

## Sin

For most people in America today, sin is something to laugh about. For those who take it more seriously, sin may be simply breaking one of the Ten Commandments having to do with stealing, lying, murder or adultery. But sin isn't just doing certain acts that are wrong (however "wrong" is defined or whatever "acts" are included). And sin isn't merely having a wrong attitude toward . . . whatever, things or persons. (Pride, greed, lust, selfishness, cynicism and bigotries come to mind here.) These notions, these ideas about what sin is are true but inadequate for our understanding. Let's think about what the Bible says sin is at its core, its fundamental essence.

In the Hebrew Bible, several words are translated as "sin." Both the Hebrew word most frequently used and the Greek word that's used have the sense of "to miss the mark," as in not meeting the standard God set, or not conforming to the revealed will of God. The other two Hebrew words mean an offense against God and transgression or rebellion against God. In their most common usage, the words used in the Bible basically mean not doing what should be done, or doing what should not be done. Sin is a breach of God-given responsibility. But it's more.

**"Everything that is not of faith is sin"** (Romans 14:23). Everything that doesn't come from faith, or that doesn't originate in faith, or that is not based on faith, or that is done apart from faith, is sin. *Everything!* But what is faith? Faith in what? "Faith" is trust in God, or in His Word or in His Christ who is the Living Word. Faith is a huge word that includes love for God, a desire to glorify Him, serve Him, obey Him, and be loyal to Him. Sin therefore is whatever is not sourced in that kind of faith in God. And there's this: **"All have sinned and come short of the glory of God"** (Romans 3:23). So in the Bible, sin is in relation to our holy Creator God. It is everything that fails to glorify Him. Or, to say it positively, only that which glorifies God is not sin. Only that which reflects God's glorious Person, attempts to mimic His great and marvelous deeds, or that obeys and is loyal to His truthful Word is not sin. All else is sin. God is not merely arbitrarily opposed to sin. Sin contradicts God's holiness, it offends His excellent Person.

God is morally perfect. He is glorious in all His perfections. And He created humanity to reflect His glory. In doing that, He endowed us with free will (or at least a measure of it, because God is sovereign over all His creation). God also revealed what is required of us to live in His house (i.e., in this world) and how to glorify Him. But those with free will must be held responsible for how they exercise their wills. Justice requires that. The Bible reveals that early in creation sin entered the human race, and God necessarily condemned us to die because of it. Sin is so horrible to God that He also cursed His entire creation, though with a promise that at some point in the future He would deal with sin and all evil.

So if we're honest, we need to acknowledge that sin is the chief characteristic of humanity. All of us are sinners, where the "all" refers not only to every person but to every *aspect* of every person. Personhood is usually defined as our mind, our will, and our emotions. There's probably more to personhood, but I'll just stick with these three. Sin has corrupted our mind. In theology this is called the "noetic" effect of sin. Our thinking is corrupted. We cannot think clearly or correctly about God or anything that has to do with God. Sin also has corrupted our will. This results in rebellion against God, against His Word and against His revealed will for us. Sin also corrupts our emotions. This has resulted in self-love, and/or love of all that is in the world (which would include love of anything and everything but God). We're totally depraved, that is, every aspect of our being is dominated by sin. Even our motives—many of which lie so deeply inside us we're hardly aware of them — are corrupted by sin. We have an innate sin nature, a principle or a force to do evil that is opposed to God. It's in every one of us, and it only ceases to control us when we die.

When we're dead, the sin nature that corrupted us is dead too. But even that doesn't solve the problem of sin because God made us to live forever. A resurrection of every human will occur some future day. Every person who ever lived will be raised from the dead. And, tragically, all the sins each individual has committed are forever in God's mind. We're guilty, all of us. Our situation is desperate. To be alive is dangerous because we cannot not sin. We cannot not offend the God who will one day judge us. People who suppose life is something to be enjoyed to be happy in, to pursue all that the world places on offer, or even to try to find and pursue meaning in it, seem to be oblivious to the fact of sin and of judgment. The very state of living, of being alive, is dire. Judgment means being banished forever from the presence of God, in a state of eternal condemnation.

