

**Worse Sinners**  
**I Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9**  
**March 7, 2010**

In high school I played volleyball. I played 3 out of 4 years for a woman named Kathy Earp. Coach Earp had something to say about everything. Every time a stroke of bad luck or a setback happened to one of us, she said “You ain’t livin’ right.” I don’t always have bad luck, but I rarely, rarely, rarely have good luck so Coach Earp had many opportunities to say to me and to my best volleyball friend Patty “You ain’t livin’ right.” The irony of this was, I was a square peg in a round hole during high school because I was so squeaky clean: didn’t smoke, didn’t drink, didn’t have sex, didn’t cheat in school, and didn’t even cuss back then except at speech tournaments when all of us randomly turned into potty-mouthed teenagers. When we returned to school the next Monday, we had all turned back into our normal, profanity free lives. So when Coach Earp told the squeaky clean preacher’s kid that she wasn’t livin’ right, it was not a serious condemnation.

Coach Earp was playing when she said “you’re not livin’ right,” but I think that the mentality found in this playful expression is rooted in the same notion taken seriously in our culture. Most of us think and act like we deserve all of the good stuff that comes our way. Most of us think and act like people who have bad things happen to them deserve those bad things. Capitalism itself is fundamentally a meritocracy; if you work hard, you get ahead. That achievement is always rewarded in equal measure to one’s talents and dedication and hard work. That failure results from one’s own flaws: laziness, lack of focus, lack of discipline, lack of intelligence, lack of integrity. America is this big place where everyone has equal opportunity to make something of his or her life as well as to squander that opportunity. Or so we’re told.

As we can tell from the Lukan text, this idea of a meritocracy was not invented with capitalism. Jesus addressed what the crowds were thinking about the hot topic of the day- the Galileans whose blood purity had been compromised by a Gentile. To be impure when you’re alive gives you an opportunity to cleanse yourself. To be impure upon your death is like a permanent stain. A permanent condemnation. With this in mind Jesus asked them “do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Jesus being the big cheese doesn’t let them finish. He answers his own question: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Then of course Jesus mentions another grim accident of their immediate time and he says that those who were killed in this random accident were no more sinful than the other people remaining in Jerusalem. In Jesus’ eyes there’s no meritocracy -- except to be a servant. The last being first and all that. In Jesus’ eyes there was no hierarchy of sin. No same to same correlation could be gleaned from a random accident of a tower falling on eighteen people. It was not: they died in a horrible death in unusual circumstances therefore those people must be especially bad. It was not: everyone else who didn’t die in Jerusalem must be living right because they weren’t killed in this horrible way. Jesus said no to this mentality. The ones who lived and the ones who died were all equally sinners.

But we’re human. We like to place blame. It comforts us to place blame. When things are bad enough, we even think that it’s appropriate to blame ourselves. Even if I get remarried and have seventeen children who give me one hundred and seventeen

grandchildren, when I'm on my deathbed I'll probably still think "Who am I kidding? I'm the one to blame for the end of my first marriage." That's how deep down that blame goes. Hey. I'm still in therapy. It's not like I don't work on this stuff. I think that maybe the blame doesn't have a grip on me like it used to, but I'm pretty convinced that a mass of blame that solid and dense will never be removed. It will only be reduced and managed. Most of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, have a dense mass of blame lodged somewhere in our bodies. That depth of self-reproach and self-hatred is not good for us. It's not good for society. And merely having blame and guilt doesn't make us better Christians or better people. It hurts our health. It hurts our hearts. It makes us hurt others. Still we hang onto it. As perverse as it is, we need it.

Blame. It sets things right. It denounces things as wrong. Blame. It makes the world orderly. We line up evil. We line up good. We safely negotiate our way when the world makes sense. Blame. It's so much easier to see black and white instead of shades of grey. Blame. It's so much easier to live with certainty than it is to live with ambiguity. When random things happen, we ascribe blame so as to avoid randomness. If the world is random, then it's chaos and we can't have that. So we divide the world up between those who deserve to be punished and those who deserve to be protected. It's amazing how we always find a way to be on the side of protection. Even if we sincerely confess our sins once a week, we still always manage the world so that we belong on the side of the protected. We are better than \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank). Even if we're sinful, he or she is a worse sinner than me so I deserve God's favor. Yes, I do. And we act as if God's favor is a finite commodity. We covet what comes to us; we chastise and chasten the potential of God's favor being shared extravagantly. That's how blame becomes one of our favorite tools. It's yet another insidious way that we divide the world into have and have nots.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, you are some of the most benevolent people I've ever met. You are cooperative and progressive. You are committed to civil dialogue. You have hung with me as your pastor when it has been hard to have me as your pastor. You give pretty well to mission. Your building policies are very fair-minded. You're educated and sensible and you're willing to grow. You are an excellent people in an excellent little church and I have enough faith in you to believe that you can change the world if you put your minds to it. And for all of that, sometimes I wonder how many of you have any real clue about grace. You take your type A mentalities and plans of action and your strong self-initiative serve you very well in many aspects of your life, but these strengths may not be your best spiritual qualities because you transfer the meritocracy of your upbringing and the meritocracy of your current aspirations into the spiritual realm. You believe that because you pray and you care and you're civic minded and because you have all of the right opinions that you merit God's grace that God is satisfied with you. You're much too fashionable and politically correct to admit this, but even if you believe that you're truly a sinner, many of you fundamentally believe that there are worse sinners. You don't condemn them because that's not fashionable, but there is present in each one of us in this congregation that smug superiority of "I'm not one of them. I'm a good person and I earn it every day." For you see my brothers and sisters in Christ, good people are still sinners in the eyes of God. We fall short again and again and again. We stand in need of God's grace, no more and no less, than anyone else.

