

**A THEOLOGY OF SIN:
ARGUING FOR A
MORE SOCIAL/COMMUNAL
UNDERSTANDING OF SIN IN AMERICA**

**AN EXEGESIS ON ISAIAH 1.14-23 AND
A LESSON PLAN FOR A COLLEGE MINISTRY
GROUP STUDY ON THE TOPIC**

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PART ONE: EXEGESIS

I. NRSV TRANSLATION AND TEXTUAL NOTES

14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals (מִנְחֹת) my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. 16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. 18 Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. 21 How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her-- but now murderers! 22 Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone (כָּל־אִישׁ) loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. (NRSV)

Note 1: In verse 14, the author uses the word מִנְחֹת (minhot) instead of other words typically used when referring to other cultic practices, such as זְבַח (*zebah* / sacrifice) or עֹלוֹת (*‘olot* / burnt offerings).¹ With the use of minhot instead, the author is able to cover every one of the cultic practices, those regularly scheduled, and those that are not; it is a broader interpretation.

Note 2: The use of אָכַל in verse 20 is interesting to note. The verb is translated by most translations as “devour.” However, both the English Standard Version (2001) and the New Jerusalem Bible translate the word אָכַל as “eaten” or “eat you” and the New American Bible translates the word as “consumed.” The word is used previously back in verse 7: “in your very presence aliens devour your land...” Upon first reading the

¹ I noticed this when I had to look up מִנְחֹת (minhot) and realized that it meant something similar to these other, more common, words. It was then brought to my attention more specifically in Tucker’s article in the New Interpreter’s Bible.

text in verse 20, it appeared that “devoured by the sword” certainly meant death, but that is not clear. In verse 7, devour means that Jerusalem and the land was besieged, however it was not captured.² So, perhaps this does not necessitate ultimate death, but it does seem to be a defeat, a ‘type’ of death, or lack of ability to choose how to live one’s life.

Note 3: In verse 23, the subject of the verse is the country’s princes, the ruling-class. It says, in the NRSV, that “Everyone (כָּלֹּאִי) loves a bribe.” Because of a variance in how the word is written in other translations,³ I believe it is unclear as to whether or not the “everyone” is speaking specifically, and only, about the princes, or rather it is more broad and encompasses all of Jerusalem and Judah. According to Brown-Driver-Briggs, it seems that the translation of כָּלֹּאִי needs to be one that encompasses a larger population than simply the princes and rulers: “with the sf. of 3 ms., understood as referring to the mass of things or persons meant, כָּלֹּאִי or כָּלֹּאִי, lit. *the whole of it*, is equivalent to *all of them, every one*, Is 1²³ *the whole of it* (the people) loveth bribes.”⁴ Because of these reasons, it is my claim that this understanding of this verse leads one to a much broader interpretation of how this verse gets applied to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. It is just one more way that God is not letting God’s people off the hook, but is calling them to be accountable for the grievances they have committed; not *just* their rulers.

² Isaiah 1.7, n 1.7-8 (p.958) in The New Interpreter’s Study Bible. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.

³ The following versions of the Bible translate כָּלֹּאִי as “everyone” (which seems to imply a broader interpretation of who “loves a bribe and runs after gifts”): *English Standard Version* (2001), *New American Standard* (1977), *New American Standard* (1995), *New King James Version* (1982), and *the New Revised Standard Version* (1989). The following versions of the Bible translate כָּלֹּאִי as “every one” (which seems to mean every one of the rulers): *American Standard Version* (1901), *Jewish Publication Society* (1917), *King James Version* (1611/1769) and *the Revised Standard Version* (1952). The following versions of the Bible translate כָּלֹּאִי as either “each one,” “they all,” or “all of them” (also implying simply each one of the rulers): *New American Bible*, *New International Version* (1984), *New Jerusalem Bible* and *the New Living Translation*.

⁴ BDB, 481-482.

II. INTRODUCTION

This project is a brief look at one aspect of a theology of sin. Instead of a holistic understanding of sin, today's individualistic culture has crept into the church. At least on the practical level in congregations, there is a fairly worked-out theology of *individual* sin. For this project, I simply examined one of the prophetic texts that spoke to both individual and social aspects of sin, and I am arguing for a more holistic understanding of sin. Although, for the time being, it may be necessary to swing the pendulum back toward focusing more on the social sin aspect, and put away notions of individual sin for awhile.

