

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 September 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Have you heard of Michael Horn?

Has anybody heard that name? Does that mean anything to you, that name, Michael Horn? I wouldn't be surprised if it does. Not a particularly famous individual. But he is somebody who has been in the news in the last week or so.

I'll give you a clue. He gave a press conference last week in which he very vividly declared, we totally screwed up.

To help you identify this individual. Not the kind of language you normally associate with corporate press conferences. Well, Michael Horn is the head of Volkswagen America.

I say he is the head. As far as I know, he still is. As I've been following the story, I haven't heard that he has resigned or jumped or been pushed.

[1 : 05] As far as I know, he remains in that position. How did Volkswagen screw up, to use the rather colorful language that Michael Horn employed?

Well, I'm sure you're aware of the story. It's been grabbing the headlines over these last few days. As I understand it, what VW did is that they deceived U.S. regulators in the matter of exhaust emission tests.

And they did so by fitting what has been called a defeat device. And apparently this very clever piece of kit can detect test conditions if a card has been placed under test conditions.

And what it does is, as I understand it, modify engine performance in those test conditions that it's detected to ensure that the results of these emission tests are within the allowable limits that have been set by the different regulators.

In this case, by the EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States. Now, as I understand it, what I've read in the press is that it's estimated that something like 11 million diesel vehicles are involved, have been fitted with these defeat devices.

[2 : 29] Of those, about half a million have been sold in the United States. And they're the object of the current scandal or crisis, though it's extending, of course, beyond the original location where it all blew up.

Imagine if Michael Horne had chosen different words in his press conference just a few days ago. Imagine if he had said this, We have sinned.

Imagine if he had said that. What would the reaction have been? From the journalists and the commentators and the public at large, what would the reaction have been to those words? They would have been true.

But how would people have responded to that expression of what they had done? We have sinned. I have no desire to delight in Volkswagen's self-inflicted crisis.

But I do want to try and do two things this evening in parallel. Well, I want to bring to bear, in some measure, on the crisis, what the Bible says about sin.

[3 : 38] And also illustrate from the crisis what the Bible says about sin. These two things are really very intertwined. Given the purpose this evening, I'm not going to be thinking of one text and expounding one particular text or verse, but rather drawing on a wider range of biblical material that impinges on, that is relevant to the matter to hand.

What can we say about sin? There's a very brief outline on the sheet that you've received, and we'll roughly follow the headings there. But we're actually going to jump over one and not deal with it this evening.

Let's begin by one fairly, I would imagine, unobjectionable statement concerning sin. And it is simply this, that sin is wrong.

We think of what VW have been to you of, what they've done, the fitting consciously and deliberately of these defeat devices. I don't think there's any debate. There's no argument that what they did was wrong. They themselves acknowledge that what they did was wrong. Indeed, even when they were doing it, they knew, of course, that what they were doing was wrong.

[5 : 02] They imagined that it was worth it. But I don't think anybody was ever in any doubt that what they were doing was wrong. And that all agreed. Indeed.

Let's just think about that for a moment. Why was it wrong? Why was it wrong what they did? Well, at one level, we can say it was wrong because they were breaking the rules.

In this case, in America, the regulations concerning exhaust emissions, establishing a certain limit, well, they were knowingly and consciously breaking those rules and seeking to occult the fact that they were doing so, cover up that they were doing so.

So we can say, well, it's clear what they were doing was wrong because they were breaking the rules that had been established. But what if the rules hadn't existed? Or what about countries? I imagine that there are still some countries around the world where environmental protection legislation is either nonexistent or much less stringent than in the United States.

[6 : 09] What if VW installed these defeat devices and sold cars in one of those countries where they weren't actually breaking any rules? Would that have meant that it was okay?

Would we then say that what they did wasn't wrong? I think we'd agree. And I don't think just ourselves, coming at it from a Christian perspective, I think most people would conclude, no, it was still wrong.

It would still be wrong, even in those circumstances. They would still be guilty of deceit, of claiming that their cars performed in a certain way when that is not the case.

And so they would be guilty of deceit, of lying, and lying is wrong. Isn't it? Well, who says? Who says lying is wrong? Who decides if lying is wrong or if lying isn't wrong?

Who decides about anything in terms of this matter of right and wrong? Because that's a huge question that as a society we struggle with terribly because of the reluctance to acknowledge any objective standard of right and wrong, and an even greater reluctance to acknowledge that there can be or is a lawgiver, one who determines what is right and wrong.

