

Theology is Not a Four-Letter Word: What is Sin?

Leviticus 5:14-6:7

1 John 1:5-2:6

If a person sins and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord's commands, even though he does not know it, he is guilty and will be held responsible. He is to bring to the priest as a guilt offering a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way, the priest will make atonement for him for the wrong he has committed unintentionally, and he will be forgiven. It is a guilt offering: he has been guilty of wrongdoing against the Lord."

The Lord said to Moses, "If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the Lord by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him of left in his care and stolen, or if he cheats him, or if he finds lost property and lies about it, or if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin that people may do – when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, or whatever it was he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it, and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for him before the Lord, and he will be forgiven for any of these things he did that made him guilty."

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you:" God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives."

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins; and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.

The author E.B. White observes, "Just as people have re-cut their clothes to follow fashion...people have remodeled their ideas too – they've taken in their convictions a little at the waist, they've shortened the sleeves of their resolve, and they've fitted themselves in a new intellectual ensemble copied from a smart design out of the very latest page of history.

You can be sure that, when slavery to fashion invades the church, our latest ideas are yesterday's fads. We adopt the world's agenda -- just a few years too late. Many Christians sport theological bell-bottoms that are neither the least bit attractive nor the least bit accurate."

If this be true, and I think it is, in the midst of constantly changing theological fashion, the job of the church is to teach and to wear clothes that endure – to put on theological truths that are timeless. To *not* be among those that Paul describes in Ephesians 4 as “infants tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching.”

And so for two weeks, we looked at the question, “Who is God?” We put together a basic *theology* of God. We said that God is, for starters, honest and honorable; He's omniscient, He's communicative, and fatherly. God is in Heaven, God is holy, God is a King, a provider, a forgiver, and a protector.

Last week, we worked toward answering the question, “Who is Humanity?” We looked at Genesis chapter one and we did a little *anthropology* – the study of man or humanity. We concluded first, that humanity has been intentionally created by God, and we've been created in God's image, in His likeness. We said that means, at minimum, four things. It means that we have a moral element in our character – a sense of right and wrong. It means that we have the unique ability to think and reason. Bearing God's image means that we have a free will – we have the ability to choose our path in life. And finally, because we are made in God's image, we are creative by nature: we have the drive and ability to create.

We are God's creation, and we are unique and honored in that we're the only part of God's creation that

bears His image in these and certainly in other ways. Psalm 8 says that “we were made a little lower than the angels and we were crowned with glory and honor, and everything on earth is subject to us.” This is *humanity* that the psalmist is talking about – *we are* the very *pinnacle* of God’s creation.

And yet, all we have to do is watch the news for a few minutes and we quickly realize that something has changed in our human race. This Zacarias Moussaoui, the 9-11 terrorist, who through his trial talked of the joy he takes in the destruction of Americans, and anyone else who doesn’t agree with his religion. What happened to the image of God in him?

What happened to this couple the police are looking for right now – from Missouri, who videotaped themselves abusing another woman, doing all sorts of horrible things to her, and finally murdering her. They’re the pinnacle of God’s creation?

You know people, and so do I, who think nothing of lying or cheating – it’s a way of life for them. How does that correlate with their being made in the image of an honest God? What happened there?

If you and I are made in the likeness of a God who is perfect and holy and communicative and who knows all things, how is it that we make so many mistakes in life? What’s happened to our mind, that we get so many things wrong...that we forget things, that we

miscommunicate with one another? What happened to the image of God in which we were created?

There is a one-word answer to all these questions: sin. Sin is the explanation. Sin is the reason there is pain and suffering. Sin is the reason we die. Sin is the reason we’re alienated from each other and from God.

But what is sin? How do you define it? That’s our question for today, and it’s a very important question, because how we define sin determines how we understand salvation and sanctification and how we interpret a host of passages in Scripture, some of which seem to contradict one another.

