

# Sin Is Spiritual!

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Sin. Crime. Error. Foul. Wrong. Vice. Each of these words names behavior that fails to reach an accepted standard. Any group of people joining to accomplish a goal will establish a set of rules, laws, guidelines or principles to regulate proper conduct. When such a code is abused or ignored, a penalty is usually imposed.

The great God of all is no different. In dealing with weak and imperfect human nature, He established a code of law based on His own perfect nature (I John 5:3). With it comes the inevitable penalty for its transgression—death (Romans 6:23). In His love for us, however, God has also provided for payment of our sins through the sacrificial death of His own Son (John 1:29; I John 2:2). It is this selfless act that we memorialize and apply personally each year at Passover.

In a seemingly straightforward verse, I John 3:4, God defines sin (*hamartia*) as *anomia*, rendered "lawlessness" (NKJV, RSV, NIV, REB, NAS) or "the transgression of the law" (KJV). Other translations use the words "evil" (Peshitta), "a breaking of God's law" (Phillips) and "iniquity" (Diaglott). The Greek word *anomia* literally means "being without law." To get a sense of what John writes, we can express it as, "Whoever does *hamartian* also does *anomian*, and *hamartia* is *anomia*."

The King James and Phillips versions imply that sin is strictly the breaking of God's law, whereas the other translations consider it more generally. However we may understand it, John certainly implies God's involvement as both Lawgiver and Judge. God will judge each person according to the standards expressed in His law.

## Countering Gnosticism

When the apostle John wrote this epistle near the end of the first century, the Gnostic philosophy had swept through the Roman world and had already made serious inroads into the church. Paul fights it in some of his letters, particularly I Corinthians, Galatians and Colossians. John attempts to counter it in all of his writings.

A primary belief of Gnosticism was dualism. This idea purports that a cosmological conflict of antithetic forces exists and will always be polar opposites. In plain English, this means that throughout time and space certain contrary forces have and will struggle against each other. These forces are matter and spirit, evil and good, darkness and light, much like the Oriental *yin* and *yang*. In such a dualistic system, no overlapping or gray area is allowed.

This belief, coupled with the Gnostic idea that believers had been initiated into the "knowledge" (*gnosis*) of salvation, led Gnostics to think one of two ways:

- » That the only way to attain true spirituality is to deny their flesh (matter) of anything that might tempt them to sin. Those who thought this way became ascetics.
- » The opposite extreme, that the things done in the body are inconsequential because only the spirit counts. These Gnostics often fell into licentiousness.

In I John 3:4, John argues against this second heresy. Some in John's area of ministry seem to have believed that they could not sin in their flesh. Since their flesh, matter, was ultimately evil anyway, it could not be redeemed and was worthless. Thus, they concluded, *anything* done in the flesh had no bearing on one's salvation.

They played a semantic game with the words *hamartia* (sin) and *anomia* (lawlessness). They considered *hamartia* to identify the transgressions of moral law, particularly sins of the flesh, such as sexual immorality, gluttony, drunkenness and stealing. *Anomia*, however, categorized sins of the spirit, like rebellion, pride, vanity and greed—the sins that Satan committed. They believed God, the eternal Spirit, would look the other way if one committed *hamartia*, but committing *anomia* put one under judgment.

They also made no connection between them; they did not recognize that one could affect the other. Gnostics would not admit that sins of the flesh had their origins in the mind (James 1:14-15) or that such sins could in turn cause their character, their spirit, to degenerate (Jeremiah 7:24). They saw a total and irreconcilable separation between flesh and spirit.

Thus, John tells them *hamartia* and *anomia* are the same; they are both sin! It does not matter to God whether the sin is committed in the flesh or in the spirit—to Him it is sin! If God says not to do something, and we do it, it is sin. He has said not to eat pork and shellfish; if we do, it is sin. He has said not to commit sexual immorality; if we do, it is sin. He has said not to hate our brother; if we do, it is sin. He has said to keep the Sabbath; if we do not, it is sin!

### **All Our Sins Forgiven**

Immediately, John ties the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to this understanding of sin: "And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin" (I John 3:5). The Word came as a man to die for the forgiveness of our sins (*hamartia*) without regard to classification! *Hamartia* is the general word used throughout the New Testament to describe sins of all kinds; it means "to miss the mark" or "to fail to reach a standard." Thus, John is saying that Christ's sacrifice covers all transgressions of law, whether or not we consider them to be physical or spiritual in nature.

