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Why Sin Matters: The Surprising Relationship between God's Grace and Our Sin

Some of the names and details in the illustrations used in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the people who shared their stories.

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FOREWORD

I meant to pack it. I was heading off on a ten-day fly-fishing trip with some guy friends, and I had packed all my gear with precision and thoughtfulness. What I forgot to consider were the accessories—clothes, food, money, and books. I had intended to take the manuscript for Mark's book, but I forgot it.

The trip is one of my sanity-saving, soul-solidifying journeys, one I've taken for nearly ten years. The trip this year was a disaster. Fires raged near our western Montana retreat. The heat was oppressive, the fishing slow, and the Forest Service deemed it unsafe to both fish and fisher for us to be on the river after noon. In addition, one of the men was late in joining us because he had been in an accident that may have meant surgery for him and then he needed to attend a friend's funeral. Finally he arrived, but only two days later he had to leave again to be with his wife after her mother had emergency brain surgery. Our wait for him had been full of uncertainty; his departure brought deep sadness.

The trip was redemptive, but with a fire-and-ashes delivery, not the wild pleasure of casting, hoping, and laughing through a season of sweet and gentle drifting. But like all times, good or ill, it ended. And we had to return to the weight of life postponed—the period when the vacation fades and reality dawns about all that needs to be done.

On the top of the pile of projects anxiously awaiting my return was *Why Sin Matters.* I was not thrilled at the prospect of reading a book about sin. I already felt petty, irritated, and depressed. I was overwhelmed by what I needed to do and the demands of what awaits for the fall academic schedule.

But as I read, and read more, I wept. I was utterly surprised by my response. I've long respected the brilliant thinking of Mark McMinn. I've read articles and his amazing book *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*. I've heard him teach and been offered more than ample wisdom and kindness through his passionate voice. But I had not been prepared to be drawn into the arms of our fiercely gracious God. I don't know why I was so surprised. It may be that I was reading the work as a task, a responsibility—one of many. Or even more likely, I read with little thought about my own sin or need for grace. I read with a heart more troubled by a banged-up fishing trip than with a heart open to considering eternal matters.

Perhaps you are in a similar state—more aware that life is not what you want it to be than terribly concerned about your part in darkening the world. We are all aware of the horror of sin and its devastation, but we're less apt to take seriously our own part.

I braced myself for the jerk back to reality and the acknowledgment that I fall far short of the glory of God. What I read instead was a compelling and gentle exposure of my heart and the glorious offer of entering the embrace of my Father.

Mark does not rub our nose in sin or trivialize it as merely a list of behavioral dos and don'ts. He does not minimize sin on the basis of our past harm, biological complexity, or relational disappointment. He is honest and hopeful.

I read and wept, and oddly I laughed. What I find most amazing is that an honest appraisal of our condition brings the heart to new parameters of hope. If I can be so small as to pout over a less than ideal vacation, then what else is my heart unwilling to face? Mark McMinn nudged me to see my heart in the context of the overwhelming pursuit of Jesus. If I make light of sin, by necessity I will be unimpressed with the work of the Cross. If on the other hand, I look deeply into the squalor of my sin, what I finally see is not dark-

ness but the aching eyes of our passionate God, who conquered sin and invites me to dine with him. It is as the poet said, "He built his tent in the place of excrement."

What I found, and believe you will as well, is a dose of honesty that flooded me with the holy love of God for sinners. Grace is sweeter and the losses of life, no matter how small or large, are less consuming as I respond to God's compelling invitation to rest in his love.

This labor of love will change your life. Read, weep, and laugh—for the good news is deeply planted in each page of this book.

Dan B. Allender, Ph.D.
President, Mars Hill Graduate School

ONE

Moments

Most of life is lived in routine. We have bills to pay, money to earn, children to raise, chores to complete, and hobbies to pursue. Days fade into weeks, and months speed by as one year blurs with the next; we peel off a page of the daily calendar and find a decade has past. The routines of life are good and provide much evidence of blessing and common grace.[1]

Thankfully, life is also punctuated and slowed down by extraordinary moments of insight. It may be a sunset, a symphony, a spiritual awakening, the surprise of unexpected friendship, stunning art, a worship experience, or seeing something new in the eyes of a loved one you have looked at ten thousand times before. These markers remind us that we are more than silicon chips churning out the tasks of existence, but are full of life—ensouled, organic beings longing for meaning, enjoying music, cherishing beauty, and yearning for love.