Today, we look at *Hamartiology* – the study of sin, to begin to answer our questions.

The typical Scriptural words for “sin,” in Greek and in Hebrew, both mean “to miss the mark,” and Scripture presents the idea of sin, in both testaments, in two ways. First, it represents actions or attitudes or desires that miss the mark, or are found lacking when compared to God’s character as it’s revealed in His law and in Jesus, His Son. That which is less than God’s perfection or that which is contrary to God’s character, the Bible calls sin. We’ll talk about acts of sin in just a minute.

But first, let’s look at the second way Scripture describes sin – as a state. The word “sin” describes that corrupt nature within humans that pushes us toward

sinful actions or attitudes or desires; this bent of our nature away from God and from His direction and His will for us. Now, we all understand this – we’ve all struggled with this at one time or another: we know the right thing to do; we know what God would have us to do, but we also have a competing desire to do what we shouldn’t do. Is this conflict within us part of God’s image – were we created to be this way?

The answer to both questions is “No.” An *event* made us this way; an incident in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, who each gave in to the temptation of the serpent, made the choice to follow their own desire instead of God’s desire for them. They were tempted and then they made the choice to do what God commanded them not to do; they chose to do things their own way instead of God’s way, and in so-doing, they rejected God and His will. They put themselves in God’s place. They made themselves the decision-makers, and they rejected the life-giving relationship they had with God. And because they rejected that relationship, because they could not longer eat from the tree of life, God’s image upon them was marred and their nature was changed...and because we are their children, we have inherited the death and the disfigurement that comes with that change.

Theologians have called the resulting human condition “total depravity.” Some have called it that because they believe we are *totally deformed* - that God’s image in us has been *completely* obliterated, but that’s not true, any more than if my likeness to my parents would be *obliterated* if I were sick or dying or

imprisoned. It doesn’t work that way. Just like my parent’s image would remain upon me, God’s image remains upon us...but it’s badly damaged. We’re deeply scarred.

We’re *totally* depraved in that *every part* of us is affected – mind, body and spirit. The apostle Paul says that our minds have been darkened.¹ He says that in this sinful state we look at things backwards – we think the things that will destroy us will make us happy.² Jeremiah says the human heart is desperately sick and deceitful.³ In Genesis 8:21, God said himself that “the imagination of the human heart is evil, even from youth.”

This depravity pushes us away from God, but it’s done something else too. It’s made our mind and bodies not work like they were created to work. We forget things. We make mistakes. We age. We get sick, we get tired. We turn left when we were supposed to turn right. Wesley called these things “infirmities” – weaknesses, deficiencies in us that are due to the effects of the depravity of the human race – the sin into which we were born.

Now, these infirmities...these weaknesses are not sins. We conclude that for a couple reasons. First, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12 that he glories in his weaknesses – Paul would not have gloried in sin. Even more importantly though, the book of Hebrews tell us that

¹ Eph 4:17-18

² Phil 3:19

³ Jeremiah 17:9

Jesus can sympathize with us in our weakness,⁴ and that He Himself was subject to weakness⁵, yet was without sin.

In Adam and Eve's life, their first *act* of sin brought about this inner depravity, this sin nature in them and in us.

In our lives, our corrupt *nature*, this sin nature that we've inherited, produces sinful acts.

And what about those sinful *acts*? Let's talk about them. Are all sinful acts the same? Some say they are...some say that sin is sin is sin; no matter how it's packaged. But Scripture doesn't seem to say that.

If you have your Bible, open it to the book of Leviticus for just a moment. You might think, "That's an odd place to start," since Leviticus is all about the sacrifices required by the Jewish Law, and Christians no longer live under the Law. That's true. But you know, Leviticus talks more about sin than any other book of the Bible. And because Christ came, not to abolish the law but to fulfill it, I believe that in this book, God reveals some important things to us about how He views sin.

