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Forgive Me for Waiting so Long to Tell You This
by David Servant

THREE

The Sinners' Club

Before the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, I spent some time traveling in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. I listened to the stories of those who were imprisoned behind miles of barbed wire, machine guns, and land mines—the communist insurance policy that no one could escape their “utopian society” without paying with his life.

Many with whom I spoke were suffering persecution because of their faith. Most people had no choice but to stand for hours in food lines in the bitter cold, and almost all were afraid to speak against those in authority. I witnessed the poverty, the misery, and the hopelessness of people who never seemed to smile and lived where everything was cloudy and gray.

Yet, with disgust, I saw the perks of the privileged party members who lived in this supposed “classless society,” and I thought about the hypocrisy of it all. It seemed to me that the communist leaders who denounced the evils of capitalism were the worst capitalists of all—they exploited their own people for the sake of self-centered gain.

I’ve also done some traveling in Central America and discovered why some of the people, to my great surprise, are so open to the ideas of communism. The reason is because they are the victims of greedy capitalists, whose profits claimed a higher priority than the welfare of the impoverished people who made their profits possible—people who have no hope of escape from a system they are convinced is evil.

It dawned on me that the real evil isn’t inherent in either economic system. Communists supposedly want equality for all, and capitalists, in theory, want everyone to have an equal opportunity. Still, both systems inevitably create people who become rich at the expense of others. Both systems have brought out the worst of humanity’s greed and selfishness.

Capitalist pigs or communist hogs, it makes no difference-they'll both push you into the mud to get their mouths in the slop. It's not the economic theories that are inherently evil-it's the people who use the systems to accomplish their selfish ends, regardless of who suffers in the process.

Democracies and Dictatorships

The same is true when we examine democracy and dictatorship. History teaches, as Lord Acton said, that "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Oh, how we Americans deplore the human rights violations of third-world dictators!

Democracy, however, doesn't automatically create incorruptible leaders, as we who live in the United States all know. It seems we are constantly barraged with news reports concerning those in our government who have committed some breach of ethics. You can't help but wonder, if you put those same people in a different country under a different political system, would they be erecting barbed wire fences along their borders?

Winston Churchill made the astute observation: "Democracy is the worst system ever invented, except for all the rest." How true. And what is it that makes democracy the worst system, except for all the rest? (Or in other words, what makes it better?)

Democracy provides a system of checks and balances. These add some extra incentives for leaders to walk the straight and narrow path while providing a safeguard for the citizens when its leaders don't. That's why a democracy is superior to a dictatorship-we can oust those rascals before they do too much damage!

Both dictatorships and democracies, like communism and capitalism, unmask an inherent evil in people. Given an opportunity to take advantage of someone else, the average person will normally seize the opportunity-if he's reasonably certain he won't suffer any negative repercussions.

And don't we just love talking about those *dirty* politicians and their *dirty* deeds? We certainly do. But when I call them "dirty politicians," I've unmasked myself.

Stop for a moment and picture this scene: Imagine a thrice-convicted felon behind bars who denounces his fellow inmates as "lawbreakers." What is your reaction? No doubt you immediately think to yourself, "Why, he has no right to denounce his fellow inmates as lawbreakers because he's just as guilty."

Now let's go back to talking about those *dirty* politicians. Do I really have a right to condemn a politician for using his position for selfish ends? I don't, unless I've never taken selfish advantage of another person or selfishly capitalized on a favorable circumstance. But I have. So when I condemn the dirty politician, *I'm no different than the felon who denounces his fellow inmates as "lawbreakers."* It's just one more case of the pot calling the kettle black.

"You Are the Man!"

Now don't pretend to sit there with a halo over your head. You too, my dear reader, are just as guilty as I am of this universal sin. All of us have acted in our own self-interest at one time or another, and others have suffered because of it. Everyone of us is guilty, either more or less. And to add sin to our sin, we've self-righteously denounced others who've acted just as we have. And that makes us hypocrites.

This is precisely the pandemic sin of which the apostle Paul was speaking in the following verse:

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, *for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things* (Romans 2:1; emphasis added).

