

Welcome

In 2008, Brian Cranston made headlines when it was announced that he would be playing Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher who becomes a drug kingpin.

The show runner Vince Gilligan had pitched *Breaking Bad* as the story of Mr. Chips becoming Scarface. If those references don't make a lot of sense, Mr. Chips is the classic lovable old teacher who spent his life making a difference in the lives of his students. Scarface is the ruthless drug kingpin who went out in a blaze of glory.

And Brian Cranston had just finished playing the role of Hal, the aw-shucks dad on *Malcom and the Middle*. Much more Mr. Chips than Scarface. So the idea that the show could believably turn a suburban dad into a terrifying crime lord was... well a little hard to believe.

Until the show aired, that is. Though it took a couple of seasons to catch on, *Breaking Bad* came to be hailed as one of the best TV shows of all time. Part of that was due to the show's impeccable production values and a good bit was due to the stellar acting of the cast - led by Cranston.

But what really set the show apart from a lot of other prestige television is the style of storytelling. Gilligan summed up that style with one word: inevitability. *Breaking Bad* was a show about cause and effect.

We're going to engage *Breaking Bad* in a conversation about sin today. I want to look at how Walter White's transformation from Mr. Chips to Scarface is a dramatization of our own powerlessness in the face of sin. Today I want to ask what Walter White can teach us about our need for God.

Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we're going to explore some of our most beloved television shows. Why? Because we're practicing listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

The shows we're engaging have been popular, which indicates they resonate with us. There's something about them that connects with us - not just as individuals, but at a cultural level. So this summer, we're going to ask, "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

So that's what we're doing this summer: first, listening to the show and second, responding in faith. We began with *WandaVision*, a show about learning to see past our self-deceptions and be honest with ourselves. Reality TV helped us understand our need for authenticity. Then we spent a couple of weeks in Heaven and Hell with *The Good Place* and *Lucifer*. Last week,

Sonya Brown took us into the Upside Down, where we saw that it's not quite as scary as *Stranger Things* makes it out to be.

Today, we're talking with *Breaking Bad*, the show that illustrates the Christian doctrine of Original Sin better than just about any other show I've seen.

When churches bring up sin, we usually experience one of two responses. The first is that we get sweaty and nervous. Maybe we grew up in a church that was fire and brimstone, that talked constantly about how God hates sin - so much so that we couldn't imagine the possibility that Jesus could somehow be good news for all us sinners.

The other is a sort of excitement. Because talking about sin can make us feel superior - as long as it's other people's sin. This is where we get judgmental and condemning. We end up turning Jesus' good news into a wall to keep sinners out.

If you know anything about *Catalyst*, you know we don't care much for either of those tones. So how can we talk about sin in a way that it sounds like, well... like good news?

When it comes to Sin... there's good news and bad news. Believe it or not, *Breaking Bad* can help. So let's start with the bad news.

Turn with us to [Romans 6](#).

The book of Romans is one of the most coherent treatments on Sin. That's partly because this is a letter Paul wrote to a church of folks he'd never met. So he's offering them his wisdom for the first time. It's also because the Roman church is a multi-ethnic congregation. It's Jews and Gentiles, and Paul is making the case that it doesn't matter what your ethnic or religious background - we're all in the same boat with respect to God.

Which is what chapter 6 is all about. And I bet, if you've any verses about Sin, you've heard verse 6:23:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. -- Romans 6:23 NLT

We think of sin as punishment. We do something God doesn't want us to, we break a rule, so God punishes us by sending us to Hell.

But when Paul talks about sin, he uses the term 'wages'. Wages isn't punishment language. It's about earnings. Wages are what you get for work.

According to Paul, Sin is something that enslaves us. It owns us. We work for it. And the wages we get for sin is... death.

This is the point *Breaking Bad* illustrates so powerfully. Actions have consequences. The choices Walter makes - to cook and sell meth, to take over a criminal underworld, all of it had real consequences for Walter and his family.

You never get the sense in *Breaking Bad* that Walter is being punished. We see him reap the consequences of his own choices.

And *this* is what Paul is saying. When we choose sin, when we choose other than what God has for us, we set ourselves on an irreversible path, one whose consequences are death.

