

Sin: Depraved or Deprived?

THE MODERN ATTITUDE TOWARD SIN

Most people don't talk about sin these days. When they do, they generally mumble. In times past, people actually feared that their sins would drag them into hell. Men in the Middle Ages were terrified by the thought. Dante Alighieri spoke for the common man when he said of hell, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here!"¹ Martin Luther, especially in his monastic years, was tormented by the thought of sin and hell, for he said, "I am dust and ashes and full of sin."²

But today, all that has changed today. Timothy Morgan hit the proverbial nail on the head eight years ago in an editorial that appeared in *Christianity Today*. This is what he said:

The idea that sin exists, that certain acts are inherently evil and offensive, is one of our most ancient and pervasive religious concepts. Tragically, our society's reluctance to label anything as *wrong, bad, or evil* has resulted in young adults who lack the mental categories to think ethically. Guilt has been reduced to negative energy, and sensitivity toward dolphins now outranks concern for the sanctity of human life.

Thus we are reluctant to call sin *sin*. We much prefer talking about crime, terrorism, fraud, or malfeasance. These are not mere euphemisms for sin. Our culture now affirms sinful dispositions, while condemning their outward manifestations. . . . Greed is touted as good (at least for the economy), but insider trading is bad. Lust is preached as healthy, but the mere accusation of sexual harassment can threaten the career of a Supreme Court nominee.

This cultural ambivalence toward sin stems from misunderstanding what sin is and what sin does to us. Fortunately, MTV openly acknowledged that sin can have dire consequences for both the self and others. However, because the inward character of sin is not understood, people seek not to avoid sin, but to counteract its effects through condoms and entitlement programs. In our low-fat, low-conscience culture, Sin-Lite has found shelf space alongside other low-guilt pleasures. "A little lust, pride, sloth and gluttony — in moderation—are fun, and that's what keeps your heart beating," says one MTV commentator.³

Even amongst Christians, sin is in. I don't mean that we merely fall into sin. That we all know well enough. I mean that many Christians seem to be on friendlier terms with sin than in times past. Many openly walk in sin and think nothing of it. Today we find

people who call themselves Christians. They claim to follow the One who said, "I am the truth," yet they don't seem to be connected to his truth. Today, it seems that many eat from a whole menu of forbidden fruit. Here we find people who see no contradiction between God's command to be chaste on the one hand and living together outside of marriage on the other. Others maintain that they trust in Christ alone for their salvation, and yet they rarely are found in God's house on the Lord's Day.

George Gallup compared the behavior of the church and unchurched in a variety of categories—people who called in sick when they weren't, people who puffed-up their resumes, people who cheated on tax deductions—and found little difference in the ethical views and behavior of the church and the unchurched. Another survey found (get this!) a deterioration in the morals and behavior of those who professed themselves to be born-again Christians!⁴ That is utterly shocking!

All of this moved theologian Cornelius Plantinga to say, "Some of our grandparents agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper might wonder whether he could still go to Holy Communion. A woman who for years envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might worry that this sin threatened her very salvation"⁵ He goes on to say:

But the shadow has dimmed. Nowadays, the accusation *you have sinned* is often said with a grin, and with a tone that signals an inside joke. At one time, this accusation still had the power to jolt people. Catholics lined up to confess their sins; Protestant preachers rose up to confess *our* sins. And they did it regularly. . .

Many American Christians recall sermons in which preachers got visibly angry over a congregation's sins. When these preachers were in full cry, they would make red-faced, finger-pointing, second-person-plural accusations: "You are sinners—filthy, guilty, miserable sinners!" Occasionally, these homiletical indictments veered awfully close to the second-person singular.

Yes, it seems that many no longer fear the wrath of a holy God.

SIN RECOGNIZED FOR WHAT IT IS

Yet, if we are called upon to recognize sinful behavior, most of us can do that well enough, provided that it is blatant enough. Some examples:

1. He stands on the street corner every day. He has a blank stare on his face. He doesn't smile, doesn't wave, doesn't speak. But he has a sign that he holds up. He's begging for money. I open my window to hand him a dollar and, as I do,

he lowers his head to say thanks. His breath reeks with the smell of alcohol. And then I see empty wine bottles where he was standing. I don't give him money anymore.

What is his sin? Oh, that's easy enough: Drunkenness, stealing, and sloth.

2. A missionary in India saw something he will never forget. His eyes caught sight of a woman who was holding a weak, sickly infant in her arms, while at her side stood a beautiful, healthy child. He saw her walk to the banks of the Ganges River. He watched in amazement as she threw the robust youngster to the crocodiles as an offering. She, then, turned toward home again, still clutching the frail child to her bosom. Tears were running down her cheeks when the missionary stopped to question her concerning her shocking actions. In defense of her conduct, she proudly replied, "O sir, we always give our gods the very best!"