[7 : 24] Well, what does the Bible say into this situation? What does it say about saying sin? Is the Bible clear on this matter?

Does it have an opinion on whether sin is wrong? Well, it's very clear as we turn to God's Word that sin is represented and described as being wrong because it involves breaking God's rules, God's law.

Sin is disobedience. Sin is disobedience. We see that right at the beginning in the garden as God established the manner and the rules by which Adam and Eve were to live, and Adam and Eve chose not to obey, to disobey one of those rules.

They sinned. In terms of a definition of sin that is not from the Bible but certainly consistent with biblical teaching, we have the words of the Shorter Catechism.

Question 14 of the Shorter Catechism presents the question, What is sin? And many of us will know the answer to that question. Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.

[8 : 37] And if we are to avoid sinning, if you are to avoid sinning, you need to know God's law. If you don't know the law, then you are more prone to sin.

We know that knowledge of the law does not in any way guarantee that we won't break it. But if we don't know it, then we are in an even more difficult situation. Sin is wrong.

But the next thing I want to say about sin that is illustrated by the VW crisis, but that we can also draw from the Bible's teaching, is that sin is stupid.

Now, that seems maybe an unparliamentary language to use. Sin is stupid. But to be honest with you, when I first heard about this situation with Volkswagen, that was what most struck me.

We'll be mentioning other things this evening. But what most struck me, what first struck me, was just how stupid they had been. And why do I say that? Well, how could they possibly have imagined, those who concocted this scheme, those who decided that this is what the company would do, how could they possibly have imagined that they could install these devices in 11 million vehicles and nobody was going to find out?

[9 : 59] Now, I just beggars belief. And that's why I say it was an act, not only that we could say it was morally wrong, which clearly it was, but it was an act of quite spectacular stupidity on the part of Volkswagen.

They were always going to be found out sooner or later. And this aspect of sin, sin as foolishness, sin as something that is spectacularly stupid, is one that certainly ties in with the Bible's teaching. And in its description of sin and the features of it, One of the words that we find in the Bible for sin, it's only an adjective that we would translate sinful, is the Greek word anomos. Nomos means law. A is simply a prefix that allows us to understand the word as being anti-law or against law. But the sense of the word, or one sense that the word can carry, is that it's against reason.

It's against order. It's against all sense. Sin makes no sense. Sin is utterly unreasonable.

[11 : 17] And hence, we can describe it, I think, legitimately by sheer observation, but also on the grounds of the Scriptures, we can describe it as stupid.

But let's think about the folks involved in this scheme at BW. What if they had been smarter? We're just speculating here. What if they'd been smarter?

What if they'd been able to develop technology incapable of being detected? Difficult to, I would imagine, ever be altogether certain of that.

Let's just imagine that that were possible. Some might say that perhaps other manufacturers have, and they haven't been caught out yet because they have smarter technology.

Who knows? Time perhaps will bring out some interesting revelations. But of course, even if it were possible for DBW or any other car manufacturer to produce technology that isn't detectable, I think we'd agree that to do so would still be wrong and ultimately also foolish, stupid.

[12 : 29] Let's listen to the sobering and true words of Jesus as He is recorded in Luke's Gospel, chapter 12 and verses 2 to 3.

What does Jesus say? He says this, There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.

But Jesus is declaring, these aren't just nice words of wisdom, He's declaring a universal truth that everything sooner or later will come out into the light.

And so if there are some clever people out there who are sitting back very self-satisfied because they haven't been found out yet, and they're confident that they never will be found out, and I'm not just thinking about people sitting in corporate boardrooms, that would apply to all of us.

All of us who would be so foolish as to imagine that a sin that we are guilty of will never be discovered, that we've got off scot-free.

[13 : 46] Jesus reminds us that everything in due course and in His time will come out into the light. That alone is surely food for thought for all of us.

Well, what about you? What about all of us? Are you behaving foolishly? Are you behaving stupidly? As you indulge in and are guilty of sin of one kind or another, being unfaithful to your wife, lying on your tax returns, fiddling your expenses just a little bit.

Everybody does it. Being dishonest with your parents or with your friends. Jesus assures us that all of these things, will all come out into the open sooner or later.

Sin is wrong. Sin is stupid. Just developing that a little bit or maybe posing the question, if that is so, especially if it is foolish, why do we do it?

