

## *All Fall Short*

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This was a difficult sermon to write.

One of the reasons is that liberal congregations do not like this topic. In all of the UCC congregations that I've served, there were always some people who had strong reactions whenever I talked about this idea that **we all sin** and that **we all fall short of God's glory**.

But sometimes I have to say things that people don't want to hear, if I am to be faithful to my calling. When I am in the pulpit, I am obligated to speak my truth, even when it might be unpopular. I remember in the 1980's—over 35 years ago—when I spoke out for equality for gay and lesbian people and some of the uproar that it caused. Preaching should never be a popularity contest.

But I guess that I'm an equal opportunity offender—challenging both conservative and liberal views. Progressive churches have a very difficult time with the word, "sin." In fact, most of them have completely removed it from our liturgy, our scripture readings and our preaching.

Now, I understand this, because the term has been used to label and judge others. Sin is often presented as part of a false binary—you have the sinners over here and the righteous folks over there. And instead of challenging this false dichotomy, this binary view, liberals tend to simply avoid talking about it at all. People think that only bad, immoral people sin.

But here's the thing. It's not just bad people. Good people, nice people are also **under the power of sin**, as Paul wrote. All people. No exceptions. As it is written: "**No one is perfect**, no one is completely righteous. No, not one." And I am pointing this out because this is a vital aspect of the Christian faith that cannot be ignored.

Ultimately, the path toward wholeness is not through good works. It is not through doing justice. It is not through being kind. It is not even through loving others. But so much of Christianity has become what Richard Rohr calls "a worthiness contest." So many churches are places that we prove how good we are. We do justice and love kindness, but it is under our own power. We are too self-sufficient and forget to **walk humbly with God**. Liberals and conservatives, alike. The focus on doing good can actually be a stumbling block to our spiritual awakening. Paul called this "works righteousness," a exercise of self-justification.

No, **a central component of the spiritual path** is that we **experience true wholeness** not by anything we do but simply **by being loved completely and unconditionally by God**. But the human tendency is to put conditions on this love. We like to say that we've earned it, that we made it happen. This is a false spiritual consciousness that spiritual teachers like Jesus constantly challenged. And **it is actually through our failings that we discover this love**; it is **by accepting that we fall short that we become open to this reality**. This truly is the good

news that we celebrate at Advent, coming in the form of the teacher and humble servant, Jesus. Yet this is often a news too good for our liking.

But those in the privileged position of self-justification were offended by this Jesus and his message. “Look at him, consorting with the sinners,” they said. It was the good people, the worthy people who were threatened by his teaching. And they reacted with violence.

In his parables he constantly told how the last will be first, and the first will be last. God’s kingdom is full of nobodies, those who are not good or worthy at all. God loves those who have gone astray and the prodigals? Wait a minute, we deserve it more. Look how good and loving we are! And the hired thug for the corrupt bosses in power, how could Jesus be OK with him?

He stood up for the woman caught in adultery. “Let those who are without sin cast the first stone,” he said. (John 8:7) What was he implying? His message was that **no one is without sin. No one.** And therefore they were in no position to condemn and destroy others. They were in no position to feel superior.

Jesus was constantly butting heads with those who thought themselves to be superior, those who thought that they were without sin, upstanding, moral, pious, obedient and good. The entire sermon on the mount was framed this way. He was addressing all those who felt worthy because they had followed all the rules.

Several times he repeats this formula: “You have heard it said...” And then he recites one of the laws from the Torah. And then he says, “But I say unto you...” And then he expands on, radicalizes and moves beyond that law. These have been termed the “six great antitheses.” So for example, “You have heard it said that you shall not kill. But I say unto you that anyone who is angry at his brother or sister is guilty of murder in their heart.” Or “You have heard it said that you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you anyone who lusts after another is guilty of adultery in their heart.”

What is he doing? He’s talking to people who have their own worthiness system, and he’s saying, “Look, you’re not as perfect as you think you are. All sin. All fall short of that unity with God. And you’re missing the point if you think that you can earn your way into this union.”

