

What Sin Is & What Sin Does

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Certain words, like people, get old and tired, having lost their vitality and impact. When they do, maybe they, like people, should be retired from active service. Perhaps a prime candidate for this verbal retirement might be the word "sin." As long as humans exist, we will never be able to retire the *concept* of sin because it definitely exists! None of us are perfect; we all sin on occasion. And certainly, sin affects all of us, both when we sin and when others sin.

The word itself, however, is so commonly used that it has become debased, distorted and abused. In this condition, it carries little emotional and intellectual force. To some people, it has become like "The sky is falling!" of Chicken Little fame. To unbelievers, "sin" is almost a joke—they even compose songs containing light references to it.

"Crime" has a far greater effect on us because it is more visible and often has a more immediate impact. Crime forces us to seek security so that it does not touch us in a painful way. Thus, we install locks—maybe several—on our doors and stay away from certain areas and types of people. Crime makes us feel apprehensive and suspicious, and most of us take steps to warn others of the dangers.

Though the overwhelming majority of crimes are also sins, not all of them are. Mankind has established such things as "Blue Laws," the breaking of which are crimes but would not necessarily be sins in God's eyes. Even so, God wants us to live within the laws of the land as much as we can (I Peter 2:13-17).

Largely, the world only recognizes the most obvious of sins. Because carnal people live by sight, not faith, and the effects of sin are not always immediately discernible, they do not understand the negative fruit that also results from the less obvious ones.

Consider the example of Adam and Eve. "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Genesis 2:16-17). As man counts days, Adam did not die until 960 years later! During that huge expanse of time, a carnal, living-by-sight human being would have great difficulty making the connection between sin—the cause—and death—the effect (Romans 6:23).

Though God commands us not to eat certain animals, fish and birds (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14), the person who lives by sight rationalizes that these are merely ceremonial laws. At least part of the reason for God's command, however, seems to be that the bad effects of eating unclean meats are not immediately apparent. Problems resulting from a steady diet of forbidden flesh may not show up for 40 or 50 years or even until the next generation. If one chooses to ignore God's gracious command and persists in eating things He has not designed as food, sin eats away at his physical and spiritual vitality.

Sin has **titanic** and often unrealized effects. Knowing this should cause us to guard ourselves against it even more strongly than we do against crime.

How the Bible Views Sin

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Later, he adds, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Sin is universal, and perhaps this is one reason why the term is so frequently ignored. So many are sinning so frequently that it is a way of life! It has become acceptable because everybody is doing it!

Sin is not like a disease that some contract and others escape. Some may self-righteously think they are better than others because of outward appearance—living by sight—but we have all been soiled by it. "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). Perfection is gone. Because of sin, we have all come short of the glory of God.

The phrase in Romans 5:12, "And thus death spread to all men" can be translated into more modern English as, "When death entered the race, it went throughout." It means death indiscriminately affected all because all sinned. It almost seems as though sin is like an amoebic blob whose tentacles reach out to encompass all in its path, absorbing and sweeping everything to its death.

In Galatians 3:22, Paul adds another picture to the Bible's teaching of the universality of sin. "But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." "The Scripture" is the Old Testament; it is man's jailer, condemning and confining him because he has sinned. This shows the uselessness of trying to be justified by lawkeeping. How can one expect the very thing that declares him to be guilty and condemns him to death also to pronounce him innocent? We would no more expect the law of our land to declare a murderer guilty and at the same time acquit him!

Sin's Dominion

All—the immoral, the ethical, the religious, the self-righteous, the atheist, the agnostic, the king, the commoner, the businessman, the housewife, the young and the old—are caught within the Scripture's web of confinement due to sin. "Man" in the Greek Scriptures is *huph hamartian*, man under sin. This means he is under the power of, in subjection to, under the control of or dependent upon, sin. Sin holds man under its authority, just as a child is under his parents or an army is under its commander. It is viewed as a living, active, forceful and dynamic power that has man under its sway.

Paul refers to sin's power to rule in Romans 5:21: ". . . sin reigned in death." The apostle personifies sin with a nature that is depraved and holding sway. In chapter 6:13-14 this becomes abundantly clear:

And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Sin is seen as an intangible entity whose movements we cannot literally see. But, as sin uses the members of our body in exercising its dominion, we can recognize it at work.

In the next chapter, Paul expands this concept of sin's dominion to sobering proportions:

For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. (Romans 7:11, 17, 23)

Paul imagines sin as beguiling, enticing and deceitful. We can almost visualize it as Satan himself, and it is certainly satanic in origin. He sees two authorities—the divine nature and the sinful nature—that are passionately opposed to each other, and man is forced to choose between them.

