

Bible Doctrine 201: Sin
April 28, 2010
Crossway Community Church, Bristol, WI

The Problem of Sin and a Preview:

“Lots of North Americans use the word sin only on dessert menus and when telling an inside joke.”
—Cornelius Platinga, “Sin, Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be”¹

On the one hand, seasoned evangelists will admit that sin is one of those topics that is becoming increasingly difficult to discuss. After all, how can one talk about sin and moral absolutes if human behavior is simply the product of random evolutionary processes or if all human knowledge is so colored by individual biases that knowing *truly* and, thus, *absolutely* is impossible?

On the other, seasoned theologians will admit that the topic is not only tightly intertwined with other doctrines (especially creation) but that it also raises to the surface some of the most difficult theological problems in Scripture (more on this below).

1. What is sin?
2. Where did sin come from?
3. What’s sin got to do with me?
4. What happens to sin/ners?

1. What is sin?

A. Sin’s definition:

“Sin is any **failure to conform** to the **moral law of God** in **act, attitude, or nature**” (Grudem, *Bible Doctrines*, p. 210).

(1) “failure to conform”: sin is described in the Bible as missing the mark, irreverence or impiety, wrong-doing or unrighteousness, law-breaking, transgression, iniquity or lack of integrity, rebellion or disobedience, treachery, and perversion—among one or two other descriptions.

(2) “moral law of God”: God’s moral law is the blueprint God imprinted on human beings when he created them in his own image (Romans 2:14–15; Genesis 1:26–27). Many of the laws in the Bible are outward expressions of this inner law (for example, nine of the ten commandments).

(3) “act, attitude, or nature”: The *act* of adultery breaks God’s moral law (Exodus 20:14), as does the *attitude* of lust (Matthew 5:27–28). Moreover, for unbelievers, even their very *natures* are sinful (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:3; more on this one below).

¹This article is available online at http://thegospelcoalition.org/publications/cci/sin_not_the_way_its_supposed_to_be.

B. Sin's root:

(1) **“The fundamental problem is the universal idolatry of humans: we de-god God”** (D. A. Carson, [*Scandalous: The Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus*](#) [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010], p. 44).

(2) **Sin is simply failure to let God be God.** It is placing something else, anything else, in the supreme place which is his. Thus, choosing oneself rather than God is not wrong because it is self that is chosen, but because something other than God is chosen. Choosing any finite [= created] object over God is wrong, no matter how selfless such an act might be.

This contention is supported by major texts both in the Old and New Testaments. The Ten Commandments begin with the command to give God his proper place. ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (Exod. 20:3) is the first prohibition in the law. Similarly, Jesus affirmed that the first and great commandment is, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’ (Mark 12:30). Proper recognition of God is primary. **Idolatry in any form, not pride, is the essence of sin.**

One might ask what the major factor in our failure to love, worship, and obey God is. I submit that it is unbelief. Anyone who truly believes God to be what he says he is will accord to him his rightful status. Failure to do so is sin [cf. Romans 3:23]. Setting one’s own ideas above God’s revealed Word entails refusal to believe it to be true. Seeking one’s own will involves believing that one’s own values are actually higher than those of God. **In short, it is a failure to acknowledge God as God** (Millard Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#) [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], p. 580).

C. Further Reflection:

(1) Who is the most offended party when we sin? (See Genesis 39:8–10; Psalm 51:4.)

(2) If sin involves more than wrong actions, what does this suggest about the extent of sin in the human race? Do you know anyone beyond lust, anger, pride, or selfishness?

2. Where did sin come from?

A. Sin's entrance:

(1) Sin entered creation through Satan (Genesis 3:1–5, 13–15; 2 Corinthians 11:3; Revelation 12:9; 20:2).

(2) Sin entered the human race through Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:1–19; 1 Timothy 2:13–14).

(3) In both cases, we see creatures who tried to “de-god God,” that is, creatures who failed to “let God be God” (Jude 6; Isaiah 14:12–15; Genesis 3:1–7; see also Romans 1:18–23).

