

## **“Jesus Exposed Sin”**

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*John 3:16–21*

*<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”<sup>1</sup>*

Imagine if everything you ever said was recorded. Now imagine if someone made a transcription of every time you made a moral judgment, every time you said, “He shouldn’t have done that . . . She ought to do this . . . That was wrong . . .” and so on. If you could read that transcript, you would find out pretty soon that we all make moral judgments, and we make them frequently.

Look at what happened with the events in Ferguson, Missouri last year. Michael Brown, a young black man, was shot and killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson. It seems that everyone made some kind of moral judgment. A lot of people simply assumed that Wilson was a racist—simply because he’s white and Brown was black—and they thought his actions were wrong. Some people looked at Brown and saw that he was on drugs, had just stolen something from a convenience store, and wasn’t listening to a police officer. They believed he was wrong. Perhaps the truth is that they were both wrong. I don’t know. I wasn’t there. The point is that everyone recognizes that certain things are wrong. We know that people do wrong things. Often, we believe it’s the “other” person that does the wrong, not us.

I’ve called this inclination to do wrong things—as well the actual wrong things we do—sin. I’ll continue to use that word. But sin can be easily misunderstood. Francis Spufford, an English writer, says that the word “sin,” as used in the world, is often trivialized. We use it to talk about little pleasures—a sinfully decadent chocolate cake, for example. We talk about the “sin tax” on things like cigarettes and alcohol—though the Bible doesn’t talk about tobacco and

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quoted herein is taken from the New International Version (1984).

doesn't forbid all use of alcohol. Or "sin" is used of only certain things, like sex. But sin isn't just "doing something naughty." It goes far deeper than that. Spufford says, "It's our active inclination to break stuff, 'stuff' here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people's, as well as material objects whose high gloss positively seems to invite a big fat scratch."<sup>2</sup>

The point to be made is that the filth of the world is not just "out there." It's within us, too. Sin is something that affects us all. And it's not just about us. Sin is primarily about God. Sin is a rebellion against God and against things that he has made. Don Carson says, "What makes sin *sin*, in the deepest sense, is that it is *against God*."<sup>3</sup> It is a rejection of the way God originally made things to be and it is a rejection of the way God wants things to be. When we reject God, we make things in his world a mess.

So, how can this mess be cleaned up? How can the filth truly be washed away? In order to understand how our situation can be fixed, we have to see sin for what it is. We have to see the filth clearly. Which one of us tries to clean our houses in the dark? You know, if you keep the lights low, your house may not seem all that dirty. But when we turn on the lights, we see where things are dirty, where things need to be cleaned. And that's what Jesus did when he entered into the world.

In John 8:12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Light and darkness are big themes in John's Gospel, as well as his letters. For example, we read this in the first chapter of 1 John:

<sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. <sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

<sup>8</sup> If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives (1 John 1:5-10).

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 27.

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, "Sin's Contemporary Significance," in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 24 (original emphasis).

Darkness represents sin. It's often committed in secret, behind closed doors. And, as we'll see, sin has more to do with what's inside of us than what we do on the outside. If we want to have a relationship with God, we need to walk in the light. God is that light. If we want our filth to be cleaned up, and our sins against God to be forgiven, we must walk toward God. But when we do that, our sins are exposed for what they are. They are revealed. We see our sin in the light of who God is. That can be a bit frightening. If you've ever confessed to someone else that you've done something wrong, you know what I mean. It's a bit scary. But until we do that, we can't have a relationship with God.<sup>4</sup>

That's what Jesus is talking about in John 3:16-21, the passage read earlier. Now, we all know John 3:16, but we forget about the context. God loved the world, yes. But what does that mean? I think it means, in part, that God loves Jews and Gentiles. I get that because of the context: this falls between Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader (John 3:1-15), and a Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26). But "world" also refers to "this sinful world." It's the realm of rebellion against God. Don Carson says, "God's love for the world is to be admired not because the world is so big but because the world is so bad."<sup>5</sup> But Jesus comes to offer salvation. Yet many reject him. Why? Consider verses 19-21: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.<sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.<sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." Many people refuse to come to the light because their evil deeds will be exposed. They love those things more than God, so they stay in darkness, instead of coming to the light, where those deeds will be exposed.