The apostle sees sin as a living and malignant power that at one time had complete reign over us. Even after a person is converted, sin still struggles mightily to retain its former dominion. The unconverted are POWs to such an extent that sin dwells in them without resistance from the Spirit of God. Talk about being brainwashed! So basic and pervasive is sin's grip that it is not merely an external power, but it has gotten into every fiber of our being. John 8:34 says, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin."

God's admonishes Cain about sin in Genesis 4:6-7:

So the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."

Because God had not accepted his offering or because He had accepted Abel's, Cain was angry and depressed. God tells him that if he changes his ways, he will indeed be accepted. But if he does not change, sin—pictured as a slave crouched just outside the door of his heart, awaiting the bidding of its master—would spring to action. God is describing sin's persistent nearness; it is *always* ready to extend its dominance by increasing iniquity. Sin strives to pile iniquity upon iniquity, even as one lie usually produces another to keep a façade of deception from crumbling.

God's warning is clear. Repent of sin at once, or it has a powerful tendency to grow and thoroughly dominate one who does nothing to stop it. This thought is reinforced in the final sentence of verse 7, "And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."

In paraphrasing God's words, James G. Murphy in *Barnes' Notes*, gives an insightful comment:

Thy case will be no longer a heedless ignorance, and consequent dereliction of duty, but a willful overmastering of all that comes by sin, and an unavoidable going on from sin to sin, from inward to outward sin, or, in specific terms, from wrath to murder, and from disappointment to defiance, and so from unrighteousness to ungodliness. This is an awful picture of his fatal end, if he do [*sic*] not instantly retreat. ("Genesis," p. 151)

In modern terms, God is saying, "Practice makes perfect." Sin's desire is so persistent and its appeal so subtle that, if it is not consciously stopped, one will become a master, a "pro," as we would say today, at sinning. It becomes a way of life. Jeremiah 4:22 makes this principle even clearer. "For My people are foolish; they have not known Me. They are silly children and they have no understanding. *They are wise to do evil*, but to do good they have no knowledge."

Did not God's warning prove true in Cain's life? We cannot afford to ignore sin's pervasive influence.

Sin Defined

It is easy for us to think of sin only in terms of I John 3:4, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness." This verse, however, is a good place to begin. Sin is directly connected to breaking laws. "Law," especially in the Old Testament, frequently means the broader term "instruction." Thus, we have more to consider as sin than just the breaking of a specific law. However, sin is not a complicated concept.

Numerous terms in both Old and New Testaments describe sin, but collectively they all give the same sense: to deviate from a way, path or law; to fail to live up to a standard. We find two of these words, translated as "trespasses" and "sins," in Ephesians 2:1: "And you He has made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins."

Trespasses, from the Greek *paraptoma*, means "to go off a path, fall or slip aside." When it is applied to moral and ethical issues it means to deviate from the right way, to wander. *Sins*, the Greek *hamartia*, is generally associated with military usage and means to "miss the mark." It indicates failing to make a bull's-eye. In moral and ethical contexts, it means to fail of one's purpose, to go wrong, or to fail to live according to an accepted standard or ideal. Sin is the failure to be what we ought to be and could be.

The Hebrew equivalents of *hamartia* and *paraptoma* are *chata* and *asham*, respectively. In Hebrew, *asham* comes closest to meaning the actual breaking of a law; in Greek, it is *anomos*. Both of these will sometimes be translated "iniquity" or "lawlessness." (See E. W. Bullinger, *The Companion Bible*, appendices 44 and 128.)

When we understand the terms God inspired to describe sin, we can easily see why sin is so universal. Because the robber, murderer, drunkard, rapist and child-abuser are so obviously evil, we readily agree that they are sinners. In our hearts we consider *ourselves* to be respectable citizens since we do none of these things. These terms, though, bring us face to face with the reality of sin—that it is not always obvious. Sin is not confined to external conduct. Sometimes it is buried within one's heart and very cleverly concealed from all but the most discerning.

The ministry has not invented sin; it is part of the territory Christianity covers. Christianity is a way of life from God that reaches into every facet of life. The central idea of sin is failure. We sin when we fail to live up to the standards of this way of life that God established and revealed through His prophets, apostles and Jesus Christ, the Chief Revelator.

As such, sin reaches into marital relationships, childrearing, cleanliness, clothing, hospitality, health, employment—even how we drive our automobiles. It involves itself in the entire gamut of human attitudes such as pride, envy, anger, hatred, greed, jealousy, resentment, depression and bitterness. In the New Testament, the biblical writers always use *hamartia* in a moral and ethical sense, whether describing commission, omission, thought, feeling, word or deed.

The standard we so frequently fall short of is stated clearly in Ephesians 4:13: "Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Connect this with Romans 3:23: "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." "The glory of God" in this context is the way He lives. *Hamartia*, sin, is to fall

short of the ideal, to miss the mark in the way we live. Combined with sin's definition in I John 3:4, *hamartia* ties what we might think of as rather minor, unimportant and secondary issues directly to the law of God.