B. Sin’s origin (or, How do we explain the move from Genesis 1:31 to Genesis 3:1–19?):

(1) *Human Responsibility*: To be human² (or, made in God’s image) means to be free* to choose to “let God be God” or not to “let God be God.” It also includes our responsibility to choose to “let God be God.”

“[O]ur ability to make willing choices at all is simply a created reflection of God’s will and his ability to make willing choices” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 331, n. 19).

(2) *Divine Sovereignty*: While God is absolutely good (Deuteronomy 32:4; Job 34:10; James 1:13–14; 1 John 1:5; Psalm 92:5), he is also absolutely powerful or sovereign. Nothing happens in God’s universe that he has not ordained (Ephesians 1:11; Daniel 4:35; Romans 11:36), including sin and various kinds of evil (Exodus 4:21; 7:3; Job 1:12–21; Isaiah 45:7; and especially Acts 4:27; Luke 2:22; Matthew 18:7; 26:24; Mark 14:21).³

On the additional questions this raises about God’s *character* (How can he be both absolutely sovereign *and* good?) and *purposes* (Why did God create the world he did?) and about *human responsibility* (How can God be absolutely sovereign and humans be responsible?), see Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, chapter 8, “God’s Providence,” pp. 147–51 and the additional resources noted below.

C. *Further Reflection*:

(1) Was it rational or irrational for Adam and Eve to think they (or the Serpent) knew better than their Creator? What does this suggest about our own attempts to justify sinful behavior?

(2) If it is irrational to think a creature could know better than his or her Creator, what does this suggest about our response to God’s absolute sovereignty or the other difficult questions raised above? (On this one, see especially Romans 9:14–21.)

² What it means to be “human” after Adam and Eve’s fall into sin will be discussed below under the heading “What’s sin got to do with me?” Moreover, “free” is best understood as the ability to act according to one’s nature. And, in light of Genesis 1:31 (see also Ecclesiastes 7:29), it seems best to say that Adam and Eve’s natures were inclined toward “the good”, even while they had little experience actually *choosing* “the good”.

³ See also Exodus 4:11; Joshua 11:20; Judges 3:12; 9:23; 1 Samuel 2:25; 16:14; 2 Samuel 12:11–12 (and 16:22); 12:15–18; 24:1, 10, 12–17 (compare 1 Chronicles 21:1); 1 Kings 22:23; Amos 3:6 (and 4:6–12); Isaiah 63:17; 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12; 1 Peter 2:8.

3. What's sin got to do with me?⁴

A. Inherited Sin (or, Original Sin): We sin *because we are sinners*. (See Romans 5:12–21.)

(1) righteous by association: our relationship to Adam's one sin is analogous to our relationship to Christ's one act of righteousness (see verses 12, 18–19; also "pattern" in verse 14)

(2) guilt (and death) by association: "*the trespass*" (verse 15); "*one sin*" (verse 16); "*the trespass*" (verse 17); "*one trespass*" (verse 18); "*the disobedience*" (verse 19)

(3) corrupted by association: "made sinners" (verse 19). This idea is also known as *total depravity* or *total inability* (see, for example, Ephesians 2:3; 4:18; Romans 8:8; Hebrews 11:6).

B. Actual Sin: *We sin* because we are sinners. (See Psalm 14:3; 143:2; 1 Kings 8:46; Proverbs 20:9; Romans 1:18–32; 3:9–20, 23.)

C. *Further Reflection*:

(1) What does our relationship to Christ's righteousness say about the justice or fairness of our relationship to Adam?

(2) How does inherited sin and actual sin make you think of the news about Christ's sacrifice for sins? What adjective would you use to describe that news?

4. What happens to sin/ners?

A. Sin's Punishment:

(1) God must punish all sin—all attempts to "de-god" him. (See Romans 3:25–26.)

(2) This punishment will be born either by the sinner or by Christ:

Option #1:

1. *Requirement or Standard of Judgment*: Good Works (Romans 2:6)

2. *Problem*: Human Inability (Romans 3:9–20)

3. *Result*: Human Sinfulness (Romans 1:19–32)

4. *Verdict*: Wrath (Romans 1:18)

5. *Consequence*: Eternal death (Romans 9:3, 22; also Romans 2:8–9).