To deny any of the above is itself sin. Sin results in our denial of God's existence and/or of His self-revelation, that is, the Bible. Sin denies He has a will for us. Sin denies a post-mortem existence, and it denies a future judgment. Sin blocks us from correctly understanding all the warnings God has provided that sin is judged. Death itself, as well as sickness and

natural disasters, are evidences of God's condemnation of sin and warnings of greater judgment to come. Sin is really deceitful because it's self-defeating. It prevents us from acknowledging our sinfulness and its consequences. Because of sin we easily deceive ourselves into not recognizing it, or into trivializing it or denying it. Sin has our minds and hearts so clouded that we are inescapably and necessarily lost and either don't know it or refuse to know it.

Many of us with an acute awareness of wrong-doing and injustice hope that by changing society, or changing our system of government a better humanity will result. We vainly suppose that prisons should be able to "reform" those incarcerated there. Or that counseling will change people. Or that a more enlightened system of education will result in greater virtue. It may be that some discernible good results from these efforts, but they are woefully inadequate to the task. They cannot eradicate our sin nature. Although its expression varies from individual to individual, a sin nature controls all of us. Humans aren't perfectible by any human-devised means.

The church's heavy influence on the Western world for almost two millennia has resulted in widespread adoption of biblical or godly virtues. So we value compassion, kindness, and generosity, for example, and we eschew sins such as bullying, ingratitude, and arrogance. We in the West today believe that we live good lives with respectable behavior and highly moral attitudes. Some (maybe many, I don't know) exalt themselves with their virtues; self-righteousness seems to be a major characteristic of the West. But that vaunted goodness is mainly because our sin nature is restrained by having been brought up with societal values; our latent sin nature still controls us. And our sin nature blocks us from loving God, the Author and Source of moral goodness, or even from wanting to know Him. The repudiation of God or the denial of His existence however may result in the release of one's sin nature from acquired societal restraints. If there's no sense of accountability to any ultimate authority, or an exaggerated sense of autonomy, the sin nature may easily express itself in hideous ways. (Think Nazi Germany, or school shooters, or countless other examples.)

But we're not hopelessly lost. That's because God loves His human creatures, and He has done what is necessary to deal with sin. And here's what He did: He made us all dead. And then He'll make us alive again – but without sin. So that we can be in His presence, love Him, and enjoy Him and glorify Him. It all is possible because of grace and because of the substitutionary death of Christ. Grace means God loves us so much that He undertook to do all that's necessary to save us from sin and its consequences, even though we don't deserve it. What we deserve is condemnation. But instead God offers us blessing beyond anything we can imagine. That's grace. But, why the death of Christ?

God exists as a unity of three differentiated Persons. God reveals Himself in Scripture as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Each has the characteristics of Personhood. The three Persons are transcendent, each equally God and infinite in their common attributes, eternally existing in a bond of love, joy and peace. How the Persons of the Godhead can be described as one God is mysterious. It's inadequate to say even that the bond of love and the unity it creates is such that Scripture reveals God as one. They are one *in their essential nature*, not just in love, purpose or thought. God is a unique Being. He is infinitely perfect morally, in goodness, justice, wisdom and in love; He's glorious in His perfections. There is no one like Him and there can be no one like Him. He's the greatest reality there is.

To deal with sin, the Son came to earth in the form of a human. As deity He took upon himself humanity. But it was a human nature that didn't have a sin nature. We know this unique Person as Jesus the Christ (or Messiah) of Israel. There's nothing lovely about us, but God loves the Son. Jesus lived not only a sinless life, but a life of righteousness that fulfilled all that God had expected of humanity. Jesus glorified God in his perfect life and in his words and teaching and acts of love for others. And then he died. But what a death that was! The Bible says a lot about it. We need to think deeply about it.