The passage I exegeted, Isaiah 1.14-23, comes from chapter 1 in the book of First Isaiah. It is common knowledge that Isaiah, some of which was written by the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, is broken up into a variety of sections. The typical breakdown for Isaiah is as follows: chapters 1-39, 40-55 and 56-66. Many scholars agree that the only sections of Isaiah that can rightly be attributed to the eighth century prophet Isaiah are chapters 1-12 and 28-31.⁵ Isaiah 1 serves as an adequate summary for the entire book, because immediately the reader is presented with Judah and Jerusalem's sin against God, and God's judgments. However, God's judgments are always immediately followed by a series of blessings and promises. The reader must become comfortable with the powerful dialectic of judgment and promises that come from the word of the LORD. In the end, we see a God who is ultimately concerned with the social needs of God's people.

⁵ Brueggemann, 8.

III. EXPOSITION

*[My purpose in this exposition section is not to attempt to arrive at any new conclusions about this text. I do not believe I will be able to come up with any breakthrough suggestions or concepts. As with any study of the scriptures, one will probably (should probably) leave with **more** questions and with **less** answers.]*

14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals (מִנְחָוֹת) my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Here we have a clear description of God's thoughts and feelings toward the religiosity of the people of Judah and Jerusalem. God is upset with the festivals, feasts, their attitude and posture toward prayer and their guilt (their hands are full of blood). Not only is God upset, but God's soul *hates* the מִנְחָוֹת of the people. These passages are always difficult, but these things that God's soul is hating are not inherently bad things. In fact, they are rituals, prayers and acts of piety that God has commanded. So, why is God upset by God's people simply doing what God had commanded them to do? It is likely that God simply knows the motivations and the real commitments (or lack thereof) of God's people, and because of this, God is upset with God's people. It seems as though the relationship is in a sense, broken, and that God could very well simply end God's Story right here. The people of God have not followed through, they are living lives of hypocrisy, and God is not going to stand for it any longer.

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

But, it is not over. In the previous two verses, God was very clear on what God was upset about; God was not happy with much of what the people were doing. But, the Story does not end here. God leaves the door open for a possible way for the people to come back to God. So, what are they to do now? God knows this question is going to

come up, so God tells them in verses 16 and 17 what God is demanding of them. And it is not easy by any means, but these are the ways which they can begin to build back the relationship that was broken because of their pride and disobedience. The verb tense that takes up the majority of the words in these two verses is the *imperative*. God instructs the people in how they need to begin to live their lives differently: *wash, clean, remove, cease, learn, seek, rescue, defend* and *plead*. These commands start from a more general and broad proscription (wash yourselves), and end up with two very specific commands: *defend* the orphan and *plead* for the widow. “The large theological issues of life with Yahweh boil down to the concreteness of policy toward widows and orphans.”⁶ With these imperatives, God leaves a way open for God’s people to return to God, to set aside their false-lives, and begin to live truly and rightfully in God’s sight.

18 Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

God has been doing much of the speaking so far in this passage. In verses 14-15, God brought judgment upon Jerusalem and Judah. In verses 16-17, God instructed them in the ways in which they could begin to repent and live in order to get things back on track with God. However, in verse 18, God beckons the people to come and “argue it out” (אָרְגְּמוּ). Another translation says “reason together;” both have the image of a courtroom, where both God and humanity will have a say and they will try and work something out. Unfortunately, the people don’t speak. Is it because God doesn’t actually give them a chance? Or is it because they realize their place in relation to God and because they now have nothing to say in the presence of almighty YHWH? It isn’t clear, but we don’t have any words spoken from the people who were invited to speak by God.

⁶ Brueggemann, 11.

What follows is a perfect example of one of the unconditional promises of God found in the book of Isaiah. Even though they have done nothing good so far, even though their motivations are unholy and impure and lacking in any true desire God would hope for them, God still utters this unconditional promise: your sins **shall be** forgiven. No if/then statements, just a declarative statement: The Word of the LORD, their sins will be forgiven. It is interesting, considering just a few verses ago (16-17), God told the people what kind of lives they need to be living and how they need to change the way they conduct themselves with each other and with God. But, if that is the case, what is the incentive? Now, just one verse after that, they hear that, no matter what, God will forgive their sins. How does this line up with God calling the people to new lives?