In Leviticus, God distinguishes between basically two kinds of acts and attitudes that "miss His mark" – that are "off-target." He distinguishes between those sins that are *intentional* and those that are *unintentional*.

⁴ Hebrews 4:15

⁵ Hebrews 5:2

If you look at Leviticus chapter 6, you'll find God describing there the necessary offerings to atone for willful, or *intentional* sins. Deceiving your neighbor, cheating, lying. Those are intentional sins – you don't do those by accident. And the Israelites were given specific offerings and restitutions to make for them. No surprise, right? That's to be expected.

OK...now, just quickly, turn to Numbers, chapter 15. In verse 30 there, we get this: "Anyone who sins defiantly, whether native born or alien, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from his people. Because he has despised the Lord's word and broken his commands, that person must be cut off." This is, apparently, another kind of intentional sin and an especially dark one.

Now, the only thing that seems to differentiate these two passages is this concept of "defiance," or "high-handedness." Apparently there is something different about merely sinning intentionally and sinning intentionally and defiantly. I don't know exactly where the line is, but let me say this: it's interesting to me that the example given for this Numbers verse is the intentional breaking of one of the Ten Commandments – specifically, keeping the Sabbath Day holy. A person doing something on God's day of rest that he knew he shouldn't do. Should we take note of the seriousness of this? I think so.

My real point is, we have in these verses in Leviticus and Numbers the identification of the reality of *intentional* sin.

However, if you look through Leviticus, you'll find that God prescribes sacrifices for the Israelites to offer for *unintentional sins* too. God said that atonement must be made for them, *even though* they were *not intended*.

In the sacrificial system, we find, in fact, that there are two types of atonement offerings for unintentional sins. The first was made once a year by the priests to cover all of the unintentional sins of the nation – this happened on the Day of Atonement – the description of that is in Leviticus 16 and also in Hebrews 9. On that one day each year, by the sacrifice of the priests, the people were cleansed from the sins they had committed in *ignorance*; for all of those things they did that offended God, but that *they did not know about*. That's the first kind of atonement offering.

Then, we see in chapters 4 and 5 of Leviticus a second type of atonement offerings – offerings that were to be presented by those *individuals* who committed a sin *unintentionally, but later became aware that what they had done was wrong*.

Look at chapter 4, verse 22: When a leader *sins unintentionally* and does what is forbidden in any of the commands of the Lord his God, he is guilty. When he is *made aware* of the sin he committed, he must bring his offering of..."

Verse 27: If a member of the community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the

Lord's commands, he is guilty. *When he is made aware of the sin*, he must bring as his offering..."

Even though they were guilty regardless, the *personal atonement offering* wasn't necessary *until the person realized* they had sinned, you see?

Now, here's what's important about all this: What this tells me is that, even though a person does something wrong, even though they fall short of God's standard, and even though they are guilty, they are *not personally accountable*, or culpable, until they *know* what they've done is wrong.

When somebody sins *intentionally*, they know what they're doing, and so they must repent by making a sacrifice. They are *personally accountable* for their actions.

However, when someone sins *unintentionally*, they are not personally accountable *until* they know what they've done is wrong. The general atonement made by the high priest covered their unintentional and unknown sin.

So you say, "In 5 minutes or less, tell me what all this means."

First, it means that God takes sin very seriously – far more seriously that we tend to. In light of all this, we need to wrestle with some questions: "Do we easily excuse sin in our lives?" "Are we honest with ourselves and with God about our actions? Are we honest with

ourselves and with God about our *intentions*? Do we take sin as seriously as God does?”

Second, all of this means that God is more interested in *why* I do things than He is interested in the *things* that I do. He’s more interested in my *intention* and he is my *action*. You remember, God told Samuel, “The Lord doesn’t look at the things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

The truth is, my life might look squeaky clean on the outside, but my *intentions* may be dishonest to the core. John says there in Chapter 1 verse 6: “If we claim to have fellowship with him, but walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” God sees our intentions, the attitude of our heart, and you and I are accountable for that.