Her sin? Idolatry and murder, yet under the guise of religious piety.

3. Time magazine reports an all-too-familiar story. Melinda East, a former crack addict now in treatment in Long Beach, California, supported her habit as an often barefoot street prostitute. Her first baby was born with "the shakes," she says, but that did not turn her away from crack. She remembers selling milk and Pampers back to the grocery store for drug money.⁶

Her sins are obvious enough: Adultery and violation of the laws of the land.

4. And who among us can forget what happened eight years ago? There stood Susan Smith crying, pleading for the return of her kidnapped sons Michael and Alex. The hearts of an entire nation went out to her. But then the ugly truth came out. The news was chilling. Nancy Gibbs, a reporter who covered the story said that divers finally found the bodies nearly 100 feet from the boat ramp. In her nationally publicized column, she said, "The children were still securely strapped in; with the windows shut, the car had floated slowly out into the lake as it filled with water . . . and settled into the silt. When the search team finally dragged the car out, veteran diver Steve Morrow stood on the banks and cried. "There's no way to be thick skinned about something like this," he said. "When it's an accidental death you can deal with it a little better, but knowing that someone could deliberately..." his voice trailed off. When he got home that night, Morrow said he crawled into bed with his little boy. "I just had to hold him for awhile." End of report. And the November 14th cover of Time asked the question that all America was asking, viz., "How Could She Do It?"⁷

Her sin, was, of course, murder.

Now I have a question. What's the difference between the street-corner wino, the pagan from India, the crack addict, Susan Smith . . . yes, what's the difference between them and you and me? The answer may shock you. The answer is that there is no difference!

Now maybe you're thinking, "What gives you the right to judge me and say that I'm as bad those people?" Actually, it is not I, but God's Word that sounds forth this terrible accusation. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Earlier in this same chapter, he says the same thing but in different words. He writes, "There is none righteous, no not one. There is none that does good, no not one." Let these words sink in. No difference. All have sinned. None righteous. None good. Not even one. Indeed, before God the righteous judge, there are no categories of sinners as if to say that there are good sinners and bad sinners, or, perhaps, really-guilty sinners and not-as-guilty sinners.

Let me ask you, is there anyone that can say, "I have never sinned—in thought, word, or deed—in my entire life." No? I take it then that we have all sinned at least once. But suppose, just suppose, that someone among us could honestly say that he has sinned but once in his life. Suppose, moreover, that the only sin on his record was that of harboring a lustful thought, if only for a fleeting second. Surely this guy must have a higher standing than everybody else, right? Before men, yes. But not before God, for St. James writes, "Whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point, that person is guilty of breaking all of it." So then, if you break the Law once, you have broken it all.

According to the Law, then, there is no distinction. We stand under the same blanket accusation as Susan Smith, crack addicts, pedophiles, rapists, or even Adolf Hitler. Our sins may not be as heinous as theirs, as men regard sin; but before God they are equally heinous, and he finds us equally guilty. In their heinous crimes, we see something of ourselves, of what sin can do to us if it has its way with us.

HOW BAD IS SIN? ARE WE DEPRIVED SINNERS OR DEPRAVED SINNERS?

Scripture gives us a definition of sin. St. John tells us, for he writes, "Sin is lawlessness."⁸ That is, sin is any violation of God's moral law, the Ten Commandments.

I remember what my attitude was like before I became a Christian. As a young adult my wife dragged me to her LCMS church. I still remember the general confession of sins that is near the beginning of the liturgy. With everyone else I muttered the words, ". . . I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with

which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. . . . "

You must understand that I did not like those words! Not even a little bit! I remember saying to my wife, "I am not poor. I am not miserable. I may be a sinner, but I am not that kind of a sinner!"

My difficulty was not in recognizing that I was a sinner. No, what I refused to believe was that I was destitute of goodness. I wanted, if ever so slightly, to retain an ounce or two of goodness deep down in the inner recesses of my soul. But the Scriptures would not allow me to do that. In Ephesians 2:1, Paul says, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins" The Greek work for dead is *nekros* meaning "a dead body" or corpse. A corpse has no life in it, absolutely none. Such is the condition of the human soul. Before faith comes, we are absolutely devoid of spiritual life, spiritual goodness, and righteousness. Since we are spiritually dead, we can make no movement towards God whatsoever. We can, in no way, prepare our hearts for grace.

What, then, is the problem? God knows. He says, "The whole head is sick, And the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is nothing sound in it."⁹ And through Jeremiah, the LORD declares, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"¹⁰ The heart of the problem, then, is a problem of the heart. Yes, it's sin, the unseen, but very real cause of all that is wrong with the world and with you and me.