19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

If. The if/then clause has returned. This is the clause that makes sense to humanity. It makes sense that if we do good things, God will treat us well. It makes sense that if we act poorly, God will not be happy and will call rain down upon us. That makes sense. The previous verse did not make sense – an unconditional promise of God’s forgiveness amidst rampant disobedience. What was God thinking...*was* God even thinking? But, in contrast to that verse, we now see the more familiar formula: that of the Deuteronomic Historian. If the people are obedient, God will bless them; if they are disobedient, God will curse them. This is the traditional formula. But what does it mean to have this juxta-posed directly with the unconditional promise of God? More than anything it call us to be content living within the dialectic of judgment and promises; ergo, it calls us to be content with the paradox of God’s interaction with God’s people.

In verse 18, God promised the people of Judah and Jerusalem he would forgive their sins. This has a very eternal feel to it – something associated with eschatology in the sense that the people of Jerusalem would have been familiar with. Verse 19, however, talks about the effects that are more temporal. In the end, it seems that God is saying to God’s people: “I will forgive your sins. So...in a sense, you don’t have anything to worry about – in the end, all will be well. But, it’s up to you to determine what *this* life is going to be like. You can either live well, and help others live well – or...you will live poorly, and eventually, you will die. And you will die by the sword. I have the end taken care of, but everything else that happens before then, you have a lot of say in how that works out.” This puts a significant role on the people of Jerusalem and Judah, as it does on people today, to live into the role that they have been called to play, as chosen people of God. To look at the word אכל, which is often translated “devour,” see note 2 on page 1.

21 How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her-- but now murderers! 22 Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water.

What strikes me most in these two verses is the acknowledgement that one point, everything was okay. The city used to be full of justice and righteousness. They used to have silver, and it was good. They used to have good wine. But now, we see these things are not what they were. The city is *not* full of justice and righteousness, the silver is wasted away to rubbish and the wine is not even worth drinking anymore. Something has happened. It seems that this poem may be alluding back to another famous piece of poetic fiction we find in Genesis 1: the story of the Garden of Eden. Like the city, silver and wine, the Garden was once a good, pure and holy place. But, something happened. A decision was made, and it was not the decision that God had requested. And because of

that, Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden, and the city became a harlot, and the silver and wine became worthless.

23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone (כָּלֹוּ) loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. (NRSV)

Here we see the princes (or rulers) and the true account of what is happening in the state of social and civic affairs. There are many contemporary examples to such claims as these: your rulers are companions of thieves, and everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. It is my belief that כָּלֹוּ refers to the people of Judah and Jerusalem as a whole, instead of just referring back to the princes (see note 3 on page 2). If this is a correct reading of כָּלֹוּ, then it is clearly pointing to the fact that it is not just the rulers who are at fault here. Often, it is easy for people to want to blame those in control, the elite, instead of claiming their own responsibility for the problems of society. This simply shows us that it is a much larger problem, and the people of Jerusalem can't simply blame others; they have a stake in this as well. They have to be held accountable for their inclination to sin.

Even if my reading of כָּלֹוּ is not correct, the mention of bribes and gifts and brings the focus completely on the individual. Whether it is everyone or just the princes, the focus on seeking after bribes and gifts is a clear indication of a society that is focused inwardly and desiring to pursue the betterment of the individual self, as opposed to that of the larger society. Because of their rampant individualism, those in society who have no one to look after them (widows and orphans) are neglected and forgotten. It is because of this individualism that the city has become a harlot and lost its justice and righteousness.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

After spending some time with this text, I believe there are a few things that it speaks to, in regard to the idea of individual versus social understandings of sin.

It is clear that God does not care about the religiosity and ‘works’ of the people of Judah and Jerusalem if they are not going to take care of the social problems that exist because of their sins. Within these ten verses, the widows and orphans are mentioned twice each, and this is important. Personal individualistic piety means nothing to God if there is social sin taking place.

In verse 15, God speaks to the people as a whole and tells them that their “hands are full of blood.” God speaks to the people as a community, and God is addressing community problems.

