

Introduction

‘It’s cancer. I’m very sorry, but the biopsy confirms that the growth is malignant’.

You knew what the consultant was going to say from her grave demeanour when you sat down. But still, nothing quite prepares you. You have a strange feeling; it’s not really panic, more like vertigo. It feels as if the floor has vanished suddenly and you are falling through the air.

You are still trying to work out what to say when her face brightens a little, ‘Thankfully we have caught it in the early stages, and it is treatable. It is in an accessible part of your body, and the operation to remove it should be relatively straightforward’.

‘That’s wonderful. When can I have the surgery?’, you manage to mumble out the words.

‘We can have you in within the next month’.

The surgeon pauses and then asks, ‘Now, when we operate, how much of the cancerous growth do you want us to remove...?’

‘How much of your cancer do you want us to remove?’ is a ridiculous question. The answer is, ‘*all* of it, of course!’ And yet, that’s not how we think about sin, which is *spiritual cancer*. Like cancer, it originates from inside of us. There are lots of

nasty diseases out there, but part of what makes cancer uniquely terrifying is that it is not an *external* attack. This is not some virus or bacteria attacking my body from the outside; this is my own body killing me. This is death growing *inside* me! That is why cancer is such a fitting metaphor for sin. It doesn't come in from the outside, but flows out of our own hearts, bringing misery, corruption, and death.

So, why do we view this spiritual cancer so differently from physical cancer? When it comes to sin, we want God to forgive us, and perhaps to help get rid of some of our more flagrant, disgraceful behaviour. Although, there are other sins that, if we're honest, we are quite keen to hang on to, or that we don't think matter very much. Certainly, we don't exhaust much energy trying to kill them; we don't spend much time begging God in prayer for help fighting them. This is *madness* when you grasp the toxic reality of sin!

Sin is the root cause of every crime that has ever been committed. Sin is the root cause of every racist insult that degraded the image of God. Sin is the root cause of every adulterous affair that destroyed a family. Sin is the root cause of every violent mugging that traumatised and terrified someone. Sin is the root cause of every act of child abuse that took fragile innocence and replaced it with brokenness, shame and misery. Sin is the common link between Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine and my lazy selfishness leaving my wife to tidy up a mess I've made.

All of these things are symptoms of the one disease: sin. But our attitude to this spiritual cancer, sin, is very different from our attitude to physical cancer. Sin is a cancer we seem happy to live with, tolerate, excuse and indulge, even as it seeks to kill us.

This is a book about sin. You may be wondering, why on earth would you read a book about such a depressing topic? Because you and I are infected with the most dangerous disease ever discovered. It is so infectious that every human to draw

breath has it, and so deadly that no human has ever survived it (except one...). The mortality rate is 100%. Yet, most of us have almost no idea about what it is doing to us or how lethal it is. Paul urged the Corinthians, ‘in regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults’ (1 Cor. 14:20). The sad truth for too many followers of Jesus is that we are ‘mature’ and experienced in the practice of sin, but mere babies when it comes to understanding its toxic impact on us and others.

Fads and fashions come and go in evangelical Christianity, but I don’t think many would argue that we are in danger of over-emphasising the need to fight sin and lead ‘self-controlled, upright and godly lives’ (Titus 2:12). Few would claim that we overemphasise the power of sin and the danger our sinful desires present to us. It’s notable that except in churches where the formal liturgy requires it, serious confession of sins seems to be rare even in evangelical church services – and even rarer in personal devotions. How many of us are in the habit of confessing our sins when we pray to God on our own? I fear that our present spiritual culture does not take sin very seriously at all.

As I write this, I am on study leave. Just last week I visited a prominent evangelical church, and I got chatting to the man next to me. He was in his early 20s and told me how much he loved the church. He was thoroughly engaged and attentive throughout the service. He was also, he told me, ‘struggling with a raging hangover’. He didn’t feel the slightest bit of shame telling me he’d got thoroughly drunk the night before!

There are two major news items in the Christian world at the moment which reinforce the impression that we have failed to grasp the seriousness of sin:

1. Sex and marriage

Currently, the Church of England is tearing itself apart over whether to bless some sexual relationships which the Bible

defines as sinful. For many who describe themselves as progressive, the argument runs something like this:

- There are lots of positive things in these relationships.
- They bring love, companionship, happiness and faithfulness to those who enter them.
- I see people flourish in these relationships, so how can that be wrong?
- If we can't see any harm – quite the opposite, we can see lots of good things – then surely we should embrace it?

Lots of faithful Christians find this line of reasoning compelling. Even if they are not campaigning on the issue, they are happy to shrug their shoulders and say, 'It isn't really that big of a deal...' The key thing to notice, however, is that for many, *the fact that the Bible describes something as sinful is not a strong enough reason to oppose it*. We are unafraid to embrace or even celebrate what God deems sinful. In other words, we don't think sin is an issue in itself; it only becomes a problem when there are obvious negative consequences. Until then, our attitude is summed up by the phrase used in some sports: '*no harm; no foul*'!