Several years ago I spoke to Lisa, my friend in Bowie, about David's plans to move out and to divorce me. At that point Lisa had known David for more than a decade. When Lisa heard the whole story she said "Beth, this sounds to be like this is a story that's more about frailty rather than a story about sin." Notice that she didn't take sin completely out of the picture, but she differentiated between frailty and sin. I think that's a hugely important distinction.

When my good friend David Ward killed himself last fall, I was completely unprepared for how many people would look beyond my grief and pass judgment on his final action. When I reached out to a friend of mine from college after David Ward's death, I told her how much I ached for the anguish that he must have felt in his life to bring him to such a place as suicide. My college friend basically replied that she didn't have any sympathy for my suicidal friend because he was selfish. She did add that she had sympathy for his wife and children. There is so much grief in a death such as this. I was grieved that my friend's selfish decision to die overshadowed one of the most selfless lives imaginable. I was also grieved that my friend, so lost in her sense of entitlement to name someone external to her as selfish, couldn't see the frailty of the situation. The out and out frailty. Good people can make horrible choices. Good people can unleash a world of hurt because of their limitations. That's how I certainly see addictions now. I grew up seeing alcohol, especially abuse of alcohol, as sinful. Now I see it as frailty and I admire those who fight for their redemption on a daily basis.

But what Christ says is not about frailty. It's about sin. What Paul says in I Corinthians is not about frailty. It's about sin. It's frailty to find yourself in a difficult place emotionally when you're in a committed relationship. It's frailty to allow a crush to go too far. It's frailty to postpone the difficult, but necessary conversations of "I'm not happy in this relationship." It's sin to allow the crush to become affection and distraction. It's a sin emotional energy into the non-covenanted relationship. It's a sin to think that only sex makes it an affair. It's sin to allow emotional emptiness to linger unaddressed for too long with one's partner so that a moderate tear becomes a major breach. It's frailty to be unable to consume alcohol in moderation. Almost all alcoholics whose stories I know drank to get drunk and couldn't do it any other way. That's frailty. It's sin to get behind the wheel of a car when you're drunk. It's sin when you choose obtaining alcohol over the health and happiness of your family. It's frailty when you come from a family unit who didn't give you enough love or attention or affirmation. It's frailty to make compromises in your moral decisions in order to be with a person or a group of people who validate you. It's sin to fall into patterns of behavior that demean your person because you're so desperate to be loved. It's a sin to have a lifelong pattern of getting attention to affirm a Mom & Dad shaped hole when the only cure for that is talk therapy, the ability to love one's self, and healthy relationships that support and sustain you. It's a sin to work yourself into smithereens as a way to escape intimacy in relationships. It's frailty not to be able to let go of trash and to feel the need to clutter one's home. It's a sin to allow your clutter to maim your life and to thwart your potential. It's frailty to have trepidation when you're working with a new group of people or you meet someone very different than yourself. It's a sin to allow something other than bad behavior to poison your relationship with them. Most differences of race, color, gender, economic circumstances, sexual orientation, hygiene, and mode of dress can be bridged with conversation and some patience. The sinful part is when we judge the person on something external that we assume about that person. It is a frailty to lack

sufficient regard for one's self or one's contributions. It is a sin when we allow our frailty to paralyze us. It is a sin when we allow our lack of self love to withhold kindness to one's self or to take too much blame for circumstances that are out of our control.

This past exercise that I did where I differentiate the frailty from the sinful action can be a very helpful way for us to become more compassionate and more humble. We aren't making excuses for anyone when we honestly identify a human flaw as a frailty. That's a wise, nonjudgmental social and spiritual interaction. But sin. That's different. We need to resist sin in all of its forms. That's the wisdom found in I Corinthians. We're all tempted, but we all have the ability to say no to the wrong thing and yes to the right thing. That power, that wisdom to know the difference, is how we take blame out of the equation. We have compassion, patient compassion with frailty. We have intolerance for sin. We start with intolerance for our own sin. When we're ready it is necessary to expand our intolerance for societal sin. It's not about self-flagellation. It's not about blame. It's not about aggression toward others because we have an intolerance for sin. It's wisdom. It's compassion. It's self-awareness and healthy self-critique. And it's the acceptance that God's best work came in the form of reconciliation and redemption, not as blame. Not condemnation. That's how we begin to dislodge the rootball of blame. That's how we begin to stop spreading guilt like a virus. That's how we learn the practices of accountability. That's how we begin the journey of grace upon everlasting, amazing, extravagant grace with Christ. Amen.