**Corporate and Institutional Sin**

We focus so much on personal sin in Christianity, and rightly so. We are responsible for our actions that are contrary to the ways of God, and we need to get right with God by repenting of our sins and gaining foregiveness.

But the emphasis that it is only our personal sin that needs to be repented of is too narrow.

So, tying in with last week’s message about stewardship and caring for creation, there is another type of sin which affects us and thereby affects our relationship with God.

Craig Nessan, professor in Contextual Theology writes that sin is not attributable only to isolated individuals but to the system of relationships in which we engage. Sin is not merely individual but systemic.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I am talking today about corporate sin and institutional sin.

Personal sins are the sins you and I commit every single day, this is the generally understood concept of sin. Corporate sin, however, is the sin of your family, your nation, your company, or any other association you have.

Randolph Richards, professor in Biblical Studies writes that sin is corporate. It permeates the whole body. It leavens the whole lump and the honour of us all is at stake

Institutional Sin, sometimes called social sin or societal sin, is a sin that is promoted on a large scale. This sin is caused by powers that establish laws that promote sin. It is systemic evil.

If you’re part of a community, there are systems that the whole community participates in. Things get done by the system, and you, by participating in the community, are to some degree responsible.

Let me explain this.

You might be in the community and know exactly what the system is doing and be happy for it and are actually actively doing it.

Or secondly, you might kind of know what’s happening in the system and you don’t think too much about it, but you’re in favour of it.

Or number three, you know what’s happening, but you don’t do anything to stop it.

Or number four, you don’t really know what’s happening and you don’t care, and you don’t even care to try to find out about it.

An example may be seen in World War II. In Germany, the voters of that country in 1933 elected a new chancellor named Adolf Hitler. Even after seeing his evilness, his anti-Semitism, and his desire to take over the world, many continued to support his deadly and devilish plans. It happened because many good people didn’t want to get involved and thereby sinned by omission and inaction.

There is a well-known statement that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.

Another example of evil being allowed to operate would be living in South Africa under the Apartheid regime.

Or living in USA during the segregation of blacks and whites.

New Zealanders sat by as big business took no responsibility for the major birth defects in people who lived at Paritutu (New Plymouth) in families that lived near the Ivon Watkins-Dow's chemical plant which made the herbicide 2,4,5-T in New Plymouth - which contained the toxic dioxin TCDD. The herbicide was a key component of Agent Orange - the defoliant used by the United States military in the Vietnam War and a known cause of cancers.

The world, and in this last case New Zealanders, suffered because of corporate sin.

God sees things happening through communities, not just simply through individual actions. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Prior to the Great Flood, God saw the corporate wickedness of the people.

Genesis 6:5-7 *Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”*

Were there good people amongst the sinful mass? Of course, but everyone except Noah’s family faced the consequence of the corporate sin. There was the flood which if you like was God hitting the reset button on creation. There was judgement against the whole world.

Another example is the Israelites in the desert, grumbling and moaning about God. There was a consequence for their corporate sin and that was that that generation would not reach the Promised Land and only their children would. Was it everyone moaning or only some?

Yet another was when the Israelites got into the Promised Land and adopted the sinful/evil practices of the Amorites.

The Amorites were evil people, and the Bible says that the land had to vomit them out.

Leviticus 18:24-28

*‘Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. For the land has become defiled, therefore I have brought its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants.*

Now, the children of Israel, who had replaced the Amorites in that land, had come to the very same point. They were walking in the statutes of these nations who the Lord had shown that He was altogether against.

*II Kings 17:7 … the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt*

*II Kings 17:8 And had walked in the statutes of the nations whom the LORD had cast out from before the children of Israel. . .*

Was it everybody ort just most or some? Yet they all suffered the consequence.

We are talking here about sin and responsibility for it.

Daniel, in Daniel 9, confesses sins and says it’s his responsibility to repent for sins that his ancestors did that he wasn’t involved in at all. He was feeling a responsibility for and repenting for things his ancestors did. Not his personal sins but the sins of his nation.

Daniel 9:4–6 (NRSV) 4 *I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, “Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, 5 we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. 6 We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.*

Why did he repent? Because he knew that the culture that he was part of produced the sins of the past and he was still part of that culture. He sensed the responsibility.

I am not personally responsible for the way successive Governments here in NZ have dishonoured the Treaty of Waitangi since 1860, but like Daniel I see that the culture I am part of produced the sins of the past and I am still part of that culture.

And I believe we need to repent on behalf of our culture to God.

If the nations believed that all people are all made in the image of God, there would have been no Holocaust, no Apartheid, no black/white separatism.

It is said that Sin is hell begun; it is disruption, disintegration, disease.[[3]](#footnote-3)

When we think that we as humanity can do what it likes with creation around us, we sin.

Everything created by God was crafted lovingly by Him and is therefore precious to him. If the nation believed that, we would cherish creation rather than trash it.

In Romans 5, Paul goes even further past the idea that we are responsible only for what other members of our family did and he goes way beyond the idea that we’re responsible for what other members of our culture do. He says we are responsible, and we are condemned for what our ancestors Adam and Eve did.