It is essential to grasp this important truth. When we point out the sins of others, we are openly testifying before the court of heaven that we *know* there is such a thing as right and wrong. Our own judgments of others provide incontestable evidence of our belief in a universal code of ethics, a standard of conduct which we ourselves have broken many times. Consequently, our own judgments of others are self-condemning.

Do you remember hearing the story in the Bible of the time King David committed adultery with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba? She got pregnant, so David arranged for her husband's murder on the battlefield. It appeared that Uriah died because of the misfortunes of war, but his death had been prearranged by King David, his commander-in-chief, who then lawfully married Uriah's grieving widow.

David's devious plan seemed to go smoothly, until one day God sent a prophet named Nathan to visit him. Nathan asked King David for his judgment concerning a very rich man in his kingdom who had great flocks of sheep but who had taken the single lamb of a poor neighbor in order to set a meal before one of his guests. David was furious and righteously declared that the rich man should suffer death for his deed.

The prophet then pointed his finger at David and cried out, "*You are the man!*"

David's story has universal application, because every time you and I condemn someone else, the Sovereign Spirit of Justice points His finger at us and cries out, "*You are the man!*"

As a wise person once rightfully said, "When you point your finger at someone else, take note that three of your own fingers are pointing straight back at you."

The Root of the Problem

Do you feel convicted? You should. If you don't, something is wrong.

Chances are, if you are like most of us, when you feel conviction for sin, you try to justify yourself. Perhaps you're saying, "But I've never committed adultery or murder like David." Maybe you haven't. But there is one sin that is the root of all other sins, and that is *selfishness*. The root cause of David's sins was selfishness; he was "looking out for number one."

How does God feel about selfishness? Jesus said that the second greatest commandment is that we should love our neighbor as ourselves (see Matthew 22:36-40). The Bible says that the commandment to love unselfishly sums up *all* the commandments of the Old Testament:

He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this

saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

People commit adultery, murder, steal and covet as a result of their *selfishness*. God hates selfishness because He is unselfish love personified, and, therefore, doesn’t love one person more than any other. When an act of selfishness is committed, injustice takes place. And when we commit *any* act of selfishness, we’re guilty of the same sinful motivation as the adulterer or murderer.

Jesus wholeheartedly endorsed this truth in His famous “Sermon on the Mount.” His listeners then weren’t any different than you or I. Maybe we haven’t committed murder. Maybe we haven’t committed adultery. But listen to what the Son of God said:

“You have heard that the ancients [ancestors] were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’

“*But I say to you* that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca’ [or, empty-head], shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ *shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell*” (Matthew 5:21-22; emphasis added).

I didn’t say that-Jesus did. And according to Him, a person isn’t guiltless just because he’s never committed murder. The same hate that condemns the murderer to hell also condemns the angry man. Both are selfish. Jesus didn’t stop there:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you, that everyone who *looks* on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already *in his heart*” (Matthew 5:27-28; emphasis added).

The same selfishness that commits adultery is the same selfishness that lusts.

Throwing the First Stone

Perhaps you know the New Testament story of the woman caught in adultery. The Pharisees had caught her in the very act, and then brought her before Jesus in order to trap Him. They reminded Jesus that the law of Moses commanded such a woman be stoned to death.

Jesus’ profound reply was simply the restatement of a principle that all of us know to be true: *No one has a right to condemn another when he himself is guilty*. Jesus said it like this: “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7).

After He spoke, Jesus knelt down and wrote in the dust. The Bible says that the woman’s accusers slowly began to depart, first the oldest ones and then the younger ones. What was it that Jesus wrote in the dust? I wonder, could it have been the names of the women in the Pharisees’ fantasies? Was it the names of their girlfriends?

Regardless, two things become evident in this incident.

First of all, adultery is sin. Once everyone was gone, Jesus told the woman, “Go and *sin no more.*”

Second, to condemn others is a sin. The self-righteous men who were holding the stones that day deserved to be stoned every bit as much as the woman they were about to execute. That is how it always is.

