



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"MISSING THE MARK"

Sunday Morning, January 7, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Psalm 8; Genesis 3:1-6

A minister's very first sermon is usually a frightful affair. It seems that something always goes wrong to mar the attempt. I can recall my own experience. I labored hard in preparation, stood up and fully delivered my message, sat down and saw by the watch I had been "in flight" exactly eight minutes! I was embarrassed, but the congregation seemed delighted, and I think now I understand why. However, my chagrin was slight in comparison to a friend of mine as he struggled through his first sermon effort. He chose as his subject the august question, "What is wrong with the world?" At the climax he sought to answer this inquiry by these words: "I'll tell you what is wrong - sin, S-I-E, sin." He reports that by the time he got to that second "sin" he realized his faulty spelling, and at that point the whole thing fell apart.

I have laughed often at this incident, and see it as quite characteristic of at least two things. It personifies a "first sermon" and it also typifies the confusion that surrounds the subject that he chose. What other three-letter word has so many different connotations? To one man it may mean playing cards; to another, cruelty to animals. Some individual may associate it with a whole string of words - "dancing, drinking, smoking"; others may think more abstractly and relate it to the demonic or the irrational in existence. The definition may range all the way from wearing lipstick to homicide, so diverse is the understanding of sin. My friend was different only in his confusion about spelling; there is wholesale ambiguity about its real essence. This morning I would like to attempt a clarification, for this is one of the central categories of our faith. And I would like to achieve this end by relating two word pictures that are found in the Old Testament.

Perhaps I should pause at the outset and note that the Hebrew language is vivid and picturesque. It is characterized by concrete images rather than abstract discourse. Back of the words and concepts are pictures, and this should help immensely in understanding the Biblical teaching. One of the main Hebrew words ("ha-ta-ah") for sin basically means "to miss the mark." The image is that of an archer or a slinger. He sets up a target, takes his aim, and then fails to hit "the bull's eye." The experience is one of unfulfilled intention or thwarted desire. At its deepest level it is a failure of purpose, and out of this image comes the Old Testament concept of sin.

But specifically, how does man "miss the mark?" How can this general idea be made more explicit for life? To answer this we need to look at man's nature and destiny. The problem of sin involves anthropology, for we cannot define man's

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failure unless we see what it is he should be and do. At this point we can turn to another Old Testament word picture. It is found in Psalm 8, and speaks directly to the issue of man's nature. The Psalmist describes man as "being made a little lower than the angels" (8:5a), as "being crowned with glory and honor" (8:5b), and as having "dominion over all the works of thy hands" (8:6). What does all this mean? It depicts man as a unique being, standing on the boundary line between the Creator and creation. At one and the same time, man has affinity with the Maker and the made. To be sure, he is a creature, brought into being by a Power other than himself, and possessing only those capacities that are given to him. Yet he is more than a creature. Martin Luther translates the fifth verse: "Thou has made him to lack but a little of God," and this is a fine insight. Man shares some of the Creator's capacities; he has consciousness, will power, freedom, the ability to act - all of this is what the Old Testament means by "the image of God." In light of his nature, man has been given a creative role in the affairs of the world. The words "glory and honor" are regal terms, meaning that man is God's king on the earth. He is given the dominion over animal and plant life, and asked to share with God the rule of all creation. Thus, in the phrase of the old popular song, man is "Mr. In-Between." He stands at the juncture of matter and spirit, and is organically related both to God above him and to creation beneath him. He moves in both realms, and is uniquely related on both levels. Made and yet maker, creature and yet creator, dependent servant and yet ruling lord - this is the Biblical concept of man.

Now it should be easier to describe the nature of sin. If it is basically "missing the mark," and if man is a "two-dimensional being," it is not hard to imagine what has happened. Man's temptation to sin grows out of his unique nature. It is, quite simply, the temptation to reject his true identity, to try to be what he is not, to forget who and what he is. This is how "missing the mark" works out in life.

As you can well anticipate, this action can take one of two forms. As man "walks the tightrope" between God on the one hand and animal life on the other, he can tip over and fall in either direction.