Everyone loves bribes and gifts. It is not limited to solely the rulers of the land, but everyone is individualistic, everyone is seeking after things just for themselves and not watching out for the welfare of their neighbors, the city and of the nation.

This passage from Isaiah, as well as others from Isaiah and other prophetic literature, make us aware of the social problems and sin present in our world. It is time to focus in on this understanding of sin and help broaden the theology of sin for today’s world.

PART TWO: COLLEGE MINISTRY LESSON PLAN

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago I received an email from a girl who was a sophomore at the University of Richmond. She had found my weblog one day when she Googled “Progressive Christianity.” Her situation is one which I am guessing many young and progressive Christians are finding to be true as they attend large universities or colleges. The Christian groups that are most visible on campuses are groups like Campus Crusade, Athletes in Action, Fellowship of Christian Athletes and InterVarsity. This student struggled with finding fellowship with peers, and had experienced a lot of dissatisfaction with the evangelical groups on campus. As soon as she expressed any dissenting views (she mentioned specifically views relating to current political events, gender issues and homosexuality), her friends were not as interested in maintaining fellowship with her. It is my hope to create a space for college students where they feel safe to ask the hard questions and express doubts about their faith.

This project is created to help college students, especially those who are more progressive, ask questions specifically about sin. In an age of widespread individualism, it is especially important to begin to focus on the role that social sin plays in our society. In the following pages, I will share with you the Who, What, Where, When, Why and How of my project. While this is a theoretical lesson plan, it is my hope that I would be able to use something like this in the future as I work with college students.

I. WHO – THE AUDIENCE

As stated above, the audience for this project is college and university students. These students attend a secular college or university. The group consists of students who come from more progressive, mainline backgrounds, those who are definitely seekers and not really sure what they believe and a few students who come from the evangelical background. When this group gathers, they generally have around 30-50 students. Many of these students are now “coming into their own” – becoming comfortable within their own skin – and are dealing with the beliefs they grew up with, which may have been their own beliefs, but were most likely the beliefs of their parents or other important people in their lives. These are the group of people that will most benefit from this group, and it is for these people that this group will be geared toward.

II. WHAT – “DECONSTRUCTING YOUR FAITH”

During the spring semester, we will be offering a series entitled “**Deconstructing Your Faith.**” The title accurately describes what many students may feel is happening with their Christian faith. Also, though not as worthy of a reason, the title may draw some skeptical students from a more conservative evangelical background, and that will help keep the conversation and dialogue “lively.” Each month, we will walk through a different theme, as described below:

- **January: Who is God?** During this section, we will analyze and examine the notions we have grown up with of God. We will look at topics such as the language we use about God, God’s control in this world, and God’s relationality and interaction with humanity.

- **February: Who are You?** What does it mean to be a creation of God, a child of God? We will look at topics such as gender role issues, sexuality, and what it means to be truly human today.
- **March: What's wrong?** God created, and is creating, in this world. Yet we know there are things wrong, and we know there is a presence of evil and sin in our world. Again, we will examine preconceived notions of sin, and how that plays into our view of sin in the context of our Americanized/individualistic culture. How might our view of sin need to be enlarged?
- **April: Is there hope?** After a whole month focused on social evils and sin, it will be necessary to ask the question, "Well, IS there hope?" We will look at the role of the Spirit in our lives and look at the ideas about Jesus many of us have grown up with. We will look at *different version of Jesus* that exist, and look at what aspects of Jesus some traditions focus on. Some of these will include: the focus on Jesus' death primarily, the focus on the Risen Christ, the Eastern Orthodox Jesus, the morally-influencing Jesus, the Jesus with the good ethical teachings and the liberating Jesus.
- **May: What can I do?** Finally, as the semester is coming to a close, we will look at what our role is in the world. How do we, in cooperation with God, bring about God's Kingdom in the world today. What role does the Spirit play in guiding and directing us to bring God's hopes, dreams and purposes about into our world.

III. WHERE – THE PLACE

There are a few different options for locations for this group. As we are a Christian group (but who is open to anyone who would want to attend), we could meet in the Campus Chapel, or a room in the Chapel. However, another option would be to simply meet in a room in the Campus Student Center, or a room that has a comfortable feel to it. Meeting in another room would help the students who aren't "religious" feel more comfortable in the meeting.

