Dr. Karl Menninger published a best selling book in 1930 which was instrumental in introducing the field of psychiatry to the American public. The title of the book was "The Human Mind." Forty three years later, Dr. Menninger shocked that medical therapeutic community with another best selling book, which debunked many of the psychiatric theories of that day. It was called, "Whatever Became Of Sin?" I’ve borrowed that title for my sermon today.

After many years of experience in his field, Dr. Menninger came to the conclusion, that mental health and moral health were identical and the reality of sin, which had all but disappeared from contemporary vocabulary, offered the best hope to the suffering, struggling and anxious world for treatment and prevention. One reviewer called his book "a lay sermon . . . preached with warmth that offered an explanation of why men know what is good but do what is bad.

An excerpt from Dr. Menninger's book best states his observations and his challenge:

"In all of the laments and reproaches made by our seers and prophets, one misses any mention of "sin," a word once in everyone's mind, but now rarely if ever heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles—sin with an "I" in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty perhaps of a sin that could be repented and repaired or atoned for? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick or criminal—or asleep? Wrong things are being done, we know; tares are being sown in the wheat field at night. But is no one responsible, no one answerable for these acts? Anxiety and depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sins? Where, indeed, did sin go? What became of it?"

Today, almost thirty years later, in the midst of corporate scandals, insider trading, inflated resumes, an epidemic of pornography, terrorism, gay marriages, escalating divorce rates, abortion, violent gangs, alcoholism, drug abuse and rising crime rates, Karl Menninger's words sound eerily prophetic. Few people today pronounce our personal failures for what they really are, even in the church— but God's Word calls it "sin," which is the subject of our study today from 1 John 2:1-6. The apostle John presents this teaching in three parts. First, he tells us that the reason for his letter is that we not sin. Second, if we do sin, Jesus is the atoning sacrifice and our advocate with the Father and third, our obedience to God's Word will determine whether or not we will sin again.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. — 1 Jn. 2:1

"My dear children" is a very affectionate expression in the original language. God's servants are not harsh or condemning. John gently pleads with those he loves by expressing God's purpose in the writing of this epistle. Our heavenly Father doesn't want us to sin because sin breaks fellowship with God.

What is sin? Most people would associate the word with some kind of wrong doing, even if they don't like the word—but what kind of wrong doing? I had a young lawyer challenge me with that question once and even though I was a new believer at the time, I knew that the Bible defined sin as breaking the law. "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 Jn. 3:4). I thought it somewhat ironic that my lawyer friend didn't know that, as that was how he made his living—defending lawbreakers. But then again, as Dr. Menninger wrote, who in our society would call a burglar, a "sinner?" Can't you just see the newspaper headline, "TWO LOCAL SINNERS BREAK INTO RESIDENCE AND STEAL OWNER'S PROPERTY or MAN CAUGHT SELLING COCAINE. WHAT A SIN! Don't hold your breath!
Whose law is being broken? The answer is God's law and all that God's law prohibits. We find that law of course in God's Word. Does that mean that every time we break God's law we are guilty of sin—even if we perceive that it wasn't our fault? Flip Wilson's character, Geraldine, always got a laugh every time she tried to justify her misdeeds with the line, "The devil made me do it," but in reality I believe that sin is a choice we make individually.

One last thought on sin, which may help clarify the above statement. James tells us that we are tempted to sin by our own evil desire which gives birth to our lawlessness (Jas. 1:13-15). In other words, we are lawbreakers by choice. We are the ones who make the final decision—no one else. That's why the Bible makes supporting statements to this truth by telling us about ourselves, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23); and "As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one (Rom. 3:10); and "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jere. 17:9). We are a sorry lot. Our sins get us into all kinds of difficulties. How do we get out of them? Well, God has made a provision for us through his Son Jesus Christ. John says, "We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." (1 Jn. 2:1b).

The “one who speaks” here is the word "parakletos" in the Greek, or the paraclete. A paraclete is a person who is called alongside to help in time of trouble. He becomes an advocate in our behalf. Modern day jurisprudence dictates that if one gets in trouble, he is entitled to a defense attorney, even if he is guilty. The mandate of a defense lawyer is to get his client off, so he always tries to present his client to the court or jury in the best possible light, even by fudging on the truth. Defense lawyers are an unusual breed. They all have wild imaginations and few scruples. They hold to no absolutes. Any defense is a possibility if a jury will buy it.

Not so with our advocate. He knows we're guilty and makes no attempt to hide the truth. What he does do is remind us that we are guilty but that the penalty for our transgressions has already been paid. We are declared innocent based on his sacrifice on the cross and nothing of ourselves.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. — 1 Jn. 2:2

"He is the atoning sacrifice." The old King James Version uses a word that hardly anyone understands, "propitiation." It is not a simple word to grasp. It is only used twice, here and in 1 Jn. 4:10. It basically means that Jesus himself, was not only our mediator as the High Priest between us and our heavenly Father but he was the sacrificial payment as well. He paid the necessary price for all of our transgressions and God accepted it. He was both the mediator in our defense and the sacrifice (Heb. 7:27). There are conditions to God's forgiveness, of course, but the restoration of our fallen relationship with our heavenly Father is always a possibility with Him for everyone in the "whole world." Sin always breaks fellowship with God but repentance always restores it—all because of the "atonning sacrifice" of Jesus on the cross once and for all. He did what was impossible for us to do for ourselves.

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: — 1 Jn. 2:3-5.

Now we come to the third leg of this discussion about sin. How can I keep from sinning? I know that I sin and God doesn't want me to. I know that Jesus paid the price for my sins at Calvary. But how do I overcome my evil desires so that I can overcome sin in my life. The answer is obedience to God's commands based on our love for Him.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is quoted as telling his disciples that our love for him is manifested by our obedience to his word. "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me (Jn. 14:21). "If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching (Jn. 14:23). "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love . . . (Jn. 15:10). So the key to the goal of a sinless life is perfect obedience to God's Word. Can we do that in this life as we continually contend with our fallen nature? Probably not, perfectly. Can we come close? Absolutely. Should that be our goal in the Christian life? Without a doubt. Do we have an example? Yes, we do in: "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. — 1 Jn. 2:6

"In His Steps" by Charles Sheldon, is a marvelous and inspiring book about Christian living. It presents us with a method and an approach to every situation and decision of life. We ask ourselves a simple question, "What would Jesus do?" When we know, we should do likewise. When we don't know we should find out and then do it. Anything else leads us to sin. When we do as he would do—we can live a victorious life in perfect fellowship with him that cannot be broken. That's where God wants us to live. And that's what I want to for my life. How about you? Maranatha. 8/11/02