Paul Tillich, that great 20th century liberal theologian, wrote this magnificent book, Systematic Theology. It is profound, deep, and dense three volume work. And buried in it was this sentence that blew me away, and I never forgot it. He wrote, **“The courage to surrender one’s own goodness to God is the central element in the courage of faith.”**

This is something that the pious religious people to whom Jesus spoke could not do. They could not surrender their own goodness. They could not give up their worthiness game they were playing. They could not let go of their superiority system. Their purity system. And while they might have been very ethical and even caring people, because they could not surrender their own goodness, they could not fully receive the good news, embodied in the lowly birth of a peasant baby, of the unmerited love of God for all, without condition.

And so I'm talking about this topic today, that we all sin and fall short of union with God, because it is part of the bedrock of our spiritual tradition. The church is not simply an ethical society doing good things in the world.

I think that many resist the idea of sin, we get defensive, because we have looked at that term very moralistically. But the actual word in the Hebrew simply means "to miss the mark." It's not the shame-inducing word that people make it out to be. It's not really about individual actions, but refers more to a state of being, a condition. It is pervasive, reaching deep into an individual's soul, a **condition of the heart**. It is a less than perfect union with God. It is when we unconsciously participate in and perpetuate structures in society that divide and diminish others. When we describe sin like this, who could deny that they don't participate in it? We miss the mark of God's wisdom. We miss the mark of God's compassion. We miss the mark of God's oneness and compassion with all. We acknowledge with the prophet that "Our thoughts are not God's thoughts; our words are not God's words." We fall short of this glory. No one is perfect. No shame in that. It's just the truth.

I once had a seminar with the great preacher, William Sloane Coffin. And he was talking about the doctrine of original sin. Now most of us liberals bristle at this doctrine. It is the folk tale that the original sin of Adam and Eve, for which they were expelled from the garden, is passed along to every human being. The problem happens when we literalize this metaphorical language, saying things like babies from their moment of birth are vile and depraved. This, of course, is ridiculous.

But Bill Coffin had a different take. He called original sin the most optimistic doctrine there is! It's an acknowledgment of the human condition. As human beings we cannot escape this condition of missing the mark. We don't have to pretend to be perfect! We can surrender our goodness.

Because the life of faith is less about following the rules and more about surrender. It's not that the rules, and the laws and the ethical aspirations are bad, but they are very limited from a spirit point of view.

Paul wrote that "through the law we become **conscious of our sin**." As we try to fulfill the purposes of God, and it is good to try to do this, we realize how far we fall short. John Calvin said that the law "**wounds us**." It destroys all of our illusions of self-sufficiency and perfection, and opens us to the reality of a love that is truly unconditional.

Jesus provides the model for receiving this love. He surrendered his own goodness. "Don't call me good, only God is truly good," he said. And it was written that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." He humbled himself and "did not count equality with God as something that can be grasped." (Philippians 2)

In the First Letter of John it says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)

They way that we open ourselves to truth is by acknowledging that we fall short, by surrendering our own goodness to God, by giving up the worthiness system of our ego, by emptying ourselves. This is the primary spiritual task. But this is difficult. And superiority, works righteousness and illusions of perfection creep in. The ego takes over.

This reminds me of the story of the priest who was walking through the cathedral, and he hears what he thinks is the voice of God. So he rushes to the front of the church and kneels and starts saying, "I am nothing. I am nothing."

The bishop sees him and kneels next to him, also saying, "I am nothing. I am nothing."

The custodian sees the two of them, drops his broom, and kneels next to them. "I am nothing. I am nothing."

The priest sees this and nudges the bishop, saying, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

It's amazing how quickly the ego can take over.

It's amazing how our spiritual pursuit can become exercises in self-justification.

It's amazing how doing every good, laudable things can lead us away from God.

It's amazing how we can deceive ourselves.

This is not bad news. Rather, it is part of the good news of an unconditional love beyond our imagining.