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**READING
PLAN**

“Be gracious to me, God, according to Your faithfulness; according to the greatness of Your compassion, wipe out my wrongdoings.

Wash me thoroughly from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my wrongdoings, and my sin is constantly before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that

You are justified

when You speak and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in guilt, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold,

You desire truth in the innermost being,

and in secret You will make wisdom known to me. Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean;

cleanse me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness, let the bones You have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and wipe out all my guilty deeds.

Create in me a clean heart, God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit.”

Psalm 51:1-12

King David penned these words after being confronted with his sin. The prophet Nathan came to him and rebuked him for his affair with Bathsheba and all that had happened in conjunction with it. David could have been prideful and arrogant. He could have turned his back on Nathan and on God, insisting that he was king and had the right to do what he pleased.

He could have, but he didn't. David let the truth wash over him. He let God's Spirit do a good work in his heart and create inside him a brokenness over his sin. He grieved the truth that he had dishonored the God he so loved. And he sought forgiveness. He repented and came before the Lord in humbleness, asking to be cleansed of his sin.

We live in a time where we're constantly told that if something feels good then it is good. The culture around us tells us that truth is relative and that morality is dead. We're told that we are our own judge and god—that if we say it is true and good for us, then it is actually true and good. This heart of relativism and the desire to be our own gods has moved us away from the truth of God and drawn us into the darkness of sin.

For the next six weeks, we invite you to reset your heart and mind. We invite you to cry out to God the same words that David cried in this psalm, "Create in me a clean heart, God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." We need a God-calibration of our hearts and minds. We need a reset. In a world that is constantly throwing us off kilter, we need His steadying hand to guide us to true righteousness.

Join us as we seek His face.

Join us as we choose to let go of the world's version of truth and cling to God's truth.

Join us as we surrender to the Spirit of God to let Him do a work inside us that only He can do.

WEEK 1

“MISSING THE MARK”

The word for sin first shows up in Genesis 4:7 where God warns Cain that “sin is lurking at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” It is the Hebrew word, ḥaṭṭā'āṭ and comes from the root word ḥāṭā' which can be translated as “to miss the mark.”

Sin is exactly that- when we miss the mark (or the standard) of God. God is perfect and holy, and so His ways are perfect and holy. When we sin, it is not simply that we broke some sort of arbitrary rule. Sin is missing the perfect and holy standard of God. It is anything that stands in opposition to who God is, His perfect character, and His perfect goodness. It's falling short of who He is.

It was once said that darkness is merely the absence of light, and it is measured not by the amount of darkness but by the lack of light. The same is true for cold. It is merely the absence of heat and is measured by the lack of heat in any situation. Sin is the absence of God. It is the removal of His goodness and His truth in any situation. It is the antithesis of who He is and His presence in our lives. It is walking in the opposite direction of God, doing the reverse of what He would do. When you take all that God is out of something, you are left with is sin.

So, sin is not defined by the whims of a fickle god looking to impose random rules on his followers. When we understand that sin is a deviation from the divine, we start to see clearly why it is such a big deal. It is a literal separation from our Creator, our King. Sin pulls us away from the very best existence and robs us of the perfection of God.

God did not create us to live in separation from Him. But sin does that. Sin takes us away from Him. In our brokenness, we run toward sin, striving to be our own gods and longing to reset the standard to one of our own making. Our sinful nature tells us that His standard is wrong, too hard, or unreasonable. It whispers that there could be another way, another truth, or another standard.

Yet deep down, we all understand that there is something beyond ourselves that we need. We crave something more than the relativism of self-godship. We understand that some things are just wrong because deep in our souls, something cries out for the One who created us. Our inner conscience screams that there is something more, something firm, that we crave to steady our lives. That something is God. And when we let go of self-godship, let go of defining our own set of rules, and trust the perfect, eternal, infallible God- that is when we find true peace.

WEEKLY READING:

Take time this week to read each passage and reflect on what the Bible tells us about sin, how we define it, and why it matters.

Sunday: Romans 3:9-18

Monday: Romans 3:23

Tuesday: 1 John 3:4

Wednesday: Ephesians 2:1-3

Thursday: James 4:17

Friday: Mark 7:20-23

Saturday: Isaiah 59:1-8

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

In your small group or with a trusted friend, reflect and discuss your answers to the following questions:

1. How does understanding sin as anything short of the holiness of God help you to identify it better in your life?

2. Reading Romans 3 gives us level ground to understand that no one is more righteous than another- all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. How does this truth affect you? Does it convict you in any way?