Of course, epiphanies need routine as much as routine needs epiphanies. Without the steady, plodding motion of routine our moments of insight would merely be an experiential roller coaster tossing us through the tumults of life. Without the moments of insight, our routines would become black-and-white, suffocating and deadening.

Most books emerge from the routines of life as writers sit down

each day and diligently produce several pages of prose, and as the days fade into months the manuscript evolves into something good: a work of art, a scholarly treatise, a guide for successful living, or a chilling mystery. But when you sit and talk with the author, you will almost always discover that a moment of insight has motivated the routine. Without the epiphany, the routine would be empty. Without the routine, the epiphany would not find its way into the pages of a new book.

I have spent a good deal of my adult life trying to understand grace. Most of this has been through the routines of life—marriage, studying, prayer, parenting, worship, reading, and friendship. Many years ago I devoted some of my routine to writing a book about grace. No one has seen or heard of the book since, and though I have quite a knack for authoring books that no one ever hears of, there is a good explanation in this case. The book was never published. I sent my two-hundred-fifty-page manuscript to several different publishers, and each of them responded with a permutation of the standard "thanks, but no thanks" letter.

Fifteen years later, I am grateful that book was never published. It was a book produced by an overachieving young assistant professor who was committed to routine but had not yet had enough moments of insight to write about grace. It was a book written before I began to grasp the depth of brokenness and sin in our world and in my own heart. Understanding grace cannot be done without understanding sin. Sometimes I ponder what that unpublished book, with its anemic view of grace, would have been titled if it had been published. Perhaps, *Grace Lite* or *Grace: Because I'm Worth It* or *Grace: I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me.*

In the intervening fifteen years I have continued to experience occasional punctuating moments—windows of insight—that have brought fresh glimpses of grace. They are not altogether pleasant

moments because they are always accompanied with a weighty, breath-stealing awareness of my sin and my desperate need for forgiveness. But they are motivating. It is the second of two such punctuating moments that finally gave me the courage to write this book.

> *Understanding grace cannot be done without understanding sin.*

The first occurred some years ago as I began to read Henri J. M. Nouwen's writings on the spiritual life. It fascinated me that Nouwen was trained in both psychology and theology, and I was intrigued by his choice to leave the ivory towers of an Ivy League faculty position to pastor and serve underprivileged people at the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto. I read many of his books, soaking in his earthy spirituality, his disclosure of genuine struggle, and his passion for God. After a public speaking event in which I had referred to Nouwen, someone in the audience approached me and asked if I had read Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son.* I had not, but the next day I found the book and began reading. That book, which I have now read several times, provided a moment of insight.

Before writing *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* Nouwen spent two days in July of 1986 at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, studying Rembrandt's painting by the same title. Nouwen describes the experience in detail: gaining admittance through a side door because of the kindness of a friend, hassling with a Soviet guard about whether he could move a red velvet chair to get a better view of the painting, studying the light streaming across the painting at various times throughout the day, and being almost mesmerized by the power of Rembrandt's portrayal. Nouwen writes: "Everything comes together here: Rembrandt's story, humanity's story, and God's story. Time and

eternity intersect; approaching death and everlasting life touch each other; sin and forgiveness embrace."[2] I was captured by Nouwen's story and his book. He was right—sin and forgiveness were embracing. The father's lavish mercy could not be understood without the story of the son's outlandish rebellion and rejection of the father. This was not just a book to me, not just a part of my reading routine. It was a moment.

The father's lavish mercy could not be understood without the story of the son's outlandish rebellion and rejection of the father.

Moments like this change us. During the past five years I have rarely given a talk without mentioning Nouwen's book and Rembrandt's painting. I found the Hermitage Web site, downloaded a small print of the painting, and made it part of various PowerPoint files for the talks I have been invited to give. My wife, Lisa, who knows me by heart, ordered a print of the Rembrandt painting, had it framed, and gave it to me for a Christmas gift. When I opened it, I cried. Then I went and hung it in my home office where I spend time looking at it almost every day.