2. Leadership abuse

The second issue dominating the Christian headlines is abuse by ministers or people in positions of authority within churches. To the shock of many, it has become increasingly apparent that this is not a problem confined to any one theological tradition. It seems to me that failure to take indwelling sin seriously is central to how many of these scandals have arisen, and in how the response has often been mishandled.

Most evangelical churches and movements pay lip service to the Bible's teaching that when it comes to qualification to

lead, character is more important than gifting (see 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1). Too often however we have seen the same pattern: a ministry which was fruitful and well-regarded collapses when patterns of bullying or sexual misconduct come to light. It emerges that many of Christ's precious sheep have been badly damaged over the years, and as a result the whole ministry or church is discredited, and Jesus' name is dishonoured in the eyes of the world. The crucial thing for our purposes is how often we hear something along the lines of 'Well, we always knew he was a bit overbearing, or could be uncomfortably tactile, but we had no idea it was this serious...' In other words, we trained and entrusted ministry positions to gifted, willing young men, and turned a blind eye to 'little' character defects. We just didn't take sin seriously enough (which means, we thought we knew better than God).

We see a failure to account for the power and seriousness of sin in the response to abuse too. We are all aware of instances where fallen leaders have been too quickly restored to positions of power and influence, only to fall *again*. It's as if we think a heartfelt expression of remorse, a brief period of reflection, or perhaps some counselling is enough to guarantee future godliness. What we fail to do is to account for the power and corrupting influence of indulged sin. It is not a small or easy thing to overcome a pattern of sin which has been allowed free rein for many years. The sad truth is that we sowed the wind, and now reap the whirlwind of abuse scandals.

Why don't we care more?

The particular focus of this book is the impact of sin on Christians, on those who have been forgiven through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most Christians want to be more like Jesus, and for most of us there are times when we feel utterly downcast over our inability to shake free of the addictive power certain sins seem to hold over us. However,

at times (*most of the time?*), we are blasé about our sin. We just don't seem that bothered about it. *Why is that?*

There can be a theological element to it – a concern that too much emphasis on sin will make us spiritually unhealthy. Some people worry that a focus on sin will undermine our confidence in God's love. One leader of an evangelical movement that has seen significant growth in the last two decades has a policy of not having a confession as a regular part of their services out of concern that to do so leads people to live 'under a cloud and in fear', rather than 'under grace and in confidence of their acceptance in Christ'.

Others might worry that too much talk of fighting sin and pursuing godly, disciplined lives will fill us with the graceless legalism of bitter little Pharisees, rather than the grace-fuelled delight which should mark those who love and are loved by Jesus. We will end up with churches where the focus is all on how rigorously we are obeying God's commands, rather than on enjoying knowing Jesus and living in relationship with Him.

Worse still is that an emphasis on what *we* must do to fight sin will lead us to rely on our own actions to make us right with God, rather than to trust in what *Jesus* has done at the cross.

These are legitimate concerns and I do not wish to dismiss them out of hand. I will look to address them as we go. Most of the time though, the reasons we are so lax about our sins (or some of them), and feel so little conviction and urgency in the battle for holiness, are rather less noble. I spent some time recently pondering the issue; here's what I concluded. I wonder if you recognise any of these in yourself:

- I think that so long as I'm forgiven, my sins don't do any real damage to me.
- I don't fear my sin, only the eternal judgement or earthly discipline it might bring.

- I feel like I can have a reasonable relationship with Jesus without getting rid of my sins.
- I just don't believe that toying with some pet sins might lead to my eternal ruin.
- I have the outwardly disgraceful sins of my life under control, and I just don't feel the same urgency about heart sins.
- I don't realise that my actions have a negative impact on others, and worse still, displease God.

What this means is that when we do become aware of sin, we are not particularly motivated to deal with it. Instead, we can find ourselves thinking:

- If I am forgiven, does it really matter if I still get angry when I don't get my way, and lose my temper with my wife sometimes?
- Does it really matter if I look at porn occasionally?
- Does it really matter if I spend far too much time thinking about money and financial security and I don't give as much as I should?
- It's not like I go around killing people or nicking stuff. So, if my sins don't cause any serious harm to others, are they really such a big deal...?

It matters to God

The central call of Christianity is to repent of our sin as well as to believe in Jesus; this is why we must develop a clear understanding of indwelling sin, which is the term the Bible uses when talking about sin which remains in us as Christians (see Rom. 7:20). Mark records Jesus beginning His ministry

with the command ‘the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:15, ESV). To repent means to turn away from something. Calvin defines it this way in his commentary on Acts 5: ‘an inwards turning around of man to God, which reveals itself afterwards in outward works’.¹ It is right that we emphasise the need to trust in and follow Jesus, but we must not neglect the other half of the gospel call – the command to repent from sin. The call to repent doesn’t end with the decision to follow Jesus. Turning away from sin is the lifelong activity of the believer. The New Testament abounds in urgent, uncompromising calls for believers to recognise our ongoing sinfulness and to take radical action to deal with it:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! (Rom. 6:15)

Flee from sexual immorality. (1 Cor. 6:18)

Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness ... (2 Tim. 2:22)

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do ... (Eph. 4:17)

... among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. (Eph. 5:3)

God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God ... (1 Thess. 4:7-8)

1. John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, eds., D. Torrance and T. Torrance (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1995), 149.