One part of Jesus' mission was to expose sin. He came to reveal to us how bad our condition is. He came to show us that not only are our deeds evil, but our hearts are also evil, too. Some of us know this already, because we've read through the Bible carefully. However, this may be a new concept to some of us. I have seen some people portray Jesus in such a way that it seems he came and said, "Hey, guys, you're fine just the way you are. God loves you, so we're cool. Carry on with your lives." But such an idea doesn't match what we find in the Gospels.

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<sup>4</sup> I suppose it's frightening because we don't know how the other person will react. But God already knows our sins and we can count on God to forgive us when we confess, as John tells us in 1 John 1:9.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, "Sin's Contemporary Significance," 25.

I've also seen other distorted views of Jesus and what he said about sin. Greg Boyd, a pastor and theologian, said, "it is important to notice that religious sin is the only sin Jesus publicly confronted."<sup>6</sup> Jesus certainly confronted what we might call "religious sin": he spoke out against things like hypocrisy and legalism, which is adding laws on top of God's laws. But Jesus also confronted all kinds of sins in public. Jesus exposes the sins of everyone: the wealthy and the poor, the religious and the non-religious, Americans, Asians, Europeans, and Africans—everybody.

Let's consider two things. One (something I said last week), when Jesus began his ministry, he preached that everyone needed to repent. This is what Matthew 4:17 says, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" That alone suggests two important things: People are on the wrong track and they are currently outside the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. No one is born part of the kingdom of God. (One must be born again—John 3:5.) Part of the conditions for entering God's kingdom is abandoning old ways of thinking, old attitudes, and old behaviors. Robert Yarbrough, a New Testament expert, says, "It implies forsaking sin and replacing it with what is right."<sup>7</sup> Everyone needs to repent. This is a universal statement.

Here's something else to consider, and I think this is a very powerful statement. In John 7, Jesus is talking with his brothers, who, at that point in time, don't even understand exactly who he is. They want Jesus to go to Jerusalem to take part in a Jewish religious festival. They want him to show his miracles to his followers. Jesus says that his "time has not come." He wasn't quite ready to die on the cross. If he had revealed himself clearly has the Messiah, the Son of God, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem would have accused him of blasphemy and killed him. They would do this because they couldn't bear Jesus' message. This is what Jesus says next: "The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right. <sup>7</sup> The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil" (John 7:6-7). The world—remember, this is the realm of sinful humanity—cannot hate Jesus' brothers because they were not yet his followers. But the world hates Jesus. Why? Because he declares that people do evil things. In fact, he shows us that we *are* evil (Matt. 7:11).

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 203.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, "Sin in the Gospels, Acts, and Hebrews to Revelation," in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 85.

I think it would also be a mistake to think of sin as merely breaking rules, in either thought or deed. The Bible isn't a big set of rules. I think rules are important, and there are some major rules in the Bible, like not murdering and not committing adultery, that we must obey. But the heart of sin is a broken relationship with God and broken relationships with others. Later in Matthew (22:37-40), Jesus says that the greatest commandment is: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." In other words, we can distill all the commandments in the Old Testament down to two principles: love God and love others. That means that all sin is a failure to love God and to love others. So sin isn't anything less than breaking rules, but it's a whole lot more. It's breaking relationships.

Now let's move on to some of Jesus' preaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows that sin is not just a matter of what we do on the outside, but it's also what goes on inside of us. Consider what Jesus says about murder. This is Matthew 5:21-22:

<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Murder is certainly wrong. The Sixth Commandment is "You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). But Jesus says not only is murder wrong, but anger is also wrong. "Raca" is an Aramaic word that means something like "empty head" or "idiot." Jesus says this kind of attitude is just as bad as murder, and the one who has it is in danger of going to hell.

