

I recently had mulch delivered to the parsonage. Jonathan and I then began to rake it into the flower beds that surround the house. I hated every minute of it. Not because it was work. But because I don't like "gardening." For me, gardening is a chore, a task, another job to do. When it comes to the spiritual life, we can have the same reaction. When asked to spend time in prayer, worship, and Bible study, we may feel it is a chore. When asked to be part of a mission activity through the ministries of our church, we may feel it is a task to do. And when asked to increase our financial giving or serve those in need, we may feel it is just another job. But doing such things is how we allow the spiritual seeds that the Holy Spirit plants in our heart and soul to "*come up*" and "*yield a crop*" that is "*a hundred times more than was sown.*"

As we think about that, it is important to realize that WE are not producing that spiritual crop. We are just the soil through which GOD seeks to bring about His will "*on earth as in heaven.*" But as we see in Luke 8, the kind of soil we allow God to put in our heart and soul, and the depth of the soil we allow God to bring about in our heart and soul, is key to Him bringing about His will not only "*on earth as in heaven,*" but also in our individual lives. This is because God will not fertilize the soil of our heart and soul without our cooperation. God will not enrich the soil of our heart and soul against our will. And God will not till the soil of our heart and soul while we seek other gods. For we fallen and sinful human beings DO often seek after other gods.

Those gods may not be Zeus, or Allah, or Buddha. But they are gods. This is because anything that becomes the primary focus of our time, talent, and treasure other than the One True God, is a false god to which we are giving our devotion. That is why the Ten Commandments begin saying "*I am the Lord your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me,*" and "*you shall not make for yourself an idol . . . you shall not bow down to them or worship them.*" For it would make no sense for God to have included the Ten Commandments in the Bible if they were just a record of how God spoke to an ancient people who believed there were other gods. God made sure those commandments were included in the Bible because being tempted to worship things other than the One True God is part of what it means to be a fallen and sinful creature.

We see this when Jesus told people thousands of years after the giving of the Commandments "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" For the people of His day were making an idol out of the Law of Moses, thinking it had the power to save them. We see this when Paul told the Corinthians "*we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world.*" For the people of Corinth were wood carvings, thinking they had the power to save them. And we see this today when people give their lives to a career, a hobby, or a political party, thinking that such things will save them, or bring them happiness, or keep them safe.

Which may be why a number of people submitted questions for our summer sermon series on the topics of sin, how sin harms us, and (most importantly) how God removes sin from our lives. For that reason, I have titled this year's summer sermon series The Summer of Sin. Today we begin with a preface question: "*What is sin?*" For most people the answer is a list of bad things: lying, cheating, stealing, hating other people. But sin - at its core - is not just a series of actions God has labeled as wrong. Those are SINS (plural). SIN (singular) is a spiritual MALADY.

United Methodist confirmation materials explain this by asking “*Have you ever been sick?*” And then stating that when you are sick “*you have symptoms that make you feel really bad. However, if you only treat the symptoms, you may not get better. [That’s because] it’s not the symptoms that are the problem; it’s the illness or disease.*” The confirmation materials go on to explain that “*sometimes people get caught up in sins (actions and attitudes that are hurtful to persons, relationship, or creation). But those are just symptoms of sin . . . think of sin [singular] as the disease and sins [plural] as the symptoms.*” This is because the spiritual disease of sin that leads to the symptoms of sinful behaviors is “*being out of a right relationship with God.*” And when we are out of a right relationship with God, all sorts of bad things happen.

We see this illustrated in the gospel passage. In Luke 8, we read how Jesus told a parable that commentators label “the parable of the soils.” In that parable, Jesus explained how our heart and soul can be different kinds of soils, with some being able to receive the spiritual seeds God sows, and other soil not being able, thereby producing different results. To understand what Jesus was saying, however, we need to understand the idea of sin itself. That is because sin (as our confirmation materials teach) is being out of a right relationship with God. And when we are not in a right relationship with God there is more at stake than not producing enough spiritual fruit, or even committing sins. We see this when in what Luke tells us before the parable.

As chapter 8 opens, Luke says that Jesus was “*proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.*” Earlier in his book, Luke described what “*proclaiming the good news*” looked like by recording how Jesus’ first sermon declared that He was fulfilling the words of Isaiah: “*the Spirit of the Lord is on me . . . he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor., . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” Luke then showed what the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy looked like by telling how Jesus drove a demon out of a man. The fact that the first miracle Luke records after telling us that Jesus’ idea of “*proclaiming the good news*” was to do something to “*release the oppressed*” by healing a man possessed by a demon is not incidental. It is the very point of “*proclaiming the good news.*” For what good is it to proclaim “*the Lord’s favor*” if that favor does not result in the ills of this world being healed, and the most important ill of all: sin. Not sins, as in the symptoms. But sin, as in being out of a right relationship with God.