One of the classic forms of sin is the aspiration to be God. Here man forgets that although he is like God he is also unlike Him. He ignores the words about "a little lower" or "lacks but a little." He wills to be his own ultimate, to take over the control of life, to be the absolute lord of all. This is the type of "missing the mark" that is described in the story of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The evil one tantalizes Adam by the prospect of "being as God" (3:5). He urges him to throw off the limitations of creaturely existence; to disregard any mandate except his own desire. This is sin in one of its essential forms: the will to play God in our lives.

When I speak of sin in these terms, I realize I am using the word "God" in a way that is broader than usual opinion. We usually associate the term with "a Supreme Being who inhabits the heavens," but I am using it in a functional sense. Thus, "God" is that to which we give our ultimate allegiance. It may be the Divine Being, or it could be our business or sex or the nation or any number of objects. In this sense there are no "atheists," for every man organizes life around some value. Thus, the real concern of Christianity is not the question: "Do you believe in a God?" Everyone does this in actual practice. The real question is

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this: "Who or what is your God?" I think the basic aim of our faith can be set forth in one sentence: to let the true God be one's real God. Or to put it even more succinctly: let God be God! This is man's intended purpose, and to commit allegiance to any other object is "to miss the mark."

This "God-complex" is a classic form of sin, and we must learn to recognize it for what it is. Too often we limit our definition to a few violent acts and leave unchallenged the attitude that produces it all. Any man whose conscious or unconscious philosophy is "me first" or "my will be done" participates in what the Bible calls sin. It may be found in the most respected places and in revered forms of art, but the reality is unchanged.

I shall never forget a certain baccalaureate service when a minister arose to sing a solo. It was an arrangement of William Ernest Henley's famous "Invictus," and he introduced it as "a stirring Christian challenge." Then he began to sing:

"Out of the night that covers me
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

It matters not how strait the gate
How charged with punishments the scroll
I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.

This is anything but a "Christian challenge." One would be hard pressed to find a clearer description of "the sin attitude" than all this about the "unconquerable soul," "master of my fate," and "captain of my soul." One way of "missing the mark" is aspiring to be one's own God.

The other possibility is in the opposite direction. Just as surely as man is tempted to be more than he is, so is he tempted to be less. Over against the arrogant aspiration is the degrading downpull - the desire to live below the level of responsible manhood. The existentialist writers describe this by the word "unman." There are many forces today that push men in this direction. Life as depicted in the modern novel and movies is little above animal passion. And modern man has erected an elaborate explanation for such conduct. A determinism of the most thoroughgoing sort is accepted by many. As pseudo psychologists that grasp a few Freudian phrases, they explain that they cannot help themselves. Dark forces out of the recesses of the unconscious compel them inexorably, and they disclaim any responsibility for what they do. Such fatalism is found again and again in writers like Tennessee Williams and John Steinbeck. It perhaps played a significant role in the recent suicide of Ernest Hemingway. A good friend of mine, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the writings of this man, pointed out that Hemingway's father had done this and "like Father like son" was a familiar motif in his work. He may have felt that this was his destiny, whether or no. Such determinism, however conceived, is a subtle rejection of essential manhood. It reduces life to a mechanical level, and is an escape from the painful privilege of freedom.

Certainly the forces of heredity and circumstance exercise a tremendous influence over us; personality is not a blank piece of paper on which one is free to

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write whatever he pleases. There is a "given" to each life within which we have to live. But in the face of all this, man still possesses a measure of will power. He was given creative power that he might do a creative work; namely, exercise dominion over the forces of nature both within and without. To give in to conflicting urges and surrender one's self up to passing circumstance is really to forfeit one's unique nature. Man is not simply a beast of instinct or a pawn in the service of some blind fate; and to resign one's self to this plight is "missing the mark" as much as aspiring to be God.

By putting these two Old Testament pictures together, I think we can reach a clear conclusion of what the Bible means by sin. Amid the bewildering confusion of conflicting opinions, here is the essence: sin is missing the mark, and for man this means refusing to accept what he is. This is what we must remember: we are less than God and more than animals. We stand between, looking up to God and down to creation. To forsake this stance, and try either to storm heaven or settle in hell - this is sin, according to the Bible.

Do you recall the little rhyme in the old childhood round:

"Oh you can't get to heaven
On powder and paint
For the Lord don't want you
Like you ain't."

This is true. So remember - you are not God; you are not an animal; and to try to be either is sin.

You are a human being. Why not be yourself?