

Expressions of Sin

“For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:16).

Wars, injustices, slavery, murders . . . these are some of the terrible things that most people think of when they encounter the word “sin.” Indeed, the recorded history of humanity is essentially the endless succession of horrible events such as these. But to limit our understanding of what sin is to such major disastrous events is to totally miss what sin is. To some, in contrast, smoking, dancing, drinking and using vulgar speech is sin – and the one who refrains from and eschews doing these sins is thus a holy person. Most people – everywhere, throughout all time – have a woefully inadequate understanding of sin. Even those who attend evangelical or fundamentalist churches! So we need to think about “sin.” We’re discussing, here, ourselves.

Sin offends God. But what is the fundamental essence of sin? Some dispute exists as to precisely what it is. Some think it’s the will to be autonomous. And that may be right. In the Garden, the Serpent’s temptation was to be like God, that is, independently making willful decisions, instead of obeying the instructions of God. But I suspect there’s something else, more prior, more basic, than the will to be independent of God. It’s this: Pride. We were created to glorify God. Sin is the refusal to glorify God but to glorify self instead. Pride is essentially self-glorification. It’s love of one’s self. The Serpent was proud, in love with himself, and his heinous work in the Garden was to make that first couple, the progenitors of the human race, similarly proud. It takes humility to be godly, to believe and love and trust God. It takes humility to obey God. It takes humility to fulfill God’s will, and to be in relationship with Him. Pride opposes all that, it makes fulfilling the purpose for which we were made impossible. The will to be independent flows out of pride (that is, self-glory). So does a lot more.

The will to glorify oneself necessarily **rejects God**. It refuses to honor God, to obey Him, or to glorify Him. It may openly deny His existence, or it may more subtly adopt a Deist-type of understanding of who God is. Or, it may simply acknowledge His existence but ignore Him, be indifferent to Him, and/or live one’s life as if He didn’t matter. There’s no faith in Him, in His promises, or in His will. The First of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me,” deals with this very issue: Pride places self before God. Pride causes us to want to be little gods of our own. This very popular refrain, “I don’t care if God is good. It’s my life, and I don’t want Him telling me how to live or what kind of person I’m to be. I will live the way I want to, and I’ll be the kind of person I want to be,” reveals how ugly pride is, yet this is the thinking that lurks deep in the soul of all of us, every one of us.

Rejection of God includes rejection of His Word. His Word, after all, not only reveals God but it expresses God’s will and purposes. God uniquely identifies with His Word. The refusal to know the Word of God and/or to base our lives and persons on it are therefore an expression of self-glorification. Unbelievers substitute all manner of speculation and imagined narratives for the Word of God. But church-goers in the Western world find equally offensive ways to avoid encountering God in His Word (“I’m too busy.” “I don’t understand what I’m reading.” “I already know enough of it.”).

God is lovely. He is the most magnificent Being in all existence. To know God is to love Him. But love of self prevents us from loving God, from even knowing Him. To refuse to love God is not only due to self-love, but it leaves us wide open to loving other gods, ones that permit us – even encourage us – to be proud. So idolatry. It also leaves us wide open to the love of the world and all that the world puts on offer, things that appeal to self-love. Worldliness exalts ourselves. Idolatry and worldliness heighten our self-love, which then keeps us from knowing God. A deadly spiral results that leads to eternal loss.

The will to glorify self also results in **contempt for others**. Making an idol of oneself means others are inferior in some way, flawed or even wicked. Even if we don’t know them, they have to be lesser persons because we’re so great. Thus we criticize others, grumble about them, gossip about them, and take every opportunity to put them down. If not publicly, then at least in our own minds. Why? So as to glorify ourselves! We’re the superior ones, the most moral, the most intelligent, the most spiritual, the most ideal. And everyone else should acknowledge that, we conceitedly suppose. By minimizing others (even if there is really some defect or failing), we seek to magnify ourselves.

But it’s worse. Our contempt for others slides too easily into hate. And without guardrails of some kind, barriers to the expression of hate, the hate can turn violent. Contempt for others doesn’t simply result in indifference to them and their needs, although that’s mostly what happens. No, it escalates and finds outlet in violence. The human race everywhere is

characterized by hatred and violence. Mankind is permeated with all manner of force directed against others, if not outright cruelty. Even verbal abuse and sarcastic or otherwise biting remarks are painful because they're so obviously motivated by selfishness.