If we are conscious as we are that it is foolish, why is it that we still do it? Well, at one level, the answer to that question is that sin is so ingrained in who we are.

[15 : 04] It's part of our spiritual DNA. We have, the Bible explains to us, inherited the corruption of Adam's sin, indeed the guilt and corruption of Adam's sin.

And the psalmist knew that so well in his own personal experience as he reflected on his own sinfulness and declared, I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

As it's often been said, and it is true, we're not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners. Sin is wrong. Sin is stupid.

But another aspect of this that we can give some thought to, in the light of the scandal that we're considering, is that sin is personal.

Again, if we think of Volkswagen and what has happened there, who is responsible for the deceit that has been perpetrated by this company?

[16:05] Can we say, well, it's the company? Well, that would be very convenient, wouldn't it? Let's just blame the company, the corporate entity. They are.

This difficult to identify, they, it is responsible. Of course, we know that just won't wash. We know that there are actual culprits.

Some of them will, I imagine, in due course, be identified. Perhaps some won't be. Not at least in the short term. The point is that there are actual people, men and women, who have been guilty of deliberately seeking to, and for a period, successfully deceiving, sinning in this way.

Men and women, with names, with homes, with children at nursery school, with hobbies, and I imagine, some of them, many of them, very pleasant people, in their own way.

And yet, they are personally responsible for sin in this matter. This is not just corporate evil. It's not the evils of capitalism.

[17:22] I'm not giving an opinion on whether there is such a thing. I'm just saying that this isn't about that. At least not about that alone. People are responsible. Sin is personal.

People sin. There is no sin unless there's a sinner who sins. The bosses who hatch the plan. I just wonder, and here I'm just speculating, imagining, I wonder when they did hatch this plan.

I wonder if it was in a brainstorming session at some corporate away day. How can we reduce the costs of production of our vehicles, and so make more money? What could we do?

Well, these emission tests, they're so demanding, and it will cost so much to produce engines that meet up to the standards. So what could we do? And somebody, some very ambitious, bright, young thing there said, well, we could do this.

And the other said, well, that's a great idea. And I wonder if they patted themselves on the back and congratulated themselves and said, well, this is brilliant. Aren't we brilliant coming up with this wonderful idea?

[18:28] I wonder how clever they thought they were as they saw the potential for greater profits and greater wealth and prestige due to their clever idea.

Well, there's the bosses who would have been involved. But then, of course, the bosses couldn't do it alone. They would have needed some of the foot soldiers, some of the employees, the software engineers, and the technology experts to devise and to concoct and to produce these devices.

And, of course, it's inconceivable that those involved in that would not have been aware of what it was they were doing. I wonder if some of them are thinking, well, I was just following orders.

It wasn't my idea. Just following orders. I'm not responsible. Does that make it okay? Well, that justification, I was just following orders, it didn't wash at the Nuremberg trials, quite rightly, and it doesn't wash today in the workplace.

And that would include your workplace. I would be astonished if amongst us today there aren't those who at some point in your working life have not been pressurized in one way or another to sin in the context of your work.

[19:51] And probably the most common way in which you may have felt pressured to do so would have been particularly in this area of telling the truth. And I'm sure some of you could tell stories of that and relate, yes, indeed, that is true.

What do you do in those circumstances? When in your work context, when your boss says, well, this is what you need to say, this is what you need to write in the report, this is the spin you need to put on this.

Do you say, well, I'm just following orders. What can I do? I can't afford to lose my job. I have a family to support. Or do you say, no, that's sin. And I'm not going to do that, whatever the consequences of my refusal will be.

We are personally responsible for our personal sins. We can't point the finger at others to justify our actions. The Bible is very clear in identifying each and every one of us as personally responsible and culpable for our own sin.

Paul assures us that all have sinned, that there is no one righteous, not even one. Sin is personal. But moving on, we can say something else about sin.

[20:59] Feature, characteristic of sin that is brought to light, I suppose, or illustrated by this VW crisis or scandal. And it is this, that sin has consequences for others.

When I speak about consequences here, I'm not speaking at the moment, we'll come to that just in a couple of moments. I'm not speaking about the matter of punishment. But at this point, I'm simply noting that sin hurts others.

