

Lesson 45: Chapter 6: Paragraph 1: What is sin? Part 1 and 2

OUTLINE

Paradigms for thinking about sin
Biblical terminology for sin
Mortal and venial sins

INTRODUCTION

Today I want to take a bit of time looking at the essence of sin before we carry on looking at the consequences of sin. The confession spoke about the original sin in this way, 'did willfully transgress the law of their creation, and the command given unto them.' And we have repeatedly spoken of sin as lawlessness. We want to stop here a dig a little deeper on this matter to really consolidate this definition in our minds. So we want to do two things today, we want to look at the various ways people have thought about sin. Then we want to think about the historic discussion on mortal versus venial sin as we think about the deadliness of sin.

Paradigms for thinking about sin

Throughout the history of the church there have been various attempts to get at the essence of sin. Here are a few of these attempts. The reason it is good for us to consider them is that there are strengths and weaknesses to the various attempts which helps us hone our own understanding. Joel Beeke in his systematic theology lays these out helpfully.¹

Sensuality versus rationality: In the early church due to the influence of Greek thought that placed a lot of emphasis on rationality and spirituality as opposed to the physical body, sin was cast as sensuality at the expense of rationality. There is some resonance here with what the bible teaches as it emphasizes wisdom and self-control. However it is built on a wrong anthropology that uncritically sees the body as evil and therefore all natural desires as evil; and implies that God made sin by making desires. This definition though helpful in showing how we give into lusts without thought, and sensitizing us to how we give into the pleasures related to our senses does create a blind spot so that we do not focus on sins of the mind but only the body.

Pride versus humility: This is a more helpful paradigm as satan's sin, the first sin is described as pride, 1 Tim. 3:6, 'He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.' Every sin includes a rising up against God in pride. The idea of pride is helpful as it supports the idea of sin as rebellion. Pride is helpful as a definition because it helps us see the motions of our hearts but it is not enough of itself we need more information about what we sin against for a more comprehensive picture.

Selfishness versus love: once again this is a perspective on sin which is helpful as it puts in the foreground the fact that loving self before loving God and others. Augustine spoke of sin as disordered desires, or loving the wrong thing in the wrong way. This is a helpful perspective as it does highlight that we should love God above all. However this definition can also play into the hands of the therapeutic culture that is around us right now that views all human failure through a psychological lens. That we are all victims who are well intentioned and just need a little redirection and affirmation. Beeke writes: 'Exegetically the

¹ Vol. 2, p334-343.

emphasis of God's word does not fall on pride or selfishness of sin, but on its rebellion and treason against God. Vos wrote, 'Sin, in the strict sense, is only conceivable as sin against God.' (cf. Ps. 51:5). Berkhof said, 'Sin always has relation to God and to His will.' Theologically, these definitions run the risk of becoming man-centered rather than God-centered, for they define sin in terms of us.² On top of that this definition can also seem to rule out proper self-love. Idolatry versus worship of God: once again we have a helpful perspective here as our sins are shown to be against God. The Puritans point out that we do break the first commandment everytime we break any commandment. We do treat as God anything we are willing to violate the law of God for. The scripture itself hints at this as a legitimate perspective when it calls covetousness idolatry in Col. 3:5. This perspective reminds us that obedience is actually seeking to glorify God in all we do, not merely keep a do-to list. The problems come in when this becomes our primary way of describing sin. The Bible primarily defines sin in relation to God's law and does not use idolatry as an all-encompassing category. On top of that we have seen some disturbing trends in veering away from biblical definitions and a preference for viewing sin as idolatry, for example in the ministry of Timothy Keller. 'Professor Iain Campbell, historian and theologian, deals with Keller's attempt to make the concept of sin sound more palatable. Keller thinks this is necessary because he has "encountered a cultural allergy to the Christian concept of sin." Campbell comments: "Keller wants to move his readers away from the idea that sin can be defined merely in terms of breaking divine rules; that is, in breaking the commandments of God. He instead defines sin as that which replaces God in giving a person his or her identity."³ Now I think this can be helpful in making people think more deeply about sin. We can see the pathological tendencies of sin our own lives and how sin dominates and rules us when we see what we look to for identity, security, purpose and satisfaction, noting how these fallen things can never satisfy. But this should only ever be the beginning of the discussion and not the end, we must eventually get to the main biblical definition of sin not as self-harm but rebellion against God so that the relevance of Jesus death in payment for our crimes against God's law can become meaningful. I have personally found there to be a lot of good food for thought in this area, the danger is in making this the whole definition of sin.

