



Section One: IT'S A MISTAKE

Last week, we determined that the starting point for the Christian faith is a question: *Who is Jesus?* Traditionally, however, the starting point for the Christian faith is an accusation: "You're a sinner."

Big difference.

Sin is an uncomfortable word. It's so uncomfortable that we've pretty much abandoned it. When kids disobey, parents don't respond with, "You've sinned against me." When an employee is late with a report, managers don't respond with, "Have a seat. We need to talk about your sins ." Even judges don't use that term.

But we know we aren't perfect, So in our efforts to address the tension between our inability to get it right every time and our disdain for being categorized as never getting it right, we've adopted a new term that falls somewhere in the middle: *mistake*. We aren't sinners. But we aren't perfect. We make *mistakes*.

**Experience enables you
to recognize a mistake
when you make it again.**

● Franklin P. Jones

There is a problem with using the term mistake to describe all our less-than-perfect decisions and behaviours. The problem is that labels don't adequately describe everything we call a mistake.

A mistake is an error in action, calculation, opinion, or judgment caused by poor reasoning, carelessness, or insufficient knowledge. Mistakes are accidental. A mistake is something a sixth grader makes on a math test. A mistake is something adults make when filing their income tax returns. A mistake is something we learn from so we don't do it again. However, we've expanded that definition to include just about everything.

But sin harms our relationship with God and our relationships with other people. It's so deeply ingrained in all of us, we can't stop sinning.

How about a celebrity when it's discovered that he's been involved in a multi-year affair? He almost always refers to those recurring rendezvous as mistakes. But does mistake really capture the magnitude and nature of an affair? Offended spouses say no. Offended spouses feel betrayed. They might even reach back for the old-fashioned term *sin* to describe what their partners are.

Then there's this. Sometimes we make mistakes on purpose. Don't we? Don't you? Sometimes we plan our mistakes. Think about that. You are guilty of premeditated mistakes! What do you call a person who plans and carries out the same mistakes over and over? A serial mistaker? Last question. What term should we use for a premeditated mistake that hurts another person?

Perhaps we've made a mistake substituting the term mistake for all things less than perfect. Perhaps we need a new term. Or perhaps we should reach back and resurrect an old term. As uncomfortable and as old-school as the term sin may seem, there is a benefit to reintroducing the word into our vocabularies.

Section One:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where have you experienced or observed the inadequacy of labeling something a mistake?
2. What do you associate with the word sin?
3. How do you respond to the consequences of having done something wrong?

Section Two: REPEAT OFFENDERS

You may resist being branded as a sinner. That's understandable. But the truth is, it's a brand no honest person can avoid. A sinner is anyone who knows the difference between right and wrong and chooses to do wrong. On purpose. Sound like someone you know?

Perhaps your resistance to being branded a sinner stems from its close association with divine condemnation, alienation, and separation. Listen to the average street preacher and you may conclude that not only does being a sinner condemn you to hell, but also that God is actually looking forward to sending you there!

Jesus had a very different response to those wearing the sinner brand. When you read the Gospels, you can't help noticing that he was attracted to sinners. Never once do we find him threatening them with hell. Not once. In fact, just the opposite is true. Jesus' response to sinners was an offer for restoration. As a result, people who were nothing like Jesus liked Jesus. And he liked 'em back. Self-righteous religious leaders who peddled graceless religion were the only ones Jesus consistently condemned. Jesus had little patience for the religious people who considered themselves sinless. He knew better. He knew they knew better as well.

Jesus taught that sin separates us from God, but that God's willingness to forgive reconnects us. So it was important to Jesus that men and women faced and embraced their status as sinners so they would recognize their need for forgiveness. Mistakers don't ask for forgiveness. Mistakers don't need forgiveness. Mistakers just need opportunities to do better next time.

When Jesus talked about sin, he made it so all-inclusive that nobody could escape. He said things like, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Ouch!

Jesus raised the standard so high that nobody made a passing grade. Then he turned right around and insisted that God was on an endless pursuit to restore his relationship with sinners. The transaction that made this possible was a personal admission of guilt and a request for forgiveness. So, while being branded a sinner is uncomfortable, Jesus taught that it is necessary. Sinners need forgiveness.

The difficulty we have in accepting responsibility for our behavior lies in the desire to avoid the pain of the consequences of that behavior.

 M. Scott Peck

Forgiveness is the means by which humanity is restored to a right relationship with the heavenly Father.

Section Two:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What does the fact that Jesus was attracted to sinners say about him?
2. What does it cost a person to acknowledge he or she is a sinner?
3. Do you resist the idea of being called a sinner?

Section Three: **ONLY ONE PERSON**

The Gospels record breathtaking events in which Jesus extended forgiveness and restoration to individuals who were considered beyond redemption. One involved a woman caught in adultery. This was not a one-time occurrence. This wasn't a mistake. It wasn't an accident. She knew better. Jewish law required that she be stoned. Jesus, who taught that the law was good and should be obeyed, invited those who assembled for the stoning to go ahead and commence the punishment . . . but with one interesting caveat.

"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." - John 8:7

Jesus didn't defend her . Jesus didn't dumb down her sin. Jesus didn't give her any wiggle room. No talk of her desperate plight or her difficult upbringing. She was guilty as charged and deserved to be punished. Again, he invited it. But no one moved. No one threw a stone. Eventually, the crowd dissipated. The oldest members of the mob were the first to leave. Before long, Jesus was alone with the frightened woman. It was only then that he addressed her directly.

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No on, sir." She said - John 8:10-11

What he said next is, well, breathtaking.

*"Then neither do I condemn you." Jesus declared.
"Go now and leave your life of sin." - John 8:11*

Jesus, who called people to an impossible standard of behavior, declared this condemned woman uncondemned. This apparent contradiction reflects the essence of Jesus' message and ministry. He did not condone sin. He did not condemn sinners. He called sin, sin. But instead of insisting people get what the law said they had coming, he extended the very thing sinning people deserved least: forgiveness.

If life were fair, we'd get treated the way we treat others, and if life were fair, we'd get paid exactly what we're worth. And in the end, we'd all get exactly what we deserve. So maybe it's better if life isn't fair.

● Mike Williams

Another incident is even more amazing, This one takes place during Jesus' crucifixion. The gospel writer Luke tells us that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. According to Luke one of the

criminals crucified with Jesus hurled insults at him. The other criminal, however, came to Jesus' defense.

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?" - Luke 23:40

What came next was shocking.

"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve." - Luke 23:41

That's quite a statement. The criminal's behavior was so heinous, he not only believed he deserved to die, he believed he deserved to be crucified--a horrible form of execution in which people often suffered for days before dying. Referring to Jesus, he continues,

"But this man has done nothing wrong. "Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." - Luke 23:41-42

There's no way, right? He has no opportunity to do "better". There's no way to know if he's sincere. He's desperate. He would say anything at this point, Wouldn't you? That's what makes this story... breathtaking.

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." - Luke 23:43

Just like that, he's forgiven.

He's restored.




He's in.

Section Three:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. In the previous paragraphs, what stands out to you about Jesus' interactions with the woman or the criminal?
2. Do you think Jesus' response to the criminal next to him was fair? Why or why not?

BOTTOM LINES FROM WEEK TWO:

-  Jesus raised the behavioral standard so high that no one could make a passing grade
-  God is on an endless pursuit to restore his relationship with sinners.
-  Jesus never minimized the seriousness of sin, but he did not condemn sinners.

FOR THE NEXT GROUP MEETING:

Read and complete the questions for Week Three.