Jesus went voluntarily to his death, a horrible death. He didn't have to die because death is a judgment for sin, and He was sinless. But the death of Christ was an act of obedience to God. It was also an act of supreme love for us. It was a selfless, sacrificial death, a death in which he substituted himself for the eternal death each of us deserves to die because of sin. It was a death that bore the wrath of God upon sin. And he did it on our behalf. He had to be human to live a righteous life and to be able to die; he had to be deity for the death to have infinite worth.

And then the resurrection. Death could not hold him. Christ Jesus was raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and he lives today in heaven. And the New Testament reveals this great spiritual truth: if we trust in him, and in what he accomplished for us on the cross, we are placed *in him*. God places all those who acknowledge that they are sinners and in need of deliverance into Christ. That is, we identify with Him intimately in some transcendent way that's so perfect that in God's reckoning, the death of Christ is also our death, and the resurrection of Christ to new life is also our new

life. Let me say it again: Because of all that the Son did in His incarnation, because of the death on the cross and His resurrection and our participation in it by faith, all that Christ accomplished is ours. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. We have forgiveness of sin, deliverance from the power and control of sin and from the condemnation and guilt sin justly deserves, a new relationship with God that will stretch for an eternity, and eternal blessing in God's presence. It doesn't get any better than this.

So, even if we're trusting in Christ, do we still have a sin nature? Yes. But we don't have to yield to it, although we can if we want to. It's still there. And it'll be there able to express itself in all its ugliness until we die. But when we die, our resurrection includes what in theology is called glorification, which means we'll have no sin nature and we'll be like Christ. And we'll be with him forever, in the presence of the Father enjoying the love and joy of the Godhead and all the perfections and beauty of God. In the meantime, we can glorify God by obeying His Word, that is, Scripture. We need to know it, love it and express it in our lives. And God gives the gift of the Spirit in us to enable us to suppress the sin nature and to become holy. Trusting in Christ means our lives should be fully oriented toward God. We should want to be holy and perfect, as God in heaven is, out of thanks for all that He did for us. If someone is a follower of Christ, that person's yearning should be to mimic the righteous life Christ that led. That way we reflect God's moral perfections.

But someone will protest: "If God is there, He is loving, and He will surely recognize all the good things I've done in life. I don't need to worry about the bad things, whatever they may be, keeping me from going to heaven." The problem with this view is, Scripture not only doesn't support it, it refutes it: "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10) and "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Sin alienates! Reconciliation with God is only because of faith in the Person and work of Messiah Jesus. If it were otherwise, there was no need for the Son to have to come to earth to suffer and die. And, worse, God would be open to allegations of injustice. But someone else may argue, "I don't believe that God exists, so why all this discussion?" I reply that belief in God is rational, but to not believe in God is absurd. No one logically can claim God doesn't exist. Because He's transcendent He has revealed Himself, and the claim that God doesn't exist dismisses the more than sufficient evidences God has provided that He's there. "But," I also hear someone saying, "Science says that everything can be explained apart from assuming the existence of any God." Oh really? How does science know that? Scientists study certain physical evidences, but evidence isn't dispositive. It must be interpreted. The noetic effect of sin guarantees that evidence will always be interpreted in a way that excludes God. Because of sin, humanity is not only alienated from God but is in rebellion against God (although the rebellion varies in its expression from person to person). And I can hear someone else saying, "All the hypocrisy and ugliness I see in the churches turns me off; I can't take seriously what you say." Sure there's hypocrisy (and worse!) in American churches. But doesn't all that just prove that the human problem is sin? In grace and with consummate patience God waits for professing Christians to experience the reality that He offers in Scripture. God is surely not oblivious to it.

Whatever religious beliefs we've harbored all thru life, whatever our circumstances in life may be, sin is the problem. Sin is the one empirically demonstrable Christian doctrine. Sin is what causes wars, violence of all kinds, hatreds, racism, and all manner of alienation. Sin is the root cause of divorce, crime, tyranny and slavery, and every form of injustice. Sin causes inequality and poverty. These are just some societally evident sins. A list of personal sins would be very long. Our problem, the dreadful problem that the world (and all history) is saturated with, is sin.