3. Ephesians 2 speaks about sin as the “lusts and desires of our flesh”. What are some areas where you see this reality in your own life, areas where you are struggling against your flesh?

4. James tells us that when we know what is right but choose not to do it, that is sin. Can you think of any times in your life you have known deep down what was right, but rationalized that it was okay to do what was wrong? Have you ever struggled with justifying sin that you knew you should avoid?

5. Jesus told His followers in Mark that it was the things that come from our heart that defile us. How does this truth stand in opposition to the world’s insistence that we “follow our hearts” as an ultimate guide to truth and righteousness?

WEEKLY ACTION STEP:

Take some time this week to go to God in prayer. Ask Him to search your heart and reveal any areas of your life where you are walking in sin. Ask Him to show you more of Himself so that you can learn to live more like Him. Invite the Holy Spirit to begin doing the work of sanctification and purification in your heart and mind, rooting out all desire for sin and giving you a desire for God's righteousness. Ask Him to show you any areas where you have fallen prey to the ideas of relativism and self-godship.

Prayerfully consider asking a trusted friend, family member, or mentor to pray with you about any areas of sin in your life that you are struggling with. Consider asking them to help keep you accountable, check in with you regularly, and be a safe place for you to confess and work through breaking patterns of sin in your life.

WEEK 2

“GIVING SOMETHING UP”

Sin first entered the world when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God. Genesis 3 tells us that immediately their eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked. The couple hurriedly hid in the bushes, sewing together fig leaves to cover themselves. They were exposed, vulnerable, and afraid. When God confronts them on their sin, in His grace, He provides clothing for them made from the animal skins. This is the first reference to any sort of death happening on earth. Something had to die to cover their nakedness.

We see that from the beginning, sin costs something. It always does. For Adam and Eve, sin robbed them of the perfect peace they had with God in the garden. Sin robbed them of a feeling of safety to be vulnerable, openness with God, and even their ability to commune closely with their Creator. Sin required death, separation, and exile.

Throughout human history we have seen clearly that the wages of sin is death. It never gives you more than it takes away. Sin always steals. It always costs. The biggest cost is our communion with God. Sin separates us from our Creator, just as it did for Adam and Eve. God is perfect and holy, and because of that, He cannot have communion with sin.

Sin also costs us communion with others. Sin destroys relationships, hurts those we love, causes division and incites wars. Sin is at the heart of every hurtful and broken thing in this world. It costs us peace, safety, belonging, and love. Sometimes it steals from us time, finances, opportunities, and blessings. No matter what, it always costs.

Throughout the Scriptures, we see that God has been constantly making a way for His people to come back to Him. In the Old Testament, God instituted a system of animal sacrifice as a means to atone for the sin in their lives. But humanity needed more than the blood of animals to make up for what was lost. We needed something powerful enough to restore the bond between us and God. We needed something supernatural.

And from the beginning, God had a plan for what that would be. Back in Genesis 3, God promises to send a Savior who would defeat sin and death- Jesus Christ. See, sin didn't just cost us. It cost God too. It cost the life of the Son of God, Jesus. It cost His blood shed as a sacrifice for our sins. It cost the second person of the God-head stepping down from His throne and into humanity. It cost Him living a perfect life and dying a sacrificial death. And His sacrifice was the final payment needed to settle the debt against us.

WEEKLY READING:

Take time this week to read each passage and reflect on what the Bible tells us about what sin costs.

Sunday: Genesis 3:1-11

Monday: John 8:34

Tuesday: Romans 6:23

Wednesday: Titus 2:11-14

Thursday: Hebrews 9:11-14

Friday: 1 John 4:9-10

Saturday: Hebrews 10:1-10

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

In your small group or with a trusted friend, reflect and discuss your answers to the following questions:

1. Have you ever been tempted to try and do enough to make up for your sin? How has that worked? Have you ever felt like it's enough?
2. Since we know that sin steals from us everything that is good, why do you think we still crave it? Is there somewhere in your heart that has reasoned that maybe sin wouldn't steal from you this time, that maybe you could avoid the cost?
3. It is amazing that even though we sinned against God, He was not pleased to allow us to remain separated. But throughout all of scripture it is God who initiates the plan for reconciliation and provides for our atonement. How does that truth give you comfort?
4. What are some of the ways you have seen sin steal from you or those you love? How has that cost helped you to see the brokenness of sin?
5. Which of this week's verses stood out to you the most? Why was that? How does that verse relate to where you have seen the cost of sin in your own life?

WEEKLY ACTION STEP:

Sin not only costs us eternally and in our relationship with God, but sin also costs us in our relationships with others. This week, take some time to talk to God about any areas where your sin has cost someone else or caused pain to them. Consider reaching out to that person (if possible) and sharing with them how God is moving in your heart. Ask them for forgiveness for what your sin cost them.