On the other hand, my life may appear to be a mess in the eyes of others, but in my heart, as far as I’m honestly aware, I’m doing all that I know of that God requires of me. There’s no check in my spirit. As 1 John 1: 7 says, “I’m walking in the light that I have, and I have fellowship with Him.” This is why God says He is the judge of others, and we’re not.

If I gave my wife a box of flowers, and when she opens the box, she finds they’re all dried up and dead, how would she respond? Well, that depends. If I accidentally left them in the car and they dried up and I didn’t realize that they had, Annette will respond totally

differently than if I gave her a box of dead flowers, knowing what I was doing and intending to hurt her, you see? The flowers are still dead – that didn’t change. Her response, however, just like God’s response, is based on the intent of my heart.

God is more interested in *why* I do things than He is in the things that I do.

Third, and most importantly, all of this means that my unintentional sins have been atoned for in the sacrifice of Christ. The sacrifice has already been made, once and for all. This is why most Wesleyans will say “unintentional” sins are not really *sins*, in that, until we realize them, Christians are no more *personally accountable* or *culpable* for them than the Jews were.

But whatever you call them, just like, for the Jews, they were atoned for by the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, so have ours been atoned for by Jesus’ death on the cross. He is our blood sacrifice, provided in love by our Father, to cover all our sins, including our unintentional sins. Jesus is sufficient.

Therefore, we don’t need to ask for forgiveness for that which we know not of. Because of the sacrifice of Christ, the unknown sin in our lives has been atoned for.

All that remains to be *forgiven* are any *intentional* sins we may commit, or any *unintentional* sins that we unknowingly commit, *but are then made aware of*.

This is why John can say in chapter 1 verse 10: “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar.” Of course we have sinned, or else Jesus would not have had to die.

But this is also why John can write in chapter 2 verse 1 “I write this to you so that you will not sin,” and then again in chapter 3, verse 6: “No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning.” The unintentional sin is already paid for. The issue becomes intent. Why would we intentionally sin against our Father – who loves us so much? To sin against Him is personal, a personal rejection of Him, of our relationship with Him, you see? Just like Adam and Eve in the garden.

Intentional sin is knowingly giving dead flowers to my wife just to hurt her – just to damage the relationship that we have. This is what we do when we sin intentionally, or when we refuse to repent of sins that we’re made aware of in our lives. That’s why, for Paul and John and Peter - it’s unthinkable to keep on sinning once you’re a Christian. The issue is intent.

At the same time, by our intent, we can also know that we’re pleasing to God. We don’t have to wonder if we please Him. If I’ve repented and asked God’s forgiveness for all known sins that I’ve committed, and if the honest intention of my heart is to please Him, then God is pleased with me. How freeing is that? To know that if I’m walking in the light – if I’m honest in my relationship to God, then God is pleased with me! With you!

God has not changed His mind about sin. He’s consistent all through this book. He’s so serious about sin because sin is what kills our relationship with Him – it’s what pushes Him away. More than anything, God wants that relationship to be healthy and whole, and in Christ, He’s made a way for that relationship to work.

That’s God’s intent. To be pleased with you, and to live in a relationship of love with you. The question is, “Is that your intent and my intent toward Him?”

Here’s the invitation – it’s three fold:

Maybe you’ve not taken sin as seriously in your life as you should, and you need to ask God to forgive you for that today. He’ll do that, if you’ll come and ask.

Or, maybe you’ve lived with a legalistic definition of sin, thinking that was sufficient. On the outside you’ve appeared clean, but inside, you’re living in rebellion against God, and you know it, and you want to make that right.

Or maybe, you’ve been walking in the light – you’ve been careful to respond to God and to His word and His guidance, and today, you want to thank Him, not only for Christ’s atoning of your sin, but for the freedom that comes with knowing that you please Him – that you don’t have to wonder where you stand with God. Do you need to give Him thanks today?

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