Back up a few verses, and we see Paul expanding his metaphor:

Because of the weakness of your human nature, I am using the illustration of slavery to help you understand all this. Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the obligation to do right. And what was the result? You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom. But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. -- Romans 6:19–23 NLT

In the first season of *Breaking Bad*, there's one scene that's pivotal to the rest of the series. Remember: the show is about a man who has cancer, and he's decided to make and sell drugs to pay for his treatment. But in episode 5, Walter's old business partner, who's a multi-millionaire, finds out about Walt's condition and offers to pay for 100% of his treatment.

This is it - *Breaking Bad* ends after 5 episodes. It becomes a story about a guy who made one bad decision, but then got away scott-free. Except Walter has some hard feelings toward his former partner. And he doesn't want someone else to come to his rescue. So he turns them down and goes back to making drugs.

This, for me, is the choice the whole series hinges on. Not the first choice to make and sell drugs - that one can be chalked up to desperation. Right or wrong, that first decision could have been a critique of our healthcare system, economics, class or a whole host of other things.

But as soon as Walter has a way out and doesn't take it, it becomes a show about sin. Walt allowed his pride to dictate his behavior. He chose to believe a lie - about his masculinity, about his identity, and his choice to believe that lie trapped him in service to sin.

It's from *that* moment on that Walt's ultimate fate (which I won't spoil, but Paul sort of did) is sealed.

You want to know why God hates sin? This is why - because Sin captures us. Sin destroys us.

In [Romans 7](#), Paul goes on to describe a life under Sin's rule - a life enslaved to Sin. He goes on at length about the anguish of feeling trapped. He concludes with this lamentation that should feel familiar to anyone who's ever felt trapped in sin:

I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me

that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? -- [Romans 7:21–24](#) (NLT)

This is the real trick of sin: it always starts off small. Little compromises. No big deal. A small choice.

But once we set that cause and effect into motion, we're trapped. One small compromise begets another and another and another and before we realize it, we're like Paul, crying out for someone, anyone, to save us from the bed we've made for ourselves.

Now, if you're paying attention, you've noticed a contradiction in Paul's words - a contradiction that resonates with any of us who've really felt sin's power.

First, Paul says that we can choose to be slaves to sin or slaves to God. But then he laments that even when he wants to do good - to serve God, sin keeps him from doing it.

Once sin has its grip on us, there's no escape. No way out.

We may not go full criminal drug kingpins like Walter, but don't mistake it - Sin always leads to death. It always hurts us and the people around us.

Which is why Paul ends with that cry - I'm such a wretched person! Who could possibly save me from this dying body?

He goes on to answer:

Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord...

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. -- [Romans 7:25–8:2](#) (NLT)

Paul is clear that it's the Holy Spirit who sets us free from sin and enables us to serve God.

So again: the bad news? Sin traps us, enslaves us. And we're helpless.

The good news: Jesus frees us. Wholly and completely and before we even know to ask.

It's still worth asking: how? How does this work? How does the Holy Spirit free us from sin?

One of the best daily practices we have to connect with the Spirit is our Prayer of Examen. We do a version of it every week before we receive communion. The idea is really simple: every day, either in the morning or evening, you take a few minutes - as few as five! - to sit in silence with the Holy Spirit and review the previous 24 hours and look ahead to the next.

The goal is to be present with God, and to remember that God is present with us throughout our days. We ask the Spirit to show us how God is speaking to us, creating opportunities for us to serve and respond to God.

I love the Examen because it's not fancy. It's almost impossible to do wrong. It's simple enough for kids to do and it takes little enough time that anyone can make space for it.

If you've seen *Breaking Bad*, you know how Walter White's story ends. It ends the way Paul warns every life enslaved to sin ends. So the question before us today, my friends, is whether we'll learn from Walter White.

The time to root out our sin is when it is small. The longer we wait, the deeper the roots grow and the more painful our sin is when it comes to light.

So will we turn to Jesus, to the rescue he offers us? Will we make space for the Holy Spirit to transform us?

Communion + Examen

How have I served God in this last week?

How have I served sin in this last week?

When might I be tempted to serve sin in this next week?

How can I make space for prayer this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Prayer of Examen