Ultimately, all law derives from God; He is Lawgiver. He designed and set in motion all the laws of physics, chemistry and biology. Even the laws of man's governments are allowed by God:

For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. (Romans 13:1-2)

Of course, God's spiritual law is of prime importance and takes precedence over all other law. As Peter said, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29) when a conflict between the two occurs. Though breaking man's laws may not always be sin, a rebellious attitude against what God appoints over us will in time lead to transgressing God's law. One who will not submit to law in one area will not submit to it in others.

Breaking the laws of physical health, such as lack of exercise and rest, injuring and abusing the body, unhygienic practices and poor nutrition, may also produce spiritual effects. Notice I Corinthians 3:16-17:

Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

Neglecting one's body, Paul says, is a sin of defiling what is holy, and God will punish for it. With an important addition, he repeats this three chapters later:

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. (I Corinthians 6: 19-20)

Here, Paul, like John, mentions this in concert with Christ's redemptive sacrifice for us. These types of sins are also forgiven. Our Savior's gift of His life covers it all!

The Old Testament also looks at sin in this fashion. David writes, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103: 2-3). The parallelism in verse 3 inextricably links the two clauses together so that they are nearly equal. Healing us of sickness is to God forgiving us of sin (see Mark 2:3-12 for the New Testament equivalent).

Even in His original promise to heal in Exodus 15:25-26, God shows a direct link between sin, disease, obedience and healing (see Leviticus 26:14-16; Deuteronomy 28:15, 22, 27-28, 35; Psalm 107:17-20; Isaiah 19:22; Hosea 6:1). This, too, has a New Testament counterpart, James 5:14-15:

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Isaiah 53:5 is a classic verse that shows how forgiveness and healing are equated and covered by Christ's sacrifice: "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed." Peter recasts this in I Peter 2:24: ". . . who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed." Just as it takes a death to forgive sin, Christ died to heal us. There is no sin that His sacrifice cannot remit!

### **Free to Choose**

One of the Bible's greatest principles is "choose life," found in Deuteronomy 30:15-20. God sets before us two ways of life—His way and the wrong way—and gives us the freedom to choose which we will follow. He commands us to choose life so that we may live fully, both now and in His Kingdom, but we can opt for the other way of sin just as readily.

With the receipt of the Holy Spirit, we truly have free choice or free-moral agency. Before conversion, as the apostles wrote, we simply lived like everyone else, that is, according to the course of this world (Ephesians 2:1-3; I Peter 1:18; 4:3). Now, able to judge between the two ways of life more accurately, we have the power to decide to go God's way.

It is in our choices that we sin or live righteously. James is very clear that we do not sin when tempted but "when desire has conceived" or when we *choose* to act on it (James 1:14-15). The sin begins with the choice and continues with the act. Thus, all sin has a spiritual basis.

God illustrates this with an example in Deuteronomy 22:25-27:

But if a man finds a betrothed young woman in the countryside, and the man forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; there is in the young woman no sin worthy of death, . . . for he found her in the countryside, and the betrothed young woman cried out, but there was no one to save her.

Though the man committed a horrible sin, rape, the woman had no guilt ascribed to her because she did not choose to participate in it. How many packs of cigarettes have we smoked—secondhand—just by enjoying a meal in a smoke-filled restaurant? How often have we eaten food that, unbeknownst to us, was cooked with lard, bacon grease or some other unclean food? Does God condemn us for "sins" beyond our control? No!

Nevertheless, some people may feel guilty when such things happen to them or they allow them to occur. Often, something in their background—like card playing, drinking alcohol or dancing to a converted Southern Baptist—causes them to condemn themselves. Yet Christ's sacrifice even covers these instances! Such conduct, if we feel guilty doing it, may be called a sin of conscience, or as Paul writes in Romans 14:23, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." An act, whether truly sin or not, that defiles the conscience is not done in faith and thus results in sin.

In these situations, we condemn ourselves, even though God may not. "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God" (I John 3:20-21). And why do we have confidence toward God? John had given the answer already in verse 16: "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us"!

What an amazing sacrifice was given on our behalf! One precious, priceless sacrifice was all that was necessary to forgive all sin for all time! God makes no distinction between sins; all are covered by Christ's death on the cross.

Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place *once for all*, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, *how much more* shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? . . . [B]ut now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. (Hebrews 9:12-14, 26)

To God, whatever He considers to be sin is sin. *Hamartia* is *anomia*. No matter how one cares to categorize it, sin is lawlessness, the transgression of law, evil, iniquity. More importantly, all sin has only one remedy, the ultimate sacrifice of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. What great confidence and hope we have now that we are clean of sin and can freely choose to live as God lives!