If reaching out to them isn't possible, take some time to write them a letter. You won't send this letter, but even just getting it out can be helpful in moving on. We can never completely make up for how our sin has hurt us and other. But through the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, we can invite God into the situation to provide healing through forgiveness in a supernatural way.

WEEK 3

“COMMITTING ADULTERY”

From the very beginning, God made it clear that He would not share His throne with anyone. He alone is God, and He requires total fidelity from His people. In Genesis 20:3, when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the very first one He gave was, “You shall have no other gods before Me.”

However, as humans, our hearts are often fickle and adulterous. Like an unfaithful wife, over and over, humanity has turned to other gods in worship and honor. We have chosen to worship gods of our own making, idols that have drawn us away from the One True King. Human history is rank with the stains of infidelity to God. We’ve left our first love time and time again.

The book of Hosea tells the story of a prophet who is called by God to love and marry a prostitute. Over and over, she leaves him to go after other men. And over and over, God sends Hosea after her. The constant love of Hosea, the faithfulness, and even the forgiveness is a shadow of the truth of our Savior. The message that Hosea’s life teaches us is that though we have left God over and over, He is always faithful to go after us. But also, in the same way we ache for Hosea and wonder why Gomer (his wife) refuses to stay with such a good man, we must also recognize ourselves in the story. We are Gomer. We are the unfaithful ones.

Maybe you’re reading this and thinking, “I don’t worship any gods. I don’t bow down to idols or sacrifice to demigods.”

The idols and gods of our time and culture look much different from the ones we read about in the Old Testament. Yet their hold on our lives and the destructive effects of our worship of them are not so different. We turn to the gods of food, wealth, comfort, or sex. We worship the idols of self-love, productivity, success, and esteem. We bow down to the pressures of worldly expectations and fall prey to the desires of the masses. We get tangled up in relationships that drag us away from God, or we compromise in situations so that we won't be rejected, all the while rejecting the God who so loves us.

Whether we see it or not, we are surrounded every day by the temptation to worship at the altar of one false god or another. Anything that compromises our total allegiance and obedience to God is an idol. It can be a person, a habit, a social movement, or even our own pride. We can try to rationalize all we want, telling ourselves that there is room in our lives for both God and this other thing. But, in the end, God will not share His throne. Anything less than true allegiance and fidelity to our Lord is sin.

WEEKLY READING:

Take time this week to read each passage and reflect on what the Bible tells us about idolatry and how God views our unfaithfulness.

Sunday: Genesis 20:3-6

Monday: James 4:4

Tuesday: Luke 16:13

Wednesday: 1 John 2:15

Thursday: Psalm 135:15-18

Friday: Galatians 4:8-9

Saturday: Romans 1:18-32

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

In your small group or with a trusted friend, reflect and discuss your answers to the following questions:

1. When you think of modern-day idolatry, what comes to mind?
2. Idols are anything that draw us away from total fidelity and sufficiency in Christ. With that definition in hand, are there any areas of your life currently where you are struggling with the temptation of an idol or false god? (Think about where you get your identity from, your security from, your worth from)
3. How have you seen yourself or others bow down to the false idols of this world? Was it easy to be fooled? Was it hard to identify the idol? Did you find yourself not wanting to give it up?
4. What do you think is the most tempting idol or false god in your life right now? What steps can you take, individually and in community, to create good boundaries to keep you from falling into idol worship?
5. God's love is relentless, and in the same way Hosea continued to pursue Gomer, God will come after us over and over again. How does this give your comfort? How does it make you want to be more faithful? Find someone to talk this over with this week.

WEEKLY ACTION STEP:

More often than not, it takes community and accountability to truly die to false idols, addictions, and the things that have kept us prisoner for far too long. As you contemplate what God is revealing to you, what is at least one area of your life that you want to move from bondage to sin and idols into freedom in Christ? Who can you talk to about this? Ask them to join with you in prayer, inviting God to break the chains that have held you captive for too long. Ask God to show you what boundaries He wants to put up in your life and invite your trusted person to help you stick to those boundaries.

(If you would ever like to receive professional help in this area, please let us know! We would love to help connect you with the resources you need to find total freedom. Email info@arborheights.org to learn more.)

WEEK 4

“FOLLOWING ALL THE RULES”

You’ve probably heard something like this before, “I’m sure I’m going to heaven. I’m a good person. I try to do what is right. I help the poor and I am honest in my business. I don’t steal or cheat anyone. I haven’t murdered anyone. I’m good. I’m sure God will look at all the good I’ve done.”

