



## 1 John 3:4

(4) Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.  
*New King James Version*

We all know this verse says, "[Sin](#) is the transgression of the law," (KJV) a broad definition. However, there is an unfortunate tendency to apply it very narrowly, defining sin strictly in terms of law. Modern translations render it, "Sin is lawlessness," a stronger interpretation suggesting that sin simply ignores the rules as if they do not exist. That, though, just scratches the surface. The Bible's overall approach to sin is much more specific.

[Ephesians 2:1-3](#) provides insight into why sin can be viewed as a living and malignant power:

And He made you alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of [this world](#), according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

Sin is generated through inspiration and persuasion of the living and malignant "prince of the power of the air." Because sin's source lies in a living being, the Bible considers it dynamic rather than static. Verse 1—"[we] were dead in trespasses and sin"—is especially enlightening. [God](#) calls things exactly what they appear from His point of view. Up to the time of our calling, we thought we were alive, but that is how wrong our thinking is. God considered sin to have already killed us, but in His [mercy](#) He made us alive so we could overcome it.

Of course, we were alive as far as animal life is concerned but dead to the kind of life

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God desires for us. We were dead to [holiness](#) and spiritual life. A corpse is insensible; it cannot see, hear, smell, touch, or taste. So were we in regard to the beauty of holiness and godly spiritual life.

Sin is not something the ministry invented to hold people in its thrall. The first sentence of [Ephesians 2:1](#) includes the terms "trespasses" and "sins," both of which illustrate simply and clearly why sin is such a universal problem. "Trespasses," the Greek word *paraptoma*, means "to go off a path," "fall," or "slip aside." When applied to moral and ethical issues, it means "to deviate from the right way," "to wander from a standard."

"Sins" is translated from *hamartia*, a military shooting term that means "to miss the mark," "to fail to achieve a bull's-eye." In terms of morality and ethics, it means "to fail of one's purpose," "to go wrong," "to fail to reach a standard or ideal." The New Testament always uses *hamartia* in a moral and ethical sense, whether in commission, omission, thought, feeling, word, or deed.

Defining sin as lawlessness, while certainly true, tends to make one think of it only in legal terms. We can readily agree that the robber, murderer, drunkard, child-abuser, and rapist are sinners, but in our hearts we think of ourselves as respectable citizens. However, these two Greek terms for trespasses and sins—*paraptoma* and *hamartia*—bring us face to face with sin's breadth. The [Ten Commandments](#) alone cover broad areas within which many specific sins lie.

Commentator William Barclay cogently catches the essence of sin: "Sin is the failure to be what we ought to be and could be." The Bible contains numerous specific standards, and Christianity is a way of life that touches upon every aspect of life. The central notion contained within these two Greek terms is *failure*—failure to live up to the standards of this way of life as established by God and revealed by His Son, [Jesus Christ](#). As such, sin reaches into marriage relationships, [childrearing](#), cleanliness, clothing, entertainment, hospitality, health, and work. [Ephesians 2:3](#), speaking of sin swaying us to "[fulfill] the desires of the flesh and of the mind," exposes it as reaching into our very heart, involving itself in vanity, [pride](#), envy, hatred, and greed.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

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