For when we are out of a right relationship with God, all sorts of bad things happen. And high on the list of those bad things, according to biblical writers, is being possessed by demons. We see this in the words of Jesus Himself. In chapter 12 of Matthew, we are told how Jesus healed a man possessed by a demon. Matthew says the crowd was “*astonished and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’*” that is, the Messiah. But, Matthew says “*when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons,’*” And they made that claim because they would not consider the idea that He might be the Messiah.

So Jesus continued to speak, and eventually said that “*when an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ [And] when it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and*

*takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.”*

In that statement, Jesus was addressing the basic reality of the condition of sin. That is because when we are not in a right relationship with God, the Holy Spirit does not dwell in our heart and soul. And when the Holy Spirit does not dwell in our heart and soul, we are in a position where that empty spot can be filled with something else. Which doesn't mean we are automatically possessed by a demon. But it does mean we are more likely to be influenced by evil, instead of being influenced by God. It means we are more likely to choose evil ways, instead of God's ways. And it means that we are more likely to lack having our heart and soul be the kind of spiritual soil that not only brings about God's will *“on earth as in heaven,”* but also brings it about in our own individual lives.

This is because while God calls us to allow our heart and soul to be the right kind of spiritual soil, and God calls us to allow that right kind of spiritual soil to be deep and fertile, the Holy Spirit will not cause the seeds He plants in our heart and soul to *“come up”* to *“yield a crop”* that is *“a hundred times more than was sown”* unless we cooperate with that process. Cooperating with that process requires that we be willing to do two things.

First, we must seek to have our heart and soul become SOIL THAT HEARS GOD. To hear God, we need to stop listening to the voices of all the false gods around us, instead begin to listen only to the voice of the One True God. This means spending time in prayer, worship and Bible study, being involved in mission activities, giving financially and serving others. For that is the first step to allowing the Holy Spirit to cause the seeds He plants in us to *“come up”* and *“yield a crop”* that is *“a hundred times more than was sown.”* That is because such things are the ways we hear God speak to us. And it is by those ways that God drives out of our lives the demonic forces that seek to take us further and further away from Him without us even knowing it.

Second, we must seek to have our heart and soul become SOIL THAT LISTENS TO GOD. To listen to God we must do what God tells us to do. This means choosing to obey what we hear in times of prayer, worship and Bible study, what we learn in mission activities, and what we grasp in giving financially and serving others. For that is the second step to allowing the Holy Spirit to cause the seeds He plants in us to *“come up”* and *“yield a crop”* that is *“a hundred times more than was sown.”* That is because such things are the ways God changes us from the inside out. And it is by those ways that God drives out of the lives of those around us the demonic forces that seek to take them further and further away from God without them even knowing it.

SO WHAT IS SIN? Sin is *“being out of a right relationship with God.”* Sin is the spiritual malady that leads to the symptoms of sinful behaviors. And sin is being in a position where we can have all sorts of bad things happen because the Holy Spirit is not dwelling in our heart and soul, thereby opening us up to the many evil things that challenge the presence of the One True God in our lives. As I said earlier, we see this in the opening words of Luke 8. In addition to having healed a man of demon possession soon after giving his first sermon about having been sent to bring *“release the oppressed,”* Luke tells us that Jesus was traveling *“about from one town and village to another,”*

*proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others."*

So when Jesus told the people about two different kinds of soil, and how God wants us to allow Him to make our heart and soul into the right kind of soil, it wasn't just so we might do a bunch of good deeds. It was so we might be so filled with the Holy Spirit, and He might so fully work in us and through us, that God's will might not only be done "*on earth as in heaven*," but also in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. And the most important sign of this happening, Jesus said through what He did, was that the demonic forces of this world would be driven away. For this is the deepest result of God saving the world from sin.

For us to be delivered from sin at that deepest level, however, and for us to work with God in helping others be delivered from sin at that deepest level, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to make us into SOIL THAT HEARS and SOIL THAT LISTENS. For that is how we allow the spiritual seeds The Holy Spirit plants in our heart and soul through to "*come up*" and "*yield a crop*" that is "*a hundred times more than was sown*." And like raking mulch even when it may not at the outset be something we want to do, we need to persevere until such acts of discipleship are no longer a chore, but the joy of our life. For that is what they will become if we allow God to change us from the inside out, recreating us into the holy people we were created to be.