Unfortunately, this false belief that we are judged based on whether the good things in our lives outweigh the bad is a lie and one that has trapped so many. Armed with this lie, we see no need for a Savior. So long as we are basically a “good person” we go about our lives believing that everything is good, that God (if He really cares) is pleased with us, and that in the end, we’ll spend eternity in heaven. We view heaven like it’s a bank account. Good deeds deposit into it, bad deeds take out of it. And as long as we’ve got money in the bank before we die, we’re good to go.

But this is simply not the truth. The Bible teaches us that even our best deeds are like filthy rags. We can’t be good enough to earn our way into Heaven. We can’t tally up enough brownie points to impress God. At the end of the day, following the rules will never be enough. In fact, James tells us that if we keep the whole Law but fail in just one point, then we are guilty of breaking the whole law. Partial righteousness is the same as unrighteousness.

This week, we are looking at the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. In this story, there are two brothers: the older son, who does what is “right” and the younger son who rebels and leaves home. We’ll talk more about the younger son next week. But this week, let’s take a look at the older son, the one who stayed and did what was expected of him.

At the end of the story, we find him estranged from his father. Why? Because he sees his father’s patience and love for his wayward younger brother and feels angry.

He looks at his life, at how he did everything expected of him, and feels like he got robbed of what was owed him. In his mind, he deserved the fatted calf. He deserved the party. But in the end, he finds himself outside the party, angry and frustrated.

See the fatal error for the older son is that he thought that by doing everything right, his father would give him what he determined he deserved. In fact, he refuses to celebrate the return of his brother because he is so wrapped up in the comparison game. He misses out on the party because he thinks he is better and cannot abide by the grace and forgiveness being lavished on his little brother.

This is what self-righteousness does to us. When we put all our trust in our own ability to do the right things, then we feel angry when God shows grace to someone who “messed up” or someone who we have deemed as being unworthy. When we’ve dedicated our lives to depositing into some cosmic piggy bank all the good we’ve done expecting a big pay-out in the end, then we’ve missed the truth and purpose of the cross. All our self-righteousness has done is kept us from receiving the free gift of God’s grace and the perfect righteousness of Christ.

In the end, we are simply robbing ourselves of the blessing of being in God’s presence. We have denied His goodness and our need for His salvation. And that will always leave us out in the cold, looking on and wondering why we aren’t getting what we think we deserve. Self-righteousness will always rob us of God’s righteousness. It will always separate us from our Savior.

Following the rules, in and of themselves, was never meant to save us. God’s rules were given as a guide for us, a protection to keep us from pain, and a way to bring Him glory and bless our fellow man. Rules were also meant to point us to our need for a Savior. We can never be enough on our own; the harder we try, the more we will see our need. Praise God that in Jesus, we have all we need to not only be able to live a good life, but also be able to draw near to our perfect Father for all of eternity.

WEEKLY READING:

Take time this week to read each passage and reflect on what the Bible tells us about salvation not being through our own works or “following the rules”:

Sunday: Ephesians 2:8-10

Monday: Galatians 2:16

Tuesday: Matthew 6:1

Wednesday: James 2:10

Thursday: Titus 3:5

Friday: Proverbs 14:12

Saturday: Luke 15:4-7

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

In your small group or with a trusted friend, reflect and discuss your answers to the following questions:

1. How can you relate to the older brother?
2. Have you ever looked at salvation like an “eternal piggy bank” - depositing good deeds in hopes of settling your accounts? How has this kind of thinking been harmful, exhausting, or fruitless?
3. Why do you think that the older brother struggled to celebrate the restoration of his younger brother? What was the main factor that got in his way?

4. Do you ever struggle to celebrate when someone who did horrible things turns to God and repents? Do you feel like it's not fair that they receive the same grace you do?

5. When we realize that deeds will never save us, that we are all sinners guilty of breaking the Law of God, how does that help equalize grace for you?

WEEKLY ACTION STEP:

In the same way that a criminal would not get away with a crime by citing all the ways he didn't break the law, we too cannot stand righteous before God based on all the ways we didn't sin. All of us have sinned and are responsible for breaking the Law of God. Spend some time this week evaluating your heart. Is there a place where you have been leaning on your "good deeds" to save you or to set you right with God? Do you have something you need to repent of that you have previously been sweeping under a rug of good deeds, assuming they will cover your sin? Take some time to talk to God about this and consider confiding in a trusted brother or sister in Christ. Ask God to cleanse you of any self-righteousness and fill you with gratitude for His endless mercy and grace.