This is not just a painting crafted by an old man in 1669; it is the story of my life and yours. It is a story first told by Jesus and recorded in Luke 15. This is a story of sin and grace—a story about the healing of a broken relationship—and it seems at times to be the only story worth telling.

The second moment of insight occurred at the State Hermitage Museum sixteen years after Nouwen had seen the Rembrandt painting there. In early July 2002 Vitaliy Voytenko, a doctoral student, and I traveled to Kiev, Ukraine, to colead a seminar for pastors. On that trip Vitaliy and I had the opportunity to go to Saint Petersburg to visit the Hermitage. Tickets were three hundred rubles (about ten U.S.

dollars), but the travel agent had warned me that I should be sure to have the tickets in advance. Desperate to see the painting, I agreed to pay seven times the normal rate to be assured of admission. The travel agent also mentioned something about a tour guide, but my mind was elsewhere, so I did not think much more about the suggestion.

Vitaliy and I arrived in St. Petersburg on a Friday, took a life-threatening taxi ride to the hotel, had dinner at the Literary Café, and then walked along the Neva River as I anticipated the events of the next day—a day that I had looked forward to for so long. Before retiring that night, I received a call from the Hermitage tour guide who asked us to meet her in the hotel lobby at ten o'clock the next morning. I envisioned being part of a large tour group and wondered how I might politely excuse myself from the tour in order to spend time with the one painting I had come to see. But when Saturday morning came, I discovered that the tour group consisted of only Vitaliy and me. Our personal tour guide drove us past the long lines waiting at the Hermitage and walked us to the front door with no wait. I was reminded of Nouwen's story, how he had been ushered past a mile-long line and had been taken directly to the painting. After a few moments of guilt for not having waited in line like everyone else, I relaxed into a calm awareness that this was God's blessing.

The Return of the Prodigal Son is the first painting a person encounters when entering the Hermitage's Rembrandt Room, where twenty-three original Rembrandt paintings are displayed.[3] It is an enormous and glorious painting, eight feet high and six feet wide. Nested in an ornate gilt frame, it hangs on its own light green wall with no other paintings competing for attention. I spotted the red velvet chairs that Nouwen had sat in and saw the window from which light enters the room, streaming across the faces of the painting just as Nouwen described. Colors leapt off the canvas, and I was instantly overwhelmed with the reality of what

I was viewing. "Thank you" was all I could utter to the tour guide as tears welled in my eyes and a lump of gratitude obstructed my throat. She and Vitaliy left me alone as they toured other parts of the Hermitage collection.

For the first fifteen minutes almost no tour groups came through the hall, which allowed me to view the painting intently and quietly. After that, groups of various languages wandered in and out. For most of that time I sat in one of the red velvet chairs that allowed full vision of the painting. The vivid detail in the original painting is stunning: the person in the distant background, the dulled hands of everyone except the father, the sandal lying next to the travel-weary foot, the small sword hanging from the belt of the prodigal, and the brilliant material of the father's cloak. But I was most intrigued by the light.

It is as if light emanates from the father, streaming across the veiled scowl of the older brother, dancing along the floor where the prodigal kneels, and revealing the father's hands and face. Most of the guides mentioned the hands, and they are amazing: the rugged, masculine left hand and the nurturing, feminine right hand. But I found myself even more drawn to the father's face. It is a face of complex emotion. Yes, of course there is relief and joy, but not the kind of joy that is captured with a smile. It is joy embedded in a countenance of sorrow, marked with years of wondering and waiting. He is an old man, and life has been hard. He has struggled and grieved and wept. He has not often spoken of the pain that has been like a dagger buried deep in his soul, but it is a pain that has never departed since the day his son left. His sorrow is etched in his brow and has dimmed his eyes. He is a man acquainted with sorrow.

As the tour groups came and went and guides spoke in dozens of languages, I was left to contemplate the language of loss. I experienced a powerful awareness of God's sorrow over a fallen world, and tears filled my eyes as I glimpsed how my sin has grieved God. Yet nowhere on the father's face was a hint of judgment or criticism.

I experienced a powerful awareness of God's sorrow over a fallen world, and tears filled my eyes as I glimpsed how my sin has grieved God.