Genesis 3:17–19 (NRSV)

*17 And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,*

*and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’*

*cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;*

*18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.*

*19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*

Just by virtue of being in the human race, we are responsible for things that we didn’t individually do. We are condemned for what they did.

But also tells us that *“But by connection to Jesus Christ, you can be saved not because of what you have done, but through your connection to him by faith.”*

The whole structure of the gospel is based on corporate responsibility.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Romans 5:18–21 (NRSV)

*18 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. 19 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. 20 But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Coming back to our creation theme from last week: Because of Adam’s sin, because he considered that he could be like God, creation as a whole suffered. And when creation suffers, so do we.

As nations fill the air with pollutants, as nations fill the seas with heavy metals like mercury, when nations poison the land in the interests of more food for us, when nations destroy the habitats of other creatures so we can get cheap wood or sugar crops, we as humanity sin against God.

Where there is sin, there are consequences.

Why do we get more cancers now than ever before? Is it because of the adulterated food and poisoned air that we are putting in our bodies?

A study reported this week says that Lung cancer in UK never-smokers doubled between 2008 and 2014. According to research presented today at the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC), exposure to tiny particles of fumes emitted from car exhausts and burning wood can increase the risk of a DNA mutation known to trigger lung tumours [[5]](#footnote-5)

Why are chickens we get in the supermarkets so big nowadays. Because they are filled with growth hormones. How do those growth hormones affect us? I don’t know.

Why are we told that eating shark so dangerous? It used to be a staple – shark and tatties. Because as apex predators they have absorbed dangerous amounts of mercury and heavy metals into their bodies. Mercury and heavy metals that we have put into the seas.

Why is some water so ruined through local mining that entire towns have to be moved?

Recently a disused gold mine collapsed in the Karangahake Gorge in the Waikato and the beautiful Ohinemuri River following through that gorge turned orange. Council claimed it was not toxic but told people to not go into the water. Hmmmm? Really?

Why is it that we cannot carbon date anything after 1950s. It is because of the unnaturally high radiation levels from our atomic and nuclear testing in our atmosphere.

What are we doing to ourselves and who is responsible?

It was not our individual fault. It is the result of other people’s decisions, but we suffer the consequences.

We suffer because of corporate and institutional sin.

We suffer because of the sins of other nameless people or groups of people.

Creation suffers and that suffering comes back to us that we all suffer.

Philip Yancey puts it that *Earth, though God’s showplace, is a good creation that has been bent*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Romans 8:19–21 (NRSV)

*19 The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

I talked last week about the level of human generated waste and destruction in the world – in the air, land, sea and space.

I did not put it there, but someone did. And it was not God’s plan that they did so.

People have played God by rejecting God’s Law and establishing their own judgement about right and wrong.

Romans 1

*21 Because knowing God, they didn’t glorify him as God, and didn’t give thanks, but became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless heart was darkened. 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, 23 and traded the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, four-footed animals, and creeping things.*

So, we suffer the consequences of those ungodly decisions made outside of our own choice.

The prophet Isaiah was distraught about what he prophetically sees (Isaiah 24)

*4 The earth mourns and fades away. The world languishes and fades away. The lofty people of the earth languish. 5 The earth also is polluted under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant. 6 Therefore the curse has devoured the earth, and those who dwell therein are found guilty.*

Just like Daniel, we need to take responsibility for the actions of governments in the past, the actions of big business, the actions of our forebears and the actions of the historical church and we need to seek God’s forgiveness for their actions and our inaction.

Remember the verse we read earlier: *19 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.*

Jesus has been there from the beginning, designing a system that, even in the midst of a fallen world, still bears the stamp of his genius and equips us for life on this planet."[[7]](#footnote-7)

By the power of the blood of his cross he is making crooked things straight; he is adjusting all things on earth to the divine order from which they have fallen.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As Christians, we should confess our own share in the corporate sin and guilt of our nation and our own circumstances to the holy judgment of God. Our one hope in this hour of crisis lies not in our own ability to change ourselves, our people, or the social structure of which we are a part, but in the power and grace of God to bring order out of confusion, good out of evil and redemption beyond judgment.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Prayer

Jesus, in dying you took on the pain of the whole of creation

Its labour pains became yours as you struggled on the cross

To bring the new kingdom to birth.

Your arms on the cross embrace the whole world in reconciling love

Offering healing to our polluted planet

And forgiveness to us, the polluters

Your resurrection life greens our world with the promise of a new spring

Renew us we pray, so that we might renew our world.

Amen.

1. Craig Nessan “Surviving Congregational Leadership: a theology of family systems” *Word and World* Vol XX, number 4, Fall 2000, 395 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Keller https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/racism-and-corporate-evil [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E. Stanley Jones *Abundant Living: 364 Daily Devotions* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Keller [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.msn.com/en-nz/health/other/doctors-discover-threat-that-could-crack-mystery-of-rising-cancers/ar-AA1qkXM0?ocid=msedgntp&pc=HCTS&cvid=eb12a6a9e6b1452e8f087bc2c3183ea5&ei=57 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Philip Yancey *Where is God when it hurts?* 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yancey [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. James Campbell *The Atonement: the heart of the gospel* 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Oberlin: Unity and Mission. (1957). *Christianity Today,* 1(25), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)