

**“America: Repent of Your Sins!”**  
**Rev. Bill Freeman**  
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**Menifee United Church of Christ**

A minister was going to preach on the gospel of Mark, chapter 17, so she asked her parishioners that by next Sunday they read the gospel of Mark, chapter 17. So, the next Sunday rolled around and she said, “I hope you all read the gospel of Mark, chapter 17. Can I have a show of hands?” Everybody’s hands went up. She said, “That’s interesting, because the gospel of Mark only has 16 chapters. Now I will give my sermon on the sin of lying.” Ah, lying and sin. We try to avoid sin, most of us, for the most part. We don’t want to be sinners. We are sinners, but we try not to sin. We know that that’s not a good thing, so we try to avoid sinning. We’re usually pretty generous with ourselves, though, about what constitutes sin. Usually we don’t think that what we do constitutes sin. We just make an innocent little mistake. Other people, when they do the same thing, they don’t commit an innocent little mistake, they are SINNERS! And they should go straight to wherever God sends sinners – hell or New Jersey or wherever it is.

I want to talk to you today about sin and what that means. What does “sin” mean? What do we mean when we talk about sin? We’ve talked about this before. We’ve talked about how sin is really missing the mark. Sin is not being perfect. Sin is making a mistake. Sin is making an error. I think there’s a difference between sin and evil. Sin is innocent in a lot of ways. Evil is not. Evil is hurtful, either physically or mentally or emotionally. But when we sin, I think we can learn from our sins. We make a mistake, but we can learn from it. It’s something we should put behind us. It’s like when a business person starts a business. They might flop on the first business, and maybe they flop on their second business, but they learn from their mistakes, so by the time they get to the third business they start, that works! They have success. They don’t dwell on the mistakes they made to get to that success. In the same way, we shouldn’t dwell on our sins, we should learn from our mistakes. Evil is a different thing. So in other words, if Bill Gates, I think made a few mistakes before he got to be Microsoft, but he didn’t dwell on the mistakes he made creating Microsoft. He’s too busy counting his millions, or billions, and giving them away to charity. That’s different, I think, than say, Bernie Madoff, who “made off” with millions of dollars of people’s money. That was evil. I want to talk with you today about sin.

The apostle Paul talks about sin. In the letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul talks about sin. He says that God has poured his love into us, into our hearts, and that Jesus died for the ungodly. Jesus died for all of our sins. What does that mean exactly? Well, we have love in our hearts because of God. God poured the love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And Christ died, not just for the ungodly, but for the godly. Christ died for all of us. Now, some Christians think Christ died just for us. Just for Christians. Or just for a certain denomination. Or just for one particular church. But no. Jesus died for everyone: Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and everyone. Jesus died for all of us. What does that mean? That Jesus died for our sins? I don’t usually talk about sin much. But I also don’t talk much about Jesus dying for our sins as much as I talk about Jesus dying because of our sins. I believe Jesus died because of our sins. Because of our sins of hatred. Because of our sins of not forgiving people. Because of our sins of greed. Jesus died because of our sins. Jesus died because he had the audacity to reduce the 613 commandments to just two, or three, depending on how you look at it. Love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself. The religious extremists of his day hated that. Who was this guy Jesus reducing the 613 commandments to just two? Jesus cured somebody on the Sabbath. He caused the blind man to see on the Sabbath. They didn’t like that, because you’re not supposed to do anything on the Sabbath. Jesus said if you had a sheep that fell in a ravine on the Sabbath, you’d pull it out on the Sabbath. Jesus said: Why can’t I do the same thing for my followers, for people who have fallen and need to rise up, even on the Sabbath? So, the religious extremists of Jesus’ day hated him for that. And really, they hated him because he presented a God of love, rather than a God of hate that the religious extremists of his day, and I would say, the religious extremists of our day, present. Jesus said, no, God is love. Because God is love. So, I think Jesus died as much because of our sins as for our sins. That’s what I want to talk to you about today – sin.