In that sense, I'm speaking of sin as having consequences for others. Sin is never victimless. You know, we sometimes hear people speaking about a victimless crime. But be assured that sin is never victimless. Now, certainly some sins have more victims than others. There's no doubt about that. But sin always has victims. Sin always offends, hurts others. If we think of the case of Volkswagen, who are those who are victims? Or who are those who are offended, prejudiced in one way or another by this particular sin?

[22 : 08] Well, we could identify the authorities in question who had been deceived by what was done. We can think of the consumer. Those who have bought the vehicles on the understanding that they met a certain standard when it's clear that they did not do so.

In a sense, you could identify victims within the company itself and employees, innocent employees, of whom there will be many. And yet, they find themselves, in some measure, victims of these circumstances, of this sin.

Of course, some heads have already rolled. The chief executive has resigned. Martin Winterkorn, interesting what he said in the context of his resignation.

Whether what he said is true or not, I can't judge. But listen to what he said. He said this as he resigned from his position. I am doing this in the interest of the company even though I am not aware of any wrongdoing on my part.

Now, that may be true. That may not be true. But the point is that the sins, in this case, perhaps of others, perhaps his own, I don't know, brings victims.

[23 : 21] And no doubt there will be others. Another consequence of sin is loss of trust and how that affects our relationships. We think of it at the personal level and we think of it in the case of the company.

Well, loss of trust, of course, affects the customer's view of the company and of the products they produce. Again, the former chief executive acknowledged that.

And he said, and I quote, we have broken the trust of our customers and the public. Sin has consequences. It hurts others. The Bible makes it very clear that sin hurts others.

If we think of this in terms of an example rather than looking for a verse that states that to be so. Think of David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba.

Think of the multiple victims of his sin. And it's quite a list. I think we could make a strong case for identifying Bathsheba herself as a victim of David's sin.

[24 : 31] We won't explain why we think that, but I think a strong case could be made. Clearly, her husband, Uriah, was a victim of David's sin, his family, and the loss of a father, a son.

We think of the soldiers in David's army, some of whom lost their lives as a result of David trying to cover up his sin. We think of members of David's own family who were, in a very real sense, victims of his sin.

Of course, we know that the consequences in the life of his family members in the years that followed were very painful and grave. And no doubt we could go on.

And yet, ultimately, and principally, the Bible makes clear that sin is an offense against God. David, as he was brought under conviction of sin, acknowledged that.

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned. But what about you and me? Your sin hurts others. Your sin offends God.

[25 : 37] Let's notice one other aspect of sin. We touched on it just a moment ago, but developed it a little bit more, and that is that sin deserves punishment. The Volkswagen, they are in for a big bill.

Apparently, they've set aside \$7 billion to cover the fallout from their sin. I was reading some of the numbers.

Apparently, the maximum fine in the U.S. for their offense is one that is applied per vehicle. Now, just to know that makes you think, wow, this is going to be a big bill.

So, it's not just, you know, you've done this wrong and this is the fine. The fine is worked out on the basis of each and every vehicle that is affected. Now, we're told that half a million vehicles have been sold in the U.S.

with this defeat device, and the maximum fine for this particular sin is \$37,500.

[26 : 39] Now, I don't know if you're good at mental arithmetic when there's lots of zeros involved. Basically, that would work out potential at a fine of something approaching \$19 billion. No doubt that won't be the final bill, I would imagine, but it gives you some idea of the scale.

Of course, in addition to that punishment, if we want to call that punishment, individuals will be punished, I would imagine. Some will lose their employment. Some may have to face criminal charges for their responsibility in the matter.

And I think in all of this, we all agree, and not just those of us here coming at it from the perspective of the Bible. I would imagine people with no sympathy for what the Bible teaches would also agree that it's right and proper that Volkswagen be punished, and that those responsible for this be punished.

That's something that people would generally consider to be a reasonable outcome in these circumstances. And yet, when we bring that to a more personal level, and our sin, and your sin, does that also deserve punishment?

Many, indeed many, within the church recoil at the idea of God punishing sinners. And yet, it is entirely reasonable, and more importantly, it is entirely just that He do so.

[28 : 12] The Bible is clear. Sinners deserve to be punished. The wages of sin is death, spiritual death, and separation from God. The Bible identifies a place of eternal punishment called hell.

Now, the VW executives may, I don't know, but they may, with the help of very clever and very well-paid lawyers, avoid due punishment, or limit the punishment that they have to suffer.