Jesus then talks about adultery: <sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'" <sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). Adultery is the Seventh Commandment (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). Here, he says that not only is having sex outside of marriage wrong, but desiring to have sex outside of marriage is wrong.

I remember when I first read through the Sermon on the Mount. I walked around for days afterward thinking, "God knows my every thought." Since I knew what went on in my own head and heart, I was terrified. I suppose I grew up thinking that only my actions were sinful. But now I realized that my thoughts and desires could be sinful, too. I didn't realize everything that the

Bible said about my sin, and I didn't really understand the remedy for my problem, but I knew sin was serious. And it is. Jesus doesn't minimize the problem of sin. He came to reveal it.

As we move along through the Sermon the Mount, we see that many actions and attitudes are wrong: divorce (unless one's spouse has committed adultery—Matt. 5:31-32), retaliating against others (5:38-42), hypocrisy, or performing religious activities only to be seen (6:1-4, 16-18), greed (6:19-24), anxiety (6:25-34), and judging others more harshly than you want to be judged (7:1-16). The sins described in the Sermon the Mount are enough to condemn us all.

At the heart of most sin is idolatry. Look at Matthew 6:19-24:

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

<sup>22</sup>“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. <sup>23</sup>But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

<sup>24</sup>“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Jesus says that we shouldn't store up treasures here because they won't last. We should store up treasure in heaven. That means we should treasure God above anything here, and we should treasure doing things that will last, like loving God and loving others. The important part of that is captured in the last verse. We cannot serve two masters. We must choose God above anything else. If we have a great love for money, our love for God and our service to him will be divided. Greed—wanting things we don't have—is a form of idolatry (so says Paul in Col.3:5), which is putting anything else ahead of God in our hearts, minds, and activities. I think that's why greed is frequently denounced in the Bible.<sup>8</sup> When we are greedy, we want things more than we want God. And when we want things, it is never enough.

Let's look at Luke 12:13-21:

<sup>13</sup>Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

<sup>14</sup>Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”

<sup>15</sup>Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

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<sup>8</sup> In Jesus' teaching alone, see Matt. 19:16-26/Mark 10:17-25/Luke 18:18-25; Luke 12:13-21, 33-34; 16:13, 19-31

<sup>16</sup> And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. <sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

<sup>18</sup> “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup> And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

<sup>20</sup> “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

<sup>21</sup> “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

We see the same message here. When we are greedy, enough is not enough. We want more and more and more. We want to build bigger barns to house more of our stuff. Our stuff ends up owning us. I’m reminded of something else Jesus said, in John 8:34: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” When we sin, we think we’re in control, but we actually become enslaved to sin. We are like addicts. We are not free.

Jesus also talks a fair amount about sex. Sex and money tend to be the two big idols. We’ve already heard that lust is equivalent to adultery. Jesus also affirms the definition of marriage that is given by God in Genesis 2. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 19:4-6:

<sup>4</sup> “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ <sup>5</sup> and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

Did you catch that? Jesus said that the *Creator*, who “made them male and female,” *said* that a man and a woman become one flesh in marriage. In other words, the definition of marriage that we read in Genesis 2:24 is what God said marriage is. Any attempt to redefine marriage is wrong. Any sex outside of that definition of marriage is a sin, and in most cases divorce is a sin. And since lust is a sin, I would imagine that nearly every human being who has ever lived is a sexual sinner.

Yes, Jesus also talked about religious sins. We read about that in Mark 7:1-13:

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and <sup>2</sup> saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition

of the elders. <sup>4</sup> When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

<sup>5</sup> So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

<sup>6</sup> He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“ ‘These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.

<sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are but rules taught by men.’