What Sin Does

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:2-3:

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.

These verses link together many things regarding sin:

- » All have been involved in sin.
- » Sin is the force that drives this world.
- » This driving force emanates from Satan.
- » It motivates conduct involving flesh and mind.

Sin does negative things to us and others. If it were positive or even neutral, a loving God would be unconcerned about it. He would not lead us to repentance or demand that we repent of it. He would not command us to overcome it and come out of this world.

Satan is at the crux of sin. His name means "Adversary." He is against God and anything godly. In Revelation 9:11, he is called "Abaddon" and "Apollyon," and both of these names, one Hebrew, the other Greek, mean "Destroyer." Satan is a destroyer, and the spirit that emanates from him, that drives this world and produces sin, is a destroying spirit. We can broadly say that sin does two bad things simultaneously: It produces negative results and destroys.

William Barclay, author of the *Daily Bible Study Series*, provides a list of things sin destroys:

Sin destroys innocence: We find evidence of this truth at the very beginning of God's Word. In Genesis 3:7-11 God records Adam's and Eve's reaction to their sin:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?"

Were two people ever more innocent at the beginning of their lives than Adam and Eve? Immediately after sinning, though, they felt shame because of their nakedness, and they doubly showed their guilt by hiding from God. Do the truly innocent have any need to hide? Do the innocent need to feel shame?

Sin leaves a tarnish on a person's mind so that he does not look at life in quite the same way anymore. David expresses how this tarnish affected him in Psalm 40:12, "My iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up." Paul later explains, "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled" (Titus 1:15).

A well-known series of scriptures, beginning in Matthew 18:1, touches on innocence and its destruction. It starts with a question from the disciples: "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus replies that unless we become as little children, we will not be in the Kingdom of Heaven. Is not the beauty of their innocence and the harmless vulnerability of little children a major reason why we find them so adorable? They produce no harm, shame or guilt. But what happens as they become adults? They become sophisticated, worldly, cosmopolitan, cynical, suspicious, sarcastic, prejudiced, self-centered, cool, uninvolved and many other negative things. They also seem to lose their zest for life. Sin does that.

Sin destroys ideals: A tragic process begins when we become involved in sin. At first, we regard sin with horror. A man, a lifelong vegetarian before coming into the true church, accepted the truth that it is permissible to eat meats. The first time he tried it, however, he became so emotionally overwrought, he vomited it up. Though he was doing something good, his mind had still not adjusted to that fact, and it reacted as if it were evil.

If we continue to commit the sin, we will still feel ill at ease and unhappy about it, but gradually our consciences will adjust. Each sin makes the next one a bit easier. Over time, the conduct will become entirely acceptable, and we will sin without a qualm. Sin is addictive like a drug. As the addiction becomes stronger, the ideal depreciates until it is completely gone.

Mark 10:17-24 tells the tragic story of a wealthy young man who greatly desired to become part of Jesus' following. Because he wanted eternal life and to be in God's Kingdom, he asked Jesus what he must do to obtain them. When Christ replied that he would have to get rid of all he had, his high ideals came crashing down. A sin smashed them because his sin was stronger than his ideals. Jesus says in verse 24: "And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, 'Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the Kingdom of God!'" The young man's covetousness destroyed his ideals, and he was willing to settle for less.

Sin destroys the will: The will is the power or faculty by which the mind makes choices and acts to carry them out. An old adage says: "Sow an act and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny." At first, against his will, a person engages in some forbidden pleasure out of weakness, curiosity or sheer carnality. If the practice continues, he sins because he cannot help doing so; he is becoming addicted to it. Once a sin becomes a habit, he considers it to be almost a necessity. When it becomes a necessity, the destiny is produced.

The author of Hebrews writes:

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end." (Hebrews 3:12-14)

The deceitfulness of sin! In this context, to be deceitful is to be seductively and enticingly misleading. Sin promises what it cannot deliver. It promises pleasure, contentment, fulfillment—life—but its delivery on these things is fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying. Its deceitfulness is the very reason why it has addictive qualities. It lures us on to try to capture what it can never deliver.

The pleasure is never quite enough to produce the contentment and fulfillment one desires. Thus, people are *forced* into greater and deeper perversions until it results in death. All along the way, from its inception to death, sin quietly produces hardness of heart. Like a callus that forms over a break in a bone or stiffens a person's joints, sin paralyzes right action.

"Hardness" is translated from *skleruno*, from which name for the disease multiple sclerosis is derived. In a moral context, it means "impenetrable," "insensitive," "blind," "unteachable." A hardened attitude is not a sudden aberration, but the product of a habitual state of mind that reveals itself in inflexibility of thinking and insensitivity of conscience. Eventually, it makes repentance impossible. The will to do right is completely gone.

