

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Vocabulary of Faith: Sin”
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Psalm 32; 1 John 2:1-6

Sins, trespasses, debts, the use of these words has caused all sorts of chaos in ecumenical gatherings. Well-meaning Christians begin to pray together with the words of the Lord’s prayer...our father who art in heaven... then around the time we are praying about daily bread the panic sets in. Are we going to say sins, trespasses, or debts? If you were an outsider listening in, you could probably hear the subtle pause after forgive us our ... s... tr... d... debts. No one needs this kind of stress in their lives, especially during a prayer.

One reason for all the confusion is that the Bible uses tons of different Hebrew and Greek words and each word describes a slightly different kind of sin or characteristic of sin. When we boil all these words into a small three letter word we lose the depth of meaning the Bible is trying to convey.

Sin is complex. When we hear people use it today it usually turns into a weapon. Shouts from megaphones hurl “sinner” as an insult on crowds. Sin becomes an excuse for bad behavior, Satan made me do it. Sin becomes heavy with no way to unburden ourselves. I’ll admit when I saw my word for today was sin I was not looking forward to this sermon. But my preaching professors assured me in every text of the Bible there is always grace and after this week I agree.

The three most common words translated as sin are Pesha, Avah, and Khata.

Our first Hebrew word is Pesha. This is the word we best translate into trespass. This specifically is used for sins that break trust in a relationship. If a nation breaks a treaty with another nation that is pesha. Pesha also highlights the difference between being violated and being betrayed. If you were robbed you would feel violated, but if you found out the person who stole from you was a friend that would be a betrayal. The relationship you had with the person would cause the robbery to hurt even more. Pesha is used a lot by the prophets because their job is to tell the people about how they have broken their relationship with God. When Israel builds idols, or forgets to look after those in need, prophets point out their pesha, the ways they have turned away from their relationship with God.

The next Hebrew word, Avah literally means to be bent or to make crooked. The Bible uses this word to talk about crooked roads or a person physically becoming crooked as in their back is Avah. But it also refers to a person becoming figuratively crooked. Avah is used most often as a metaphor for how humans have bent the world out of shape. Through lying, killing, stealing and other destructive sins we have Avah’ed our purpose. The straight line of goodness and rightness has been made crooked. Each kink in the line is sin.

Avah is most commonly translated as iniquity. Iniquity is a word we only see on SAT tests these days. It describes not only the act of the sin but all the junk that comes after. The pain, the unjust structures, the negativity ripple that sin starts into motion. Iniquity is something we must trudge through every day because the remnants of past sins are still around us.

I read an article this week about how golf balls are killing sea turtles. If you don’t already know I have a not so mild obsession with turtles, this article was in one of my turtle magazines, yes there is more than one. These golf balls are not harming turtles in a way that would be obvious. The problem is all those missed and banked shots made by golfers that end up in the ocean. Golf balls are made of plastic, they are resilient, but they do degrade. When they do,

they break up into micro plastic. Shards of plastic less than 5 mm in size and they float around the ocean. Micro plastic is a problem because it is very hard to clean up, you can't see it and when animals digest it it messes with their hormone production. Worst yet, it also messes with human hormones when we end up eating a fish that has lived in an area heavy with micro plastic shards. Missing a shot on the back 9 may not feel like a sin, but it is avah. It causes a negative ripple of destruction in its wake.

The third word is the most commonly used word for sin. Khata. I was surprised to find out the first use of the word sin is not in the story of Adam and Eve but in the story of their children, Cain and Abel. In their story Cain and Abel give offerings to God. God knows Abel gives out of a right motivation and gives a good offering. Cain however does not give his offering with good intentions and holds back a bit. God makes it obvious that Abel is right, and Cain needs to improve. This makes Cain angry, and God sees the anger and knows where that anger will lead. SO, God steps in and tries and guide Cain back to the right path. God says "Why are you angry, if you do good you will be accepted, but if you keep on this path SIN lurks at the door with the desire to devour you. You must overcome this anger." Cain does not and he kills his brother, committing the first sin post-garden.

Like our other words, Khata does not mean sin in any literal way, Khata means to fail or miss the goal. The next time your favorite teams botches a field goal, or 3-point shot try screaming Khata at the TV instead of the other four-letter words you might feel like screaming in that moment. Khata means missing the goal but it gets translated over and over as sin, so there must be some goal we are supposed to be aiming for but when we miss it is sin. SO, what is the goal.

In short, the goal is Love. The ten commandments are a rubric of how not to sin and can be lumped into two categories, how we love God and how we love others. Loving God means God is number one in our lives, we use God's name with good intention, and we remember a day to worship God. Loving others means we honor our parents, we respect life, we respect other's body's, we respect their property, we tell the truth. Loving others is important because Genesis tells us everyone is made in God's image. Which means everyone represents God here on earth and is worthy of respect.