But even if the contempt we harbor for others doesn't lead to violence, other more subtle expressions of scorn erupt. Thus we seek to manipulate others; we use them for our own selfish purposes as if they were mere physical objects. We lie to them and we deceive them in order to promote ourselves or our own plans or will. We steal from them and suppose it's either no big deal or we rationalize it somehow. Glorifying self means we seek to get what we want without concern for who suffers loss or hurt. And if we perceive others are a threat to us in some way (or maybe they even actually hurt us), we react in a way that seeks revenge – however subtle that settling of the score may be.

Among the many ways that glorifying self manifests, one of the most pernicious is **self-righteousness**. Oh, perhaps we fail morally in some small way every now and then, but we're really basically good. We *must* be, because we're great, godlike. Others may do wicked things because they're corrupt, but not us. We know what's good, and we do it. We know not to murder others, or steal from them, or rape or tell lies, and we carefully refrain from doing such wickedness. But even more positively, we keep our houses neat and clean, our lawns and shrubs cut, our cars washed, and we get haircuts when needed. We go to church every Sunday, put a gift in the plate, and we send cards to people we know every Christmas. We're virtuous people. And we glory in that. Self-righteousness is also wicked in that it causes us to gloat when we're aware of someone else's failing. The moral lapses of others reinforces our own goodness. It also causes us to refuse to forgive those who offend us. Why forgive someone who is morally inferior? Only people who themselves are sinners should forgive sinners.

People who love themselves have no clue what sin is. Nor what righteousness is. Sin is always what *other people* do. We adjust our moral standards so that we comfortably meet them. There's no need for Christ's vicarious atonement. No need to worry about whether there's a judgment after death. No need to feel guilt. No need to read God's Word to know what righteousness is. No need, in fact, to believe in God! But if there is a God . . . "Hey, He must be pleased with me. I'm a good person." This is pride at its ugliest. It not merely contradicts God, it calls Him a liar.

Finally, let's discuss **lust**. The love of self, the desire to exalt oneself, leads to endless self-gratification. We therefore lust for things, fame, power, wealth, sex, whatever. What it is doesn't matter, it's the lusting for it to glorify us that makes it especially sinful. So the lust for money, for example, makes us feel independent and powerful. And that makes us feel superior. It reinforces our exalted self. The lust for power makes us feel important, and that exalts us. Thoughts of God are totally alien to us, because lusts consume us. There's never contentment, nor peace. Always, desire for more.

Lusts can be subtle, so subtle that we don't recognize them for what they are, and we easily deceive ourselves into thinking our desires are legitimate. For example, we are tight with our money. We fail to be generous and loving when we see another person with a real need. The core problem is we lust for wealth. Another example: We want recognition as a leader, as a person who has special understanding of things, we want our opinions to count. That's lusting for fame. Indulging in sexual fantasies expresses lust. Many examples could be cited of inordinate desires, of wanting ever more of something, and all are in reality just plain old lust. What's wrong with lust? Let's identify three things: (1) It distracts from what we're supposed to be doing with our lives. (2) It either expresses or instills in us ungodly desires instead of being content; it says that God's provision and providence in our lives is inadequate. And (3) it invariably results in harm to others in some way. Lust is always an expression of sinful pride.

There's much more to mention. For example, we're not to be insensitive to others' consciences (Romans 14). Not loving others sacrificially is sin. Even our *thoughts* matter to God (Philippians 4:8). We offend God with just our thoughts! And there's this: With consummate arrogance (it's worse than merely self-exaltation), we presume upon God's grace. We put Him to the test, just as ancient Israel did. We attempt to manipulate Him. We don't even realize what we're doing! Sin is deceitful. Our sinful nature affects not only our desires and our values, but our thinking as well. We can't think rationally or realistically about sin. It's impossible. That's why God has done what's necessary to deal with sin. He first of all made forgiveness available to us by faith in Christ. And then He sends the Holy Spirit into our lives to reveal to us all that we need to repent of so that we can be transformed and express instead God's holiness. Apart from the enabling work of the Spirit, we are hopelessly in bondage to sin, and to the just condemnation that sin requires. There's no other escape from sin's power than what God has already done for us in the Gospel. To conclude, dear reader, your responsibility is to glorify God with your life. Meditate carefully and often on what sin is and how it subtly, deceitfully controls you. And ask God to forgive you and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. He will do it (1 John 1:9).