IV. WHEN – THE DATE & TIME

This campus ministry group meets weekly on Wednesday at 9pm. We have found that although there are a variety of evenings that may work out, Wednesdays are nice because if some of the students do go to church on a Sunday, sometimes doing a Sunday evening meeting is too much for a Sunday. A Wednesday evening is right in the middle of the week, and a good time for students to take a break from the work of the week.

V. WHY – WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT

Again, the primary reason for this section of the semester's series, "**What's Wrong?**" is focused on helping students acknowledge and then learn how to deal with the individualistic culture of America, specifically when it comes to the topic of sin. For some of these students, the only thing they will think about when they hear the word "sin," is what bad things they did the previous weekend. The notion of sin that is taught to so many of our young people in youth groups is a theology of individual "do-nots." They understand what sin means primarily as a "bad" act that an individual commits. However, our goal for this time together is to take a more in-depth look into social sin.

Some of the same reasons for the audience description. Students need to be able to look outside of their own “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” and begin to look at the world, and sin, from a new perspective.

VI. HOW – THE PLAN FOR ONE NIGHT

There will be many components to the evening where we will discuss social sin. Below, you will find an overview of what will happen throughout the evening:

- **9:00 – 9:20: Free time with Stations:** When students arrive in our meeting room, they will be surprised to find it covered with newspapers and magazines. They will also hear audio in the background of radio broadcasts during war-times. There will also be TVs set up throughout the room and they will see video-loops and images of war, death and injustice, as well as just some normal videos of everyday shots (this will be to show that many times social evil is present in the world even when we do not see it, nor do we expect it). It will be a bit of a sensory overload, and hopefully students don’t feel like we are attempting to try to manipulate them emotionally, but perhaps this is a way that will get their attention.
- **9:20 – 9:45: Group Discussion:** We will then have a group discussion and discuss anything that the students thought about the time with the videos, audio and images. We’ll ask if they thought we were just going to be talking about ‘individual’ sin tonight, and if so, what did they think about our focus primarily on the social sin. We will also talk some about their history of dealing with the word *sin* and what that meant to them growing up and how they have come to understand what “sin” is.

- **9:45 – 10:15: Small Groups with Prophetic Texts:** We will then randomly split up into small groups and discuss a few prophetic passages that have to do with the ideas of social and communal sin and evil, specifically Amos 5.10-13, Isaiah 1.14-23 and Isaiah 5.1-10. Each group will be assigned a passage and with the leadership of a student leader, they will work through the texts and come back prepared to share some of their thoughts.
- **10:15 – 10:30: Regroup & Discuss:** We will gather for a short discussion and sharing from the small groups on their prophetic passages. I will try and close up the time by asking the “So, what?” question. “So, what significance does this have for us? What can we do about this?” This will be the students’ opportunity to take some of this theology and make it practical. It will be important not only for the students to be open to rethinking some of their theology, but any God-talk should have a life-impact, so they will discuss practical things they could do with their lives to help alleviate the world of social sin.

Something during the month, we will do an event called *The Confession Booth*.

For each of the month’s different themes, there will be an activity that students are encouraged to participate in. The group would wait for a Spring Fair or some other time when there are a lot of booths out on campus, and we would create a confession booth.⁷ However, this would not be a confessional where we would have people come and confess their sins to us. It would instead be a chance for the students in our ministry group to confess the sins that Christianity has turned away from. It will be a chance to ask for forgiveness for much of the history of Christianity (especially the Crusades) and for

⁷ This idea was taken from Donald Miller’s book [Blue Like Jazz](#).

the things that so often, non-Christians use against Christianity as a reason for not believing.

VII. CONCLUSION

Obviously, much of the deconstruction through this series is immediately followed by reconstruction. The goal is not to make everyone faithless, but rather to help students struggle, wrestle with God and **own** their faith. It is the hope that students would genuinely wrestle with these topics, be open to new perspectives, like a deeper theology of systemic and social sin, and come to conclusions of their own based on their life experience, knowledge of scripture and most importantly, through the guiding and directing of the Spirit.

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