We can't not sin. It's our nature to sin. And sin is ugly. It offends a holy God who made us to reflect His glory. And it necessarily, in perfect justice, demands judgment. Sin is the terrible predicament every human has by being alive. But in love, God took the initiative to deal with this issue. He has done all that's necessary to deliver us from the power and presence and consequences of sin. It's all freely available, to any who want it, and it comes by faith in Christ Jesus.

The Gospel is the true story of a holy God condescending to step into His creation to deliver His beloved human creatures from sin and evil and the condemnation that His own justice demands, to take us to himself to enjoy Him forever. There's nothing more reasonable and more necessary that anyone can do than to receive this Gospel with the most sincere and profound gratitude. "But 'true'? How do you know it's true?" someone will ask. The resurrection! Death could not hold deity. That death was necessary, but God is eternal. He had to return to life. The Gospel also is true because it is so important that it was miraculously prophesied centuries earlier; see Isaiah Chapter 53, for example. It also is true because to any honest reader, the New Testament narratives all have the ring of truth to them. God speaks! He's a God who reveals Himself and His will. How does He do that? In written form. That's the role of Scripture. God is the ultimate Author of Scripture, in sovereignty having superintended its writing. He does not and cannot lie.

Our problem is, we don't want to listen to Him. We prefer other voices. "Science and philosophy, and the progress of history with its enlightened understanding of the world, have made belief in God impossible. You are simply sweeping all that the advance of civilization has given us into a trash-bag and calling it 'sin,'" someone else alleges. Yes! Except that that issue is eternally true truth from the One who cannot lie. We simply don't want to listen to His voice. In supposing we're so intelligent, so advanced, we not only become fools but we thus participate in the very evils we pretend to loathe.

The fundamental essence of sin is not pride, nor the will to be autonomous, as some thoughtfully and with good reason suggest. Rather, it's the willful repudiation of God. It's the rejection of Him who is altogether good and glorious. It's the deliberate rejection of His authority over us. So we refuse to fulfill the very purpose for which we were created. We invent instead all manner of other stuff in a vain attempt to bring happiness and understanding into our lives.

**"For the recompense of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:23). Justice demands that wrong-doing be punished. The judgment God has decreed upon sin is ghastly, eternal separation from good. But in a love that surpasses human understanding, God did all that was necessary to rescue us from that judgment. It all hinges on belief in a unique Person, Jesus the Messiah of Israel and all that He accomplished for us.

What's absolutely astonishing in all this is that, although we're totally corrupted by sin, God nevertheless loves His human creatures. That is evident in the humiliating and sacrificial mission He undertook to rescue us from deserved wrath. **"For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:16). Sin is ugly, stupid, hateful and painful. Yet God's love overcomes it, defeats it and replaces it. God's glory is on full display. Following are a few more Scripture passages relevant to the discussion:

**"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"** (1 John 4:10).

**"The one who does not believe God has made Him out to be a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony God has given concerning His Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life"** (1 John 5:10b-12).

**"The Father . . . has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him"** (John 5:22-23).

**"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies"** (John 11:25; Jesus speaking).

**"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ . . . God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. . . God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"** (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

**"How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?"** (Hebrews 2:3).

**"Just as it is appointed for mortals once to die, and after that judgment, so also Christ was sacrificed once to bear the sins of many"** (Hebrews 9:27-28).

**"...Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to set us free from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good"** (Titus 2:13-14).

**"But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us, not by works of righteousness that we have done, but on the basis of his mercy, through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our Savior. And so, since we have been justified by his grace, we become heirs with the confident expectation of eternal life"** (Titus 3:4-7).

**"And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness [of sin]"** (Hebrews 9:22b).

**"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death"** (Romans 8:1-2; the "me" refers to the Apostle Paul).

**"Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, whereupon all sinned"** (Romans 5:12; the "one man" is Adam).

**"Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it . . . And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened . . . The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books"** (Revelation 20:11-13).

And this, **"It is terrifying to fall into the hands of the living God"** (Hebrews 10:31).