How bad is the human condition? It is similar to an old story I once heard. It seems that a businessman retired with considerable wealth. He decided to invest his money on a fruit orchard. He learned of a 1000 acre peach orchard that was for sale. When he came to look at the property, he was impressed. He walked around the perimeter of the orchard and marveled at the quality of the trees and their fruit. A few weeks later he was the proud owner of this wonderful orchard. He couldn't wait to show it to his wife. As before, he walked along the perimeter with his wife. What beautiful fruit! But she urged him to walk toward the middle of the property. He heartily agreed, for he had been told that the best trees were in the center. After walking a few minutes, his wife was the first to notice that the trees were not very healthy. "Don't worry about it," he said to her. "Let's go deeper. The best trees are there." So they went deeper. But the trees got worse. They found withered trees with shriveled peaches on them. But still he remained optimistic. "Let's go even deeper," he said. They did. And soon he cried out in disbelief. In the center were several hundred acres of an abandoned chemical dumpsite. There was nothing but polluted ponds that reeked with the smell of chemicals. Nothing grew there. Everything was dead—as if the curse of God rested on every square inch of it.

That's how it is with the unregenerate human heart. For generations people have been told to go deeper. "Go deeper," they say, "and when you come to the center you will find the best fruit, a veritable wellspring of goodness. But it's a lie. Introspection does not reveal an inner beauty, but only the corruption of an evil will. For when we go deeper, we find only pollution, decay, and a toxic dump of death. As God says, "There is none that does good, no not one,¹¹ for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."¹² Sin is not merely something we do; it is the human condition. It is our sinfulness that moves us to hatred, vengeance, and self-indulgence. It is because we are sinners that we are disposed to want what we want when we want it, and, if we do not get it, to drown ourselves in self-pity or in booze or heroin. The terrible truth is that we are all bent in the direction of evil. And there is nothing that we, by ourselves, can do about it.

So then, we possess nothing with which we may make even the slightest movement in the direction of God or even of God's grace. We not merely deprived of a lump of inner righteousness, we are devoid of righteousness before God. We are deprived not deprived.

In Romans 5:19, the apostle tells us of the reason for our depravity. He writes, . . . "through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, . . ." The one man that Paul refers to is Adam. By Adam's transgression, sin entered into the world and it has been passed from generation to generation ever since. That is to say, since the Fall, God has imputed the sin of Adam to all people of every generation. Thus, King David says of himself, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."¹³ Likewise, Jesus calls unregenerate man "flesh," that is being outside the Kingdom of God and in need of rebirth, for he says, "You must be born again." (John 3:3). Jesus also said, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." (John 3:5).

Charles Colson tells a story that gives us a powerful glimpse of ourselves. In 1960, Israeli undercover agents orchestrated the daring kidnapping of one of the worst of the Germany's war criminals, Adolf Eichmann. After capturing him, they moved him to Israel to stand trial. One man, Yehiel Dinur, who had miraculously escaped death at Auschwitz, was called to testify. Dinur stared at the man in the bulletproof glass booth—the man who had murdered his friends, personally executed a number of Jews, and presided over the slaughter of millions more. As the eyes of the two met—victim and murderous tyrant—the courtroom was silent, filled with the tension of the confrontation.

But no one was prepared for what happened next. Dinur began to shout and sob, collapsing to the floor. Was he overcome by hatred, by the horrifying memories, by the evil incarnate in Eichmann's face? No. As he later explained in a riveting "60

Minutes" interview, it was because Eichmann was not the demonic personification of evil that Dinur had expected. Rather, he was an ordinary man, just like anyone else. And in that one instant, Dinur came to the stunning realization that sin and evil are the human condition. "I was afraid about myself," he said. "I saw that I am capable to do this exactly like he." Dinur's remarkable statements caused Mike Wallace to turn to the camera and ask the audience the most painful of questions: "How is it possible for a man to act as Eichmann acted? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying. Was he normal? Dinur's shocking conclusion was terse: "Eichmann is in all of us."¹⁴

To speak more accurately, sin is in all of us. Jesus makes it clear that if we want new life in him, then we must have the same assessment of our sin as he does. This is difficult for us because, as R. W. Dale says, "It is only ... because sin does not provoke our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God."¹⁵ We must learn the greatest and most objectionable truth on earth, namely, to gain the awareness of being a sinner, and a poor, miserable sinner at that.¹⁶

The totally corrupt sinner is at enmity toward God. As St. Paul says, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so."¹⁷ Clearly, then, it is God who must do the converting if one is to be saved. And that is precisely what he has done. Through his Word, he not only offers the sinner forgiveness, but also works the faith that trusts in Christ for that very forgiveness. Indeed, it is written, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."¹⁸ Baptism possesses the same power, for Paul says in Titus 3:5 "According to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit."

What shall we then say? We say with Paul in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

Soli Deo Gloria!

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