All of us are guilty of passing judgment upon others for doing what we have likewise done: acted in our own self-interest. All of us are like the off-duty policeman who speeds home after issuing speeding tickets all day to irate motorists.

Like it or not, we’re all members of the sinners club. And some who think they don’t belong are actually the highest-ranking officers-which is why Jesus so frequently denounced self-righteous people. (Incidentally, He is the *only* one who had the right to denounce hypocrites-because He was sinless.)

Are We Basically Good People With a Few Flaws?

If you’re like most people, you consider yourself to be basically a good person. (Polls tell us that eighty-six percent of Americans believe they’re going to heaven.) But that is only because they’re comparing themselves with their neighbors, and not with God’s standards. Jesus said, “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). He made it plain that people are not basically good, but basically evil.

Think about your particular code of conduct. Would you rob a bank at gunpoint? Probably not. But have you ever stolen something of lesser value? Have you ever cheated on your income tax, thus stealing from *every* American citizen? Have you knowingly accepted more change than you were entitled to at the grocery store, thus stealing a few coins? Have you ever taken a small tool or a paper clip from an employer? You see, you *are* a thief. The reason you don’t rob a bank is not because you are basically good or basically unselfish. Your small thefts prove otherwise. The reason you don’t rob a bank is because you are afraid you might get caught. You see, the “goodness” that you *do* display is really just another indication of your selfishness! If you could rob a bank with as little risk to your reputation and future freedom as you can steal a paper clip from your company, you would! But the same selfishness that motivates you to steal small things that no one will know about also motivates you to be “good” in big things.

The same is true of murder. Would you ever kill someone? “Of course not!” you declare. And why not? “Because I’m a good person, and only evil people commit murder!”

Let me ask you then, if you *wouldn’t* fire bullets into the back of someone you dislike, why *do* you fire insults behind the backs of those you dislike? Mainly because hatred won’t send you to jail, whereas murder might. And, as a murderer, your reputation would be ruined, yet you can still be accepted by your peers even when you constantly cast insults. You see, selfishness is what motivates insulters to refrain from murdering.

If murder is ever legalized, no one would be safe, and you know it. We can be certain of that, because murder *has* been legalized in our country, but only as long as the victim hasn’t been born. Are people basically good or basically selfish? The answer is obvious when millions of people pay to have their own children ripped to pieces or poisoned in their wombs.

God's Point of View

You may be asking why I'm trying to make you feel so guilty. The answer is this: You must see the truth about *your own sin* in order to understand fully your need for a Savior.

I'm not going to leave you eternally guilty. In fact after two more chapters I'm going to tell you the best news that has ever been heard by a human ear. I'm leading up to God's plan to offer you a free pardon—full forgiveness. *But of absolute necessity, you must see yourself as a sinner who needs God's pardon.*

Some people are like the cowering adulteress—she knew she was guilty and was bracing herself to feel the first stone bruise her back. But most others are like the crowd that had gathered to condemn her, equally deserving of the punishment they hypocritically wanted to execute upon her.

Just as the apostle Paul said, they were self-condemned and without excuse.

Now picture the scene as God saw it: There stood a group of lustful men and adulterers preparing to stone an adulteress! What pure hypocrisy! But isn't that a picture of the human race?

Gossipers gossip about their gossipy neighbors. Lazy workers (who steal time from their boss) complain about the extravagant salary of their CEO. Holier-than-thou types don't go to church because "everyone there thinks he is holier-than-thou." Lustful editors write about fallen evangelists. Citizens cheat on their taxes so as not to give more money to "the corrupt government." Electors complain about the self-seeking politicians whom they elected to serve their own self-interests.

I recently read in the crime report of a local newspaper about three people who reported the theft of their radar detectors from their cars. They were angry because someone broke the law, stealing from them a device that helped them break the law!

All of us have acted selfishly, all of us have condemned and criticized others, and thus all of us are self-condemned before God. It's not just the communists, greedy capitalists, dirty politicians, bank robbers and murderers.

We're all guilt-carrying members of the sinners club. Membership has its consequences.

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).