Since my flight from St. Petersburg did not leave until Monday morning, I returned on Sunday to the Hermitage, paid my admission fee, and—after a few minutes of peaceful wandering—found the Rembrandt Room. The painting, of course, was still there, where it has been for almost 250 years since being acquired by Catherine the Great. I was the temporary one, leaving the next day for my homeland. The painting, like the story it tells, is both timeless and priceless.

On the second day I noticed more detail. One of the bystanders in the picture—not the one typically identified as the older brother, but the steward a bit further in the background—looks astonished by the events unfolding before him. His left arm is perched on the bench where he sits, indicating that he is leaning in to get a better view. His right hand is over his heart, his lips slightly open as if he is releasing a groan of amazement and wonder. As the older brother watches with a scowl of discontent and a distant heart, the steward leans in to capture the sights and sounds of forgiven sin. One person resists grace; the other yearns to see it closely. One resists restored relationship; the other yearns for it.

As I studied the painting, I remembered how Nouwen describes that artists of Rembrandt's day often combined the New Testament story of the Prodigal Son and the nearby story of the tax collector and the self-righteous religious leader in the temple.[4] In the latter story the religious leader prays smugly, "I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don't sin, I don't commit adultery, I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income."[5] The tax collector does not even dare to raise his eyes to heaven, but beats his chest and cries out, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner."[6]

I wondered if perhaps Rembrandt placed the older brother—still out in the fields in the biblical story—as a featured character in this painting in order to tell two stories at once. Maybe Rembrandt painted a double feature. The story of the Prodigal Son is, of course, the main feature. But the other story—woven subtly onto the canvas as only an artistic master can do—reminds me of the cost of pride and the freedom of humility.

I thought about my own heart. Will I admit my sin and my need for mercy, yearning for grace, like the steward and the tax collector? Or will I stand in aloof judgment, like the older brother and the

religious leader? Which will I choose: Door Number 1 or Door Number 2? One opens to a life of grace and gratitude and restored relationship, the other to pride and resentment and alienation.

I reflected on the many times I have resisted grace by denying my sinful state, focusing on whatever good deeds I can muster, and rehearsing the list of "big sins" I have managed to avoid. Yet I yearn to see grace clearly—to lean in, acknowledge my need, and look closely at God's redemptive embrace that covers all my sinfulness. The older brother, like the Pharisee praying in the temple, is pushing away the possibility of mercy by focusing on his good behavior. The steward in the background, like the tax collector, is leaning in to get a better glimpse of the grace that covers the vastness of our sin.

My eyes fixed on the prodigal, then the older brother, then the steward. Which man was I most like? Whose heart did mine reflect?

Then the music started. It began in the recesses of my mind, and soon it could not be contained internally. I began humming and then singing quietly. A few people looked at me strangely, but for the most part they didn't complain. I sang the words over and over again:

> *O to grace how great a debtor*
> *Daily I'm constrained to be!*
> *Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,*
> *Bind my wandering heart to Thee.*
> *Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,*
> *Prone to leave the God I love;*
> *Here's my heart, O take and seal it;*
> *Seal it for Thy courts above.*[7]

After the hours in the museum that Saturday and Sunday, I knew it was time to say good-bye to this punctuating moment—

a moment of grace—in my life. I also knew that my time in the Hermitage, hanging out with a 333-year-old painting, had given me the momentum and courage I needed to begin writing this book, which I have pondered for a long time.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1: MOMENTS

[1] Common grace is a theological term for God's goodness that is available to all humans, regardless of their beliefs or eternal destiny.

[2] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Image, 1992), 93.

[3] If you would like to take a virtual tour of the Rembrandt Room of the Hermitage, visit this Web site: <http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/08/hm88_0.html>, then click on the links for the Virtual Visit, the First Floor, and number 44 for the Rembrandt Room. Unfortunately the virtual tour does not show *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* but a link at the bottom of the page will lead you to an enlarged image of the painting as well as a description of the work.

[4] The story of the Prodigal Son is recorded in Luke 15, and the story of the tax collector and the self-righteous religious leader is recorded three chapters later in Luke 18.

[5] Luke 18:11-12.

[6] Luke 18:13.

[7] Stanza of "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," words by Robert Robinson (1758), music by John Wyeth (1813). Public domain.

CHAPTER 2: PRELUDE TO GRACE

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Boston: Cowley, 2000), 41.