Maybe ensure that it's the company that pays the bill in its entirety, and they can somehow remain scot-free. We don't know what the outcome will be. But be assured of this, that there will be no lawyers on judgment day, just the accused and the judge.

That is all that will be required on that great and dreadful day. Sin deserves punishment. But we can't conclude without recognizing and bringing to bear on this matter the good news of the gospel, that sin needs to be and can be forgiven.

forgiven. How does that work? How can sin be forgiven? How can sin be justly dealt with? Well, one way in which sin can be justly dealt with is by the guilty party paying their dues.

[29 : 42] Commit the crime and do the time. That's one way in which justice is served. Punishment is received and endured.

But how would that apply to our sin against God? How would the notion of sorting out the problem by doing the time, how would that work?

Because the problem is that doing the time in regard to my sin and your sin against God is not a good option because the time is eternal punishment.

Well, that's one way of dealing with your sin to receive the punishment that it is due. But I don't think any of us would identify that as an attractive option.

What then can we do? Well, let me also bring to base on this something that was said by a spokesperson for one of Volkswagen's major investors who were giving their opinion on the situation as they saw the share price tumbling.

[30 : 47] And this representative one of the major investors gave their opinion on what VW should do. And I'll just read what they said. They, that is Volkswagen, really need to reinstate the trust of the market.

And one of the potential ways of doing that is to appoint a new head and try to tie all the bad or irresponsible things to the old one.

This was the advice. This is the way the problem could be solved. Tie everything, all the bad stuff, tie it to one person and get rid of that one person and hey, problem is solved.

That's an interesting proposal. I'm not giving an opinion on whether I think that would be the right thing to do or a good thing to do, but that is what was being suggested. Now again, as I say, whether you agree or not to what is being proposed, what is being proposed is what we could call a scapegoat, one who will carry all the blame and guilt of everybody.

It may be that in the case of Volkswagen, they have their own share of the blame, but they'll also carry everybody else's blame and will serve this function of a scapegoat. They'll take all the flack, all the punishment, all the consequences, and everybody else gets off F3.

[32 : 07] Now this notion that was being proposed by one of the investors, it does point to, and only in a partial and inadequate way, it does point to what God has done to deal with our sin and to secure our forgiveness.

What the Bible teaches us is that God has offered himself in the person of his son as our scapegoat. We read in 2 Corinthians that the language of scapegoat is not used.

If we were to turn to the Old Testament and the sacrifices of the Old Testament, we could find the actual language of scapegoat, but we're not going to do that this evening. But the principle is certainly one that is found in the final verse that we read in 2 Corinthians 5, where we read this, God made him, that is Jesus, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

All of our sin laid on his shoulder that he would deal with it. Now in the case of Jesus, of course, it was one who had no sin. And so when he went and dealt with sin, he wasn't dealing with his sin and everybody else's, he had no sin of his own.

And so when he died on the cross, receiving due punishment for sin, he was doing so not for his own sin, but for the sin of those that God had laid upon him.

[33 : 35] All those who would put their trust in him as Savior and Lord. Well, what do we need to do in this matter of sin?

In the light of the reality that we are sinners, in the light of what God has done in Jesus to secure our forgiveness. Well, our new friend, acquaintance, Michael Horn, the head of VW America, can help us.

We've totally screwed up, he said. That's a starting point for us. We need to acknowledge that we're sinners. We've sinned against God.

We're at fault. We're responsible. We have done what we ought not to have done. We have failed to do what God required us to do. We can do nothing to solve the problem in our own resources.

We can't reform ourselves. We need to confess our sin and trust in Jesus as the one who was made by the Father our scapegoat upon whom was placed our sin.

[34 : 43] He dealt with it at the cross in our place, bearing our guilt, receiving our punishment. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you that it is a word that speaks to the human condition as it really is. We thank you that we can consider and analyze all that goes on round about us but also in us, our own conduct, our own foolishness and find that in your word not only is it predicted and described but also, and we thank you for this, an answer is granted and provided and offered to us, a way out.

We do thank you for the gospel. We thank you for your son Jesus. We thank you that he who knew no sin, was made sin for us. We thank you that as we put our trust in him, not only is our sin dealt with but we receive in return his righteousness, oh sweet exchange.

Heavenly Father, we pray then that you would help us to acknowledge our condition, our sinfulness, our need of forgiveness and acknowledge that that forgiveness can be found only in your son Jesus and help us to put our trust in him.

And these things we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 22] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.