

Sin insulation: Sunday, September 16, Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

The sins revealed in these first three scripture passages are blockbusters—betrayal, idolatry, adultery and violence—the raw material for larger-than-life stories and films. The Bible does not whitewash the sins of its major characters. Their awful failures and wrongdoings are part of the story, as are the human consequences, divine judgment and forgiveness.

On their journey to the promised land, Aaron and the children of Israel craft a golden calf and worship it, crediting it with their rescue from Egypt. Despite their close relation with the Lord/Yahweh and their previous promises not to make any idols, the Israelites turn to idolatry. Generations later, King David, in a moment of lust, calls for Bathsheba and sleeps with her. Then, finding her pregnant, he attempts to cover his sin by arranging for her upright husband to be killed. And Paul, an apostle and leader in the church, was once “a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence.”

Each of these passages describes a personal response to sin. Moses learns that his brother and his people have betrayed their God, rewritten their history and denied their identity. Still, he pleads with God on their behalf—to remember the covenant, the promises and the work God has already done with and for them. Exodus 32 records an extraordinary dialogue in which Moses pleads and God hears.

When David grasps the magnitude of his sin, he is overwhelmed (2 Sam. 11-12). Faced with the evil he has done and his betrayal of God, David repents, and cries out to God for forgiveness, cleansing and restoration.

In 1 Timothy 1 we are drawn into Paul’s amazement that God would embrace a person like him and call him into ministry. Paul, the persecutor of the church, the man of violence—forgiven, transformed. He describes himself as the foremost among sinners—and uses the present tense. Paul recognizes his own capacity for evil, his actual sin and the forgiveness he has received, and his words explode into a doxology. If God could forgive and find a place for him, than his merciful God could do it for anyone.

Because facing and addressing sin is never easy, we do our best to avoid coming to grips with it. Many of us rub off the roughest edges of sin and convince ourselves that in comparison to the larger culture or our favorite Bible characters, our sins look pretty small. Nothing outrageous, although fears, jealousy, greed, lust and arrogance do continue to pester us.

Just last week a friend of mine asked if there was anyone who consistently spoke truth into my life. She wondered whether I was careful not to surround myself exclusively with people who depended on me and thus were wary of challenging me. I was surprised by her question, but as I looked at these passages I was reminded of the importance of having a “Nathan” in one’s life. Each of us needs someone, or a small community, who will name what is going on and speak a word of truth to us when it is needed. Those of us in ministry can insulate ourselves from warnings and criticism by not noticing that the people around us feel indebted to us.

Many Christians today find it easier to talk about the structural dimensions of sin than to address individual wrongdoing. It is too personal, too pious and too intrusive to name another person’s particular wrongdoing as sin. When faced with our own wrongdoing, we often find ways to distance ourselves, to shift the blame elsewhere or to conclude that it somehow just “happened.” But our unwillingness to face sin makes repentance irrelevant. And without repentance, there is no healing. At best we limp away or press on in the weak hope that things will ease with time.

There is no way to understand the depths of mercy and grace if we don’t recognize the capacity for sin within ourselves. Of course, there are risks. We can be buried by a “worm” theology, but our present danger seems to run in the opposite direction. With little sense of our need, we take God’s welcome for granted and have little appreciation for the grace that holds our lives.

Other troubles follow when we lose a robust awareness of sin. One is uncertainty about how to deal with the nagging guilt left over from wrongdoing that we bury, deny or ignore and the subsequent distancing from God that we experience. Another is a pious heartlessness toward those whose sins have found them out and who wear the consequences like a scarlet letter. Protective of our own precarious righteousness, we can only afford to see sin in others.

But what heaven sees when a sinner repents is a precious lost one who has been found. This is the wonder of Jesus’ parables in Luke 15 and the joy that is missed by

the scribes and Pharisees who are annoyed by Jesus' indiscriminate welcome to sinners. Tax collectors and sinners draw close to hear more good news, but the religious leaders grumble and note that Jesus is careless about the character and status of the people with whom he eats.

And so Jesus tells stories of lost things being found and directly connects the owner's joy at their recovery with God's pleasure as sinners repent and find welcome. Heaven rejoices when the lost are found. God's steadfast love, the basis for Moses' plea, David's hope and Paul's ministry—these are available to each person because God's abundant mercy continues to find us and make us new.