Sin produces slavery: This product follows directly from the destruction of will. When a person sins, he is not really doing what he likes, but what sin likes! Paul says in Romans 7:17, 23: "But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. . . . But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." Even though one may enjoy the sin while he is doing it, the person is not in control—sin is! This is doubly true when one sins with knowledge.

We must be very careful of this because Jesus warns, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34). Having gained our freedom through Christ's sacrifice and God's gift of the Holy Spirit, we do not want to be pulled back into bondage. As He says in the next verse, "And a slave does not abide in the house [God's Kingdom] forever, but a son abides forever."

Paul makes his approach to sin very clear: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (I Corinthians 6:12). His strong statement reflects his resolve—through such virtues as his knowledge of God, self-control, moderation and patience—to set his will not to permit *any* created thing, animate or inanimate, to gain dominance over him through his sins.

Sin produces more sin: James 1:12-16 lists the steps leading to sin, beginning with temptation. People rarely stop at just one sin, however, and it is often not long before they add another and another to the chain. Jeremiah describes this course of sin in his day—the same process that is likely to occur in anyone's life: "And like their bow they have bent their tongues for lies. They are not valiant for the truth on the earth. For they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know Me," says the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:3). This is a major reason why God uses leaven to symbolize sin. As leaven spreads and does its work in flour, so sin spreads and corrupts the lives of all it touches.

For example, a tragic sequence of events begins in Genesis 37 with one sin whose impact reverberates to this day! Jacob's favoritism (respect of persons) for Joseph irritated his brothers. Their irritation grew to jealousy and flared into hatred. They conspired to commit murder, sold Joseph into slavery and deceived Jacob to hide their complicity and guilt. What happened to their relationship with their father after this? Did they live in fear that one of the brothers would "squeal" on the others? Did they ever feel guilty for the pain they brought upon Jacob? Did their actions honor him?

Did these events intensify his over-protectiveness of Benjamin and, in reality, make things worse for them than when Joseph was with them? Sin produces more sin unless someone stops it by repenting.

Sin produces sickness, pain and degeneracy: The episode involving Jesus and the paralytic (Mark 2:1-10) makes a distinct connection between sin and sickness. This effect is often subtle because an illness or a poor, weak, rundown state of health may not be the result of a specific sin. It may be the product of a series of sins committed over many years or a lifetime. Sin is so subtle that a worldly person, examining himself for the cause of his sickness, may never consider sin at all. Not knowing God, he would have no inclination to look for sin as the cause.

Our Savior certainly connects sin with sickness: "Jesus said, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk.' . . . Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, 'See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you'" (John 5:8, 14). It could hardly be clearer.

Sin produces death: Death is the ultimate in slavery, a bondage so intense no one escapes from it unless the Lord raises him. It is such a powerful enemy that, according to I Corinthians 15:26, it is the last one destroyed. James' vivid portrayal of the course of sin also shows death to be sin's final result:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. (James 1:13-16)

A person's first sin gives birth to the first death. Repeated sinning without true repentance, especially when one has a knowledge of God, brings forth the second death (Revelation 20:13-15). What more can we add?

This article has not given any solutions, but one is certainly implied from beginning to end. As we are involved in this spiritual warfare, we would be well served to observe one of the primary principles of war: The better we know our enemy, the better our chances to defeat him. We need to understand more fully how the Bible perceives sin. It is a formidable and devastating opponent. It lurks within, looking for any opportunity to spring forth and gain dominion over us, seeking to produce more of its kind while it destroys life's God-intended qualities and finally life itself.

The law of God exposes and condemns sin. One of the purposes of the law, combined with the Holy Spirit, is to lift the lid from our self-deceived respectability and reveal what we—and sin—are like underneath. Perhaps a weakness of the church is to soft-pedal sin and God's judgment. But sin is rampant in these end times, and the judgment of God has begun upon us (I Peter 4:17)! We do not want to be like the false prophets described in Jeremiah 6:14, "They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace."

Very likely, the degree of our appreciation of grace and the gospel of the Kingdom of God stands in direct proportion to our understanding and abhorrence of sin. It has been said that the beauty of a pearl cannot be appreciated when there is no conception of the filth of a pig sty. Only against the inky blackness of the night sky do stars sparkle brilliantly. Thus, it is only against the ugly background of sin and judgment that the beauty of God's grace and His gospel shine.

Not until we clearly see that sin has battered, bruised and driven us to despair will we even begin to admit our need. Not until we grasp that sin has arrested, imprisoned, condemned and killed us will we reach out to Christ for justification and life. Sin is not a joke. We need not be morbid about it, but we should certainly check for it often within ourselves to avoid its deceptive, life-destroying bondage.