I believe, and I believe God believes, it’s a sin to kill people. I believe, and I believe God believes, it’s even more of a sin, a million times more of a sin, for society, for government, to kill people. Even criminals. I believe, and I believe God believes, it’s a sin to kill people, and I’ll explain why. When Texas executes somebody for a crime, that’s the same thing as Saudi Arabia executing somebody for a crime. In Saudi Arabia, they call it following Sharia Law. So, is Texas following Sharia law when it’s executing somebody? Even a criminal? “Now, wait a minute, Pastor. California has the death penalty. California voters just voted last November to support the death penalty.” Yeah, I know. Thanks for reminding me, my imaginary friend. I came from Michigan three years ago or so. Michigan has never had the death penalty. Ever. There’s only four or five countries, including the U.S., that have the death penalty. We’re in the same group as Saudi Arabia and some of the others. I just think that’s sinful. “Now, wait a minute, Pastor. I don’t agree with you. I think it’s perfectly fine to put people to death for committing a crime that calls for the death penalty. Who are you to say that’s not right, that’s a sin?” You’re right, my imaginary friend, don’t listen to me, listen to Jesus. Jesus, I think, talked about this. You will remember when Jesus was presented with the adulterous woman, by a group of men. You’ll note that he wasn’t presented with the adulterous man. It takes two to tango. Anyway, Jesus was presented with the adulterous woman and what was he going to do about it? Now the Law, the commandments, said that she should be stoned to death. But what did Jesus do? Jesus said, “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” Jesus did

not stone her to death. To me, that says that Jesus opposes the death penalty. Again, I'm not speaking today about individual sin, but about communal sin, societal sin, government sin.

Rev. Dr. William Barber is a minister from North Carolina, but I heard him online from a sermon he gave a couple months ago commemorating the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's anti-war sermon at Riverside Church in New York City. Rev. Dr. William Barber went to New York City, to Riverside Church, to preach about war and peace. He noted that the current administration wants to increase the military budget by 10%. So, he said, "What will make us safer? Spending \$54 billion more dollars for the war machine? Or giving money for jobs, education, health care and infrastructure." William Barber was speaking truth to power the same way that Dr. King did 50 years earlier. That's what ministers are supposed to do, speak truth to power. And he did. I try it myself every now and then. That's what ministers are supposed to do. That's what we're all supposed to do. We're all supposed to speak truth to power. When you see evil, you're supposed to call it out. When you see societal sin, governmental sin, I believe you're supposed to call it out. Can I get an Amen? "AMEN!" That's what we do, because we care about people. As politicians say, we care about "the children."

Parents are supposed to take care of the medical needs of their children. When they don't, and their children die, I believe, and I believe God believes, it's a sin. And society believes it's a crime, a lot of times. Parents end up in court if they neglect the medical needs of their children. So, doesn't it make sense, that if society, if the government, would neglect the medical needs of children and adults, isn't that a million times worse sin? Societal sin. Governmental sin. As I understand it, the secret health care bill that's being plotted and planned in Congress, is going to leave 24 million people without health insurance who have it now. Many of those people will die. Isn't that a greater sin for society, for the government, to commit? As I understand it, people will not be covered who have pre-existing conditions. As I understand it, that's being done to give a tax cut to the rich. To give millions, if not billions of dollars to the rich. So, it's even a greater sin. "Now, wait a minute, Pastor. I don't think the government should take care of people's health needs. They should take care of their own. They should pay for their own health care, even if they have pre-existing conditions. What do you say about that, Pastor?" Well, I don't say anything about it, my imaginary friend. I just quote Jesus. And Jesus said, "When I was sick, you comforted me." Jesus talked about doing "to the least of these." So, I think that's what we're supposed to do – to comfort the sick, to help people in need. And not to do that, I think, is a societal sin. We have to care about the marginalized, those who aren't rich. Jesus also said, "Blessed are you who are poor ... But woe to you who are rich." Jesus also talked about that. Jesus also talked about paying your taxes. So, we have to be concerned with those who are marginalized by society.