[2] Luke 15:18-19.

[3] Colossians 2:23–3:2.

[4] John 8:7.

[5] John 8:11.

[6] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship,* rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 45–46.

[7] Isaiah 6:5.

[8] G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 235.

[9] For more on this, see Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics,* 202.

[10] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Image, 1992), 36.

[11] Some readers will remember Thomas A. Harris's 1974 book about transactional analysis, *I'm OK—You're OK* (New York: BBS, 1999).

[12] Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections: A Christian's Character before God,* trans. James M. Houston (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1996), 5–6.

[13] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee* (New York: Image, 1981), 127.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT *WHY SIN MATTERS:*

"Mark McMinn is a prophetic voice in a world where sin is explained away and grace is cheapened. Only by reclaiming the language of sin will we be free to discover the power (and cost) of grace. A book for every person who longs to live fully."

LARRY CRABB, Ph.D., New Way Ministries, author of *The Pressure's Off: There's a New Way to Live*

"Ignatius of Loyola, one of the most grace-laden leaders in Christian history, wrote several years *after* his conversion: 'The most important gift I have received from God during my spiritual journey is to know that I am a sinner.' The closer we come to the Light, the more we see the darkness in ourselves. With uncommon depth Mark McMinn explores the intimate connection between sin and grace. For anyone seeking the profound meaning of the graced life, this masterful book is an indispensable read."

BRENNAN MANNING, author of *A Glimpse of Jesus*

"Therapists often speak of 'invisible elephants in the living room' of their clients' relationships. In this book psychologist Mark McMinn grapples with sin, the most invisible 'elephant' of all in contemporary society. He does so with biblical insight and a wealth of clinical experience, sharing his own and others' stories with a humor, discretion, and grace that avoids being judgmental or voyeuristic. This volume points readers toward a timely recovery of a difficult but essential Christian doctrine."

MARY STEWART VAN LEEUWEN, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Resident Scholar at the Center for Christian Women in Leadership, Eastern University, St. Davids, Pennsylvania and author of *My Brother's Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't)Tell Us about Masculinity*

"Cheap grace abounds where sin is forgotten. When our sins and our sinfulness get minimized, trivialized, euphemized—when sin is explained away or blamed away—grace loses all its beauty and its potency. But if I have the courage to face and confess the sin in myself—to see and admit that I am,

in fact, the chief of sinners—then I am in a place to discover the amazing alchemy of God: that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Mark McMinn's book gives me such courage and leads me to such a discovery. A book about sin, in lesser hands, might be a gloomy proposition, a morbid and languid dissection of our heart's deep darkness. But in Mark's hands, it is as joyful an occasion as a Father running to greet a son he thought lost, even dead. More than this, the book is an invitation to enter the Father's house and join the celebration. It's getting dark out here. Won't you come inside?"
MARK BUCHANAN, pastor of New Life Community Baptist on the West Coast of Canada, author of *Things Unseen: Living in Light of Forever* and *The Holy Wild: Trusting God in Everything*

"Seldom have I read a book that moved me as deeply as Mark McMinn's *Why Sin Matters.* But be warned, don't read this unless you long to be deeply changed, for this book has the power to grip readers' hearts with the life-transforming grace of our Savior God. This is a 'must read' for seminarians, pastors, counselors, and any person pursuing a more passionate relationship with Christ. I believe this book is destined to become a twenty-first-century classic."
SANDRA D. WILSON, Ph.D., seminary professor, speaker, and author of *Released from Shame* and *Into Abba's Arms*

"At the intersection of sin and grace Mark McMinn writes simply, deeply, and thoughtfully in both senses of the word. This book has soul."
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"This book offers a helpful discussion of sin and a hopeful reminder of the healing dynamics of grace. We all long to return home to the loving embrace of our gracious Father, but the first step is—as Mark McMinn reminds us—the recognition of how badly we have messed up in attempting to find our own way and arrange our own fulfillment."

DAVID G. BENNER, Ph.D., C.Psych., Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Spirituality, Psychological Studies Institute (Atlanta), author of *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*

"Some of the stories in this book brought tears to my eyes. Mark McMinn has modeled greater transparency for me, which gives me permission to acknowledge my own struggles and weaknesses. A powerful look at sin and grace."

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