There is a man in the Bible named Joseph, you might know him better as the guy with the colorful coat and mean brothers. He is sold into slavery by his brothers but works his way into the trust of his master. Joseph is also very attractive, so his master's wife invites him to have sex with her. Josephs response is "how can I sin against God." This might seem like an odd response. Accepting the offer would obviously be a sin against the master, but how is that sinning against God. Joseph recognizes that his master carries the image of God. That image may be avah, or crooked because the man owns slaves, but even so Joseph knows a sin against any human is also a sin against God. Against that image of God that the human contains.

Considering that everybody is made in God's image, the ten commandments are really all about loving God. Because when we disrespect a person, we are also disrespecting God. We miss the goal of being fully loving. Khata is also used for moments people miss the mark of love without knowing it. When Pharaoh saves Egypt's economy through building projects, and better infrastructure but does so with the use of slave labor the Bible says this is Khata. This word highlights that sin is not just the actions we choose to take knowing they are wrong. Sin is also the way we spin our bad actions into thinking they are okay.

Recently in the news, pictures surfaced of Joshua Tree National park. Visitors had caused a fair amount of damage to the trees, and terrain. Some visitors probably intentionally came into the park to cause damage. Some brought spray cans to tag rocks, but they may have explained away their actions as "harmless." It's just a rock. Other visitors drove off the paths hoping to see a part of the park usually off limits. But then others may have innocently followed later in their tire tracks, thinking it was part of the path options. All of this is categorized as sin. And it may seem unfair that

the ones who didn't know the path was wrong still get a mark against them, but that points us back to how desperately we need Jesus to help us out of the mess sin creates.

Therefore, God tells Cain sin is ready to devour you. In the Old Testament sin is represented as a beast prowling and ready to pounce. It is a force outside ready to over take any human who is not vigilant. In the new testament Paul introduces the word Hamartia. It is also translated as sin. But this sin understanding of sin is not something that lurks out there. It is a powerful force within us so that even the things we know we shouldn't do the things we do not want to do, turn into the things we do. We are stuck.

Essentially, we are horrible judges about what is right and what is wrong. We call a rouge golf ball and a naive left turn fine, but they are not fine, they cause destruction just as bad as the intentional spray can, and a well-aimed gun. We are terrible judges because it is hard to ignore our own desires for safety and self-improvement. When our desires say I want to eat it is hard to find the strength to share our food with others. When our desires say I want to be safe it is hard to welcome in the stranger. When our desires say I want to protect my reputation it is hard to tell the truth. It is said you can love anyone if you only knew their story. This means that any mean, rude, obnoxious person probably has a reason they act that way. And if you knew that reason you would feel sympathy and offer them another measure of love. Well we can't know everyone's story, we can't map out the consequences of every action. This mess we are in is why God starts off creation with us not having to worry about it. But that got messed up and now we are stuck with free will and choices and sin.

These words Peshah, Avah, and Khata are also used to describe God's unimaginable grace.

the Old Testament avah is just as often used to describe God's grace. Hebrew poets describe how the negative after effect of sin can gather on us like weights carried on our backs. Making our backs crooked, more avah, but God offers to carry that weight. In psalms we learn that when we confess God offers to carry our avah. And there is a promise of a servant who will come to take all our avah on himself. Isaiah tells us this servant will take on all the avah of the world, allowing it to crush him, but that he will survive and come back to offer that same survival to us. Peshah may have broken the relationship with God, but God's response is to send Jesus to live as a human. To step into the other side of the relationship and literally put on the human predicament. God as Jesus lived in our shoes and saw how the force of sin inward and outward affected us. The amazing thing is that he did not, khata, or miss the goal yet also didn't blame us or punish us for our khata.

Jesus took on the punishment of those who peshah and khata. Jesus's example showed us clearly what the goal is so that we know when we have missed the goal. He also gave us a way back into a good relationship with God when we inevitably khata again. Sin in Biblical texts is not described or talked about so that we would feel bad about it. It is not used as a weapon to bring people down. The Bible describes sin to show us how vast God's grace is.

Every December when we plan for Christmas eve we discuss how dark the sanctuary should be during the candle lighting so that the glowsticks and candles really shine. Every year we decide we need to turn off all the lights and be in total darkness. Knowing darkness helps us appreciate the light. We need to know the reality of sin so that we can really see God's grace shine. We need to recognize sin is a powerful force within us so that when we wish for God to blot out all evil in the world we pause and remember that would mean our destruction as well. We need to know there are unintentionally consequences to seemingly innocent acts. We need to feel their weight on our shoulders but only for a second before giving the weight over to God so that we can appreciate the lightness of that lifted weight. We need to remember any act that is unloving toward another human hurts God so that when God offers us forgiveness, we are inspired to forgive those who....peshah, avah, khata...against us.