Someone came to the church recently and complained about our "Black Lives Matter" sign on the side of our building. So, I talked to him and I said, "What's the problem?" He said, "All lives matter." I said that I agree with that. All lives matter. But it's not unarmed "all lives" that are being shot and killed by white police officers, it's unarmed black lives being shot by white police officers. He said, "Police officers are being shot, too." I said, "Yes, I know. That's a tragedy. That's not right either. But it's a false equivalency." I told him that, years ago, I was a radio talk show host, believe it or not, and about the time of the Rodney King beating, which was caught on film - white police officers nearly beating Rodney King to death here in California. After there was a trial and the police officers were found not guilty, there was rioting and a white truck driver, Reginald Denny, was pulled from his truck and was nearly beaten to death by some black thugs. I talked about this on the radio and somebody called and said, "There, we're even! White officers beat up a black guy, now black guys beat up a white guy. We're even." I said, no, that's not how it works. We don't pay thugs to beat up a white truck driver. We pay police not to beat up motorists, like Rodney King. We don't pay white police officers to shoot and kill unarmed blacks. We pay them not to do that. So, I think it's a sin on society to have white police officers shoot and kill unarmed blacks. It can't happen. It's not right. I don't know if I changed that guy's mind, but it's wrong. It's especially wrong when those white police officers are put on trial and rarely, if ever, convicted. We have to look out for everybody, but especially people of color.

Mexico is where a number of immigrants come from, of course, they come to America. I believe, and I believe God believes it's a sin to come to this country illegally. But I believe, and I believe God believes it's an even greater sin to treat people differently who come from Mexico, than we treat those who come from Canada, or Europe, or Asia. I don't think people who come from Canada go through the same red tape as people who come from Mexico and I think that's wrong. I think we need to live up to the words on the Statue of Liberty: "Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." "Now, wait a minute, Pastor. I think it's wrong not to keep people in line with the law. It's right for us to deport illegal immigrants." Well, I understand, my imaginary friend, but I think it's wrong to treat people from Mexico differently than we treat other people and make them wait 12 years and sometimes, while they're waiting 12 years to be here legally, they're deported, because we now know who's trying to be here legally. I don't think that's right. "Well, Pastor, I don't care what you think. I think it's wrong." OK, don't listen to what I think, listen to what Jesus thinks. Jesus himself was an immigrant and a refugee, when his parents took him and fled to Egypt when he was just a baby. But Jesus also preached, in the gospel of Matthew: Welcome the stranger. And again, "as you do it to the least of these, you do it to me." I do know that the immigration situation is a difficult problem for this country to solve, but I think we should try to solve it. We shouldn't build a wall along Mexico when we're not building a wall along Canada. I think that just points out our racist policy. If somebody from Canada wants to come here, we don't have a problem with that as much as we have a problem with somebody from Mexico coming here. And as far as people from Mexico taking jobs, they often take jobs that other people don't want to do: picking fruit or picking tomatoes or whatever, in the 90 plus degree heat. I think if America could ever solve its immigration problem, that would be worth singing about.

Woody Guthrie sings a song about that, that I really love. He wrote it in response to Kate Smith's song, "God Bless America." Woody Guthrie thought that was a little too nationalistic, a little too jingoistic. So, he wrote, "This land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the New York Island, from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, this land was made for you and me." And this land is made for you and me. And it's made for people of color, and it's made for poor people, not just rich people. It's made for everyone. It's made for Christians, but not just Christians. For Jews and Buddhists and Muslims and Hindus and everyone. That's what that song is all about. That's what America should be all about. That's why today I didn't want to talk about individual sin, I wanted to talk about societal sin, governmental sin.

What about you? What do you think about societal sin? Governmental sin? Do you see that as greater than individual sin that preachers like to talk about all the time, usually while thumping their Bible? I hope you do. "Now, wait a minute, Pastor. I come to church, not to hear about politics. All I'm hearing this morning is talk about politics. I come to church to hear about the Bible! I come to church to hear about Jesus!" Well, I think I quoted Jesus a lot in this sermon. I quoted the Bible a lot. I think I did what Jesus did. Jesus talked about justice. I don't talk about politics. I don't mention politicians' names. I talk about justice. I talk about the issues that affect poor people, that affect people's health, that affect everyone. I hope I didn't give in to the sin of not talking about the Bible, not talking about Jesus, because I think I did talk about them. I think we all need to repent of our sins. That's what Jesus said. Whether we commit the sin of thinking we've read chapter 17 in the gospel of Mark, or whatever sins we've committed. But, I especially think it's important for America to repent of its sins. So that America can be that shining city on a hill.

Let us pray:  
God of love,  
Help us to repent of our sins.  
Help us to help others to repent of their sins,  
And help us to cry out for justice and cry out for America,  
to repent of its sins.  
Now and forevermore,  
By the power of the Holy Spirit  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes  
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*