

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
September 15, 2017  
Philippians 4:1-9

### *Falling Short*

We modern Congregationalists don't often talk about sin in church. It's the same for other churches, too, in this era of church life. Somewhere along the way to these days of the popular "prosperity gospel" mega-churches with their rock bands and worship focus on entertainment, and good church people not wanting to offend anyone, the brokenness that we all experience in our lives got swept under the ecclesiastical rug. It has seemed that for a long time sin has only been used by television and radio evangelists who like to use the concept of sin—as defined by them, of course—as a bludgeon of fear to raise money for their electronic ministries.

Pastors can be blamed, too, in this massive ignoring of sin and human brokenness. We are human beings and it's probably not thought of as a good strategy to possibly offend those in your congregation that you want to continue to receive their support by calling out their sins. It seems to work on television because some pastors like to use fear to raise money; but up close and personal, you take a big risk. Somehow today, in church circles, it has become politically incorrect to talk about sin out loud. Even when pastors get together just among themselves it's a risky business!

*Three pastors went to the pastor convention and were all sharing one room. The first pastor said, "Let's confess our secret sins one to another. I'll start - my secret sin is I just love to gamble. When I go out of town, it's cha-ching cha-ching, let the machines ring."*

*The second pastor said, "My secret sin is that I just hate working. I copy all my sermons from those given by other pastors."*

*The third pastor said, "My secret sin is gossiping and, oh boy, I just can't wait to get out of this room!"*

([http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Pastors/Secret\\_Sin.shtml](http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Pastors/Secret_Sin.shtml))

Next time I go to a pastor's convention I'm going to choose my roommates very carefully!

I'm sure many of you have heard the phrase, "we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." I know I have; I learned that from my Dad long ago. What do we mean by sin? One answer you hear a lot in seminary circles is another pat phrase which goes, "sin is falling short of the mark." In other words, there is some mark, some bar that your behavior just doesn't measure up to. Of course, it's pretty subjective about where that mark is and who gets to set the bar.

In Judeo-Christian circles we have used the Ten Commandments as sort of a bar that can help us define sin. Sin would be loving other things as gods rather than the one true God. Not honoring your father and mother would be a sin. Killing would be a sin. I think those are pretty good measures and for the most part the Ten Commandments are pretty universal in understanding and acceptance. The Catholic Church along time ago defined the “seven deadly sins” as they are pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth. Other the other hand, there are Catholic cardinal virtues. The four classical cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, temperance and courage (or fortitude) and the three theological virtues are faith, hope and charity.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\\_virtues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_virtues)) I think those are pretty good guidelines, too.

This morning we read from Paul’s letter to the church in Phillipi. We heard some pretty good advice there, too, about getting closer to the mark, to the bar, we should try to reach. We heard:

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

I find these beautiful words to help you guide your life, especially your life in community, within the church. We would all do well to try to live with one another with those guidelines in mind.

Noted religion historian and author, Huston Smith, embarked on an academic research study of people who had Near Death Experiences—NDE’s, for short. He and his grad students interviewed hundreds of people who had clinically died and were revived. One of the common themes that people who had gone through an NDE talked about was a sense of self-judgement rather than judgement by God. There was no list of names written in the “Book of Life,” for these folks. What they did experience, though, was a sense of seeing their life through the eyes and minds of people they had come in contact with throughout their lives—family, friends, and even strangers. They were able to see and experience the good and bad they had done to others through the eyes and minds of other people. That is when they felt judgement during their NDE. It was more self-judgement.

Folks, I think that while there are certainly some objective ideas about what sin is, we all know it’s an area where there seems to be more shades of gray than blacks and whites. Many things thought of as sin can be redefined especially when there are so many variable circumstances around when and why we do things. I don’t think a lot of what we call sin or claim for our neighbors as sin can be known for sure. I’m not saying that everything bad someone does can be explained away depending upon the circumstances in which it happens. There should be some bad behaviors we all, universally, can condemn.

One of the measures I have used in my personal life when it comes to knowing what is right and wrong is how that behavior makes me feel about myself. It's kind of a personal litmus test I use to judge my own behavior. For sure, I fall short way too often of my own standards. If something I have done, or am thinking about doing, will make me feel bad about myself, for me that is a sin if I did it or end up doing it. If what I have done, or am about to do, makes me feel good about myself, than I don't think that is necessarily sin. This wonderful passage from Philippians has been a good guideline for me, in my life, to consider the state of my soul. Again, it is:

*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise,*

then I pay attention to that. Hopefully, I have these considerations in mind before I decide to do something or not. But, when I don't, and I fail, then I thank the Lord for this amazing and eternal gift of forgiveness. In the scheme I use it's not only God's forgiveness I'm seeking, but also my own and others. And, preferably, with the forgiveness comes learning a lesson that will help me in the future.

Folks, try to be good to yourself. You, this amazing creation of God, who God loves unconditionally. Do things that make you feel good about yourself and seek forgiveness and knowledge when you don't.

I promise you, too, that I will never test your sinful nature as this one pastor did that I heard about:

*A minister told his congregation, "Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark 17."*

*The following Sunday, as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the minister asked for a show of hands. He wanted to know how many had read Mark, Chapter 17. Every hand went up. The minister smiled and said, "Mark has only sixteen chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying."*

(<http://www.broadcaster.org.uk/section2/jokes/christianjokes.html>)

Amen.