⁴ Here is how this question is answered in Crossway's statement of faith: "We believe that Adam, by disobeying God and falling into sin through Satan's temptation, forfeited his original blessedness, both for himself and all his descendents. **As a result, all human beings are born into sin, alienated from God, radically corrupted in every aspect of their being (physically, mentally, volitionally, emotionally, socially and spiritually), personally opposed to God, and therefore, condemned finally and irrevocably to death**—apart from God's own gracious intervention." (See the section on "Man" here: <http://www.crosswayonline.org/about/statement-of-faith>)

Option #2:

1–4. *Same as above*

5. *Solution*: union with Jesus’ substitutionary death and perfect life through faith (Romans 3:21–31)

6. *Consequence*: Eternal Life (Romans 2:7; 1:17)

(3) Are there some sins that Christ’s death cannot cover? (See Matthew 12:31–32; Mark 3:29–30; Luke 12:10; Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–27; 1 John 5:16–17.)

1. Christ’s merits are applied *only* through faith.

2. Persistent, irrational (that is, against *clear* evidence) unbelief makes such an application impossible.⁵

“We may be reasonably sure that those who fear that they have committed this and worry about this, and desire the prayers of others for them, have not committed it” (Louis Berkhof, [*Introduction to Systematic Theology*](#) [reprint of 1932 edition; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979], p. 254).

B. Sin and the Believer:

(1) *the view from the courtroom*: There is no condemnation for those in Christ (or Christians) because Christ has endured all of God’s wrath that would have been theirs. (See Romans 8:1; 1 Corinthians 15:3.)

(2) *the view from the family room*: When Christians sin, God is grieved (Ephesians 4:30; Isaiah 63:10) and Christians receive his fatherly discipline (Hebrews 12:4–11). Their appropriate response is repentant confession (1 John 1:8–9).

Although they never can fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s *fatherly displeasure*, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance (The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, section 5).

⁵ On the one hand, it is true that it is impossible for *anyone* to believe the Gospel without God’s special grace (see “What’s sin got to do with me?” above and texts that address God’s initiative in salvation, for example, Acts 13:48; Philippians 1:29; Ephesians 1:3–11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; on these, see Grudem, *Bible Doctrines*, chapter 18, “Election”). However, the kind of sins addressed in the texts above make belief impossible in another way, it seems. They make belief impossible because God has decided that he will not impart saving grace to people who stubbornly resist the clear truths of the Gospel. We might say, it would be impossible for God to work his saving grace in such a one in a similar way that it is impossible for God to lie (see Hebrews 6:18). Both actions would go against God’s own nature. (This observation would, of course, also need to be read in the light of our earlier reflections on God’s relationship to sin and evil.)

C. Further Reflection:

- (1) How important is creation for establishing human accountability and responsibility? To put it another way: would the idea of a “standard of judgment” and our accountability to such a standard make any sense without the doctrine of creation?
- (2) Does the two options above help to highlight how irrational unbelief is? Do these two options suggest anything about evangelism?

Additional Resources

- (1) On the doctrine of sin, generally, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), chapter 24 (pp. 490–514). See also his suggestions for further reading on pp. 511–13). For a smorgasbord of good preaching and teaching on sin (or what I like to call “tasty textual treats”), see the audio files under the category “Sin” at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/topic-index/a>.
- (2) On God’s relationship to evil and on the idea of “free will”, see Andy Naselli’s talks entitled “How Could a Good God Allow Suffering and Evil” and “Do We Have a Free Will?” given in Crossway’s *Difficult Issues Series* and available at <http://www.crosswayonline.org/resources/audiolibrary>.
- (3) On the notion of absolute truth and morality, see Owen Strachan’s talks entitled “How Can There Be Truth That Is True for Everyone” and “Isn’t Morality in the Eye of the Beholder?” and given in Crossway’s *Difficult Issues Series* and available at <http://www.crosswayonline.org/resources/audiolibrary>.
- (4) On the Christian and “unpardonable” sins, see D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” pages 247–76 in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2000_reflections_on_assurance.pdf.