot see the ending. You have called us to walk paths yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand leads us, and your love supports us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Amen.