<sup>8</sup> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

<sup>9</sup> And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ <sup>11</sup> But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), <sup>12</sup> then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. <sup>13</sup> Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

There are two things that are really important here. The Jewish religious leaders added to the laws that God gave the Israelites in the Old Testament. They added laws about cleanliness, including cleaning one’s hands. Notice that the Pharisees mention “the tradition of the elders.” So Jesus tells them they ignore God’s commands in order to hold on to manmade traditions. This is always a problem with religious people. It happens in many churches today. The other thing is that they skirted one of the Ten Commandments, “honor your mother and your father,” by saying they had an obligation to give “Corban,” which was an offering devoted to God, another thing that they added to the Old Testament laws. This would be like saying, “Sorry, mom, I know you have medical bills you need help with, but I have to give my ten percent to the church.” All of us need to understand the principles behind God’s commandments. We must remember that we love God often by loving others. We can’t use service to God as an excuse not to serve others.

The greatest problem with religious sins—like any other sins—is that they are committed with bad motives. Offering up acts of worship to God with a bad motives—such as a desire to appear holy and righteous—is not worship at all. All sins stem from the heart. We see this in the very next passage in Mark 7 (vv. 14-23):



<sup>14</sup> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup> Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’”

<sup>17</sup> After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. <sup>18</sup> “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? <sup>19</sup> For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)

<sup>20</sup> He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

When God gave certain commands in the Old Testament—ones referring to certain foods to eat or not eat, or certain clothes to wear and not wear, or certain ways to be physically clean or unclean—these were merely pictures of a greater reality. The real problem is not what food we eat or clothes we wear. The real problem is our desires, what is in our hearts. The things in our hearts make us unclean. If you stop and think about all those words that Jesus uses—evil thoughts, sexually immoral thoughts, thieving thoughts, murderous thoughts, lustful desires, greedy desires, malicious thoughts, deceitful intent, lewd thoughts, envious thoughts, slanderous thoughts, arrogant thoughts, foolish thoughts and desires—you have to realize that you, like everyone else, are unclean. You are sinful. You stand deserving God’s wrath. Read again Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. We deserve condemnation.

Now, if I stopped here, this would all be bad news. But bad news is necessary to understand the good news. If we don’t understand the depth our sin, we can’t understand the height of God’s love. If we don’t see our sin for what it is, we won’t realize how much we need salvation. Because of our sin problem—because we have hearts that are bent toward evil—we can’t pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. We need help that only God can provide.

The good news is that Jesus came to help sinners like you and me. He didn’t come for people who were doing fine on their own. This is what we read in Matthew 9:10-13:

<sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”

<sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Not only did Jesus come for sinners, but Jesus also died for sinners. We find this in many passages in the New Testament:

Romans 5:8: But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

2 Corinthians 5:21: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

1 Timothy 1:15: Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

1 Peter 3:18: For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.

Jesus came to die in our place on the cross. To be children of God, we don't rely on our own righteousness. Our best deeds are filthy (Isa. 64:6). But Jesus is our righteousness, and we merely need to come to him in faith and confess our sins and turn from them in order to right in the eyes of God.

This reminds me of a parable that Jesus taught in Luke 18:9-14. This should give us hope.

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup>“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup>“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So, what are we to do? If you are not a Christian, consider that you have done wrong things. You know you have. And the problem is that you have ultimately done wrong things against God. One day, your life will end, and you will meet him. Tell him now about your sin. He already knows all about it. Tell God that you've wrong him. Turn to Jesus in faith and follow him.

If you are a Christian, take sin seriously. Jesus died for your sin. Don't trivialize it. Use the resources God has given us—the Holy Spirit, the Bible, prayer, and the church—to fight against sin. We are supposed to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:14/1 Pet. 1:16).

As “children of light,” we shouldn't walk in darkness. Rather, we should expose evil deeds (Eph. 5:3-11). We can do this within the church, by confessing sins to each other and lovingly calling each other out on our sins. But when we share the gospel, we must also tell people about their sin problem. This isn't popular or fun, but it's a necessary part of the gospel. Without the bad news of sin, salvation from sin doesn't seem like good news.

Jesus came to expose sin, but he also came to die for sinners. Let's live in light of this, and let's share this message with others.