Unbelief versus faith: once again we have a very useful perspective on sin in this idea. We know that Eve's original sin was unbelief when she accepted satan's lies; Israel were guilty of unbelief in their various sins in the wilderness, without faith it is impossible to please God. Luther said, 'unbelief is the root, sap and chief power of all sin.' But once again this description looks more at the root than the nature of sin; it runs the risk of defining a very deliberate act against God as a negative and not a positive act. Someone may think to themselves that because they did not commit a sin of unbelief they have not sinned.

Disobedience versus obedience: This is understood to be the most biblical definition of sin, 1 John 3:4, 'Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.' Through the law comes the knowledge of sin. This law-centric definition will be uncomfortable to those who have a low view of the law but we understand the law to represent God's will for His creatures. It is the revelation of God's will to His creatures and the concrete symbol of the Creator-creature distinction and our duty towards Him. To hate God's law is to hate God; to break God's law is to be an enemy of God. Along with Paul in Romans we emphasize this aspect of the definition of sin because

² Ibid. p337.

³ <https://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/keller-and-his-critics/> accessed 2/9/2024

the great problem for humanity is that our first federal head broke the law of God and by His disobedience he has brought death upon all. On top of that all are now sinners condemned by this law whether it is the law on the heart or stone. But Jesus came born under the law, to fulfil the law for us; give His life in satisfaction for the laws we had broken. And now we are saved with the law of God written upon our hearts and by the Spirit we gladly walk in His ways. The death of Christ is only intelligible if we realize that He was hanged upon the tree as a sign of His being cursed for us, the curse of the law, Gal. 3:13.

So in conclusion to this part of the discussion, we need to keep in mind the biblical definition which is law centered and God centered, and although some of these other historic perspectives can be helpful on their own they will detract from bible's definition. It is clear that we need to be aware of man-centered trends and make sure we get sin right so that we get the gospel right.

Biblical terminology for sin

We have discussed the various paradigms for sin, and seen how lawlessness is a key definition that outlines how sin is against God, and prepares us for how the gospel saves us. Now we want to look at the other biblical ways the bible describes sin. Joel Beeke in his systematic theology identifies 15 ways in which sin is variously described in the OT.

1. The noun 'sin' (khatta'ah) and the verb (khata') are found nearly 600 times in the Hebrew bible. The literal meaning is to miss the mark (Judges 20:16) but as Beeke says, 'However, the concept of sin inherent in this term is not a mere mistake, but a willful aiming at the wrong goal.' (p328).
2. Rebellion as a noun (pesha) and a verb (pasha') is found more than 130 times. The central idea here is to defy authority, e.g. Ex.23:21, 'Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.'
3. The noun 'iniquity' ('avon) is used more than 230 times. It speaks of moral evil, e.g. Is. 53:6, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' Interestingly the word is also translated as punishment like when Cain says, Gen. 4:13, 'Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear.' This speaks to the nature of sin as in part its own punishment. Those are the three most common expressions of sin, here are some others:
4. In the OT the notion of 'to hear' (shama') is associated with faith and obedience, and so to 'not hear/obey' (lo shama') is used 88 times as a way of expressing sin, e.g. Jeremiah 6:19, 'Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing disaster upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not paid attention to my words; and as for my law, they have rejected it.'
5. Closely related to not hearing is the idea of being deaf or blind to God's word; or to be hard hearted or stiff necked.
6. The word evil (ra'), or to do evil (ra'ah) can be used to describe a natural disaster but is also used in a moral sense to describe sin. 1 Kings 11:6, 'So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done.'
7. The noun wickedness (rish'ah) and the verb to commit wickedness (rasha') are set as opposites against righteousness, Prov. 11:5, 'The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight, but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.'
8. 'Other verbs translated as 'to rebel' (marah and marad) also invoke the idea of defying the authority of a king and disobeying the law (Gen. 14:4; Deut. 1:26,

“Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God.’). Another term (sarar) seems to emphasize the sullen, stubborn attitude behind the rebellion (Deut. 21:18, “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them.’ Prov. 7:11).’⁴

9. Lev. 26:40, “But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me.’ The idea of treachery/infidelity (ma’al) like when a spouse commits adultery is another word used to describe sin.

10. The idea of offense or guilt is used more than 100 times in the root (asham) when it is translated as trespass/guilt offering, e.g. Lev. 5:5-7.

11. The noun for ‘ignorance’ (shegagah) is used to describe unintentional violations of God’s law which still required the making of atonement, Lev. 4:2.

12. Another Hebrew root translated as wickedness, iniquity or injustice which focuses on the wrongfulness of an act is used, Ps. 7:3, ‘O Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands.’

13. Numbers 14:41, ‘But Moses said, “Why now are you transgressing the command of the Lord, when that will not succeed?’ A verb used for ‘pass’ or ‘passover’ communicates a trespass or transgression.

14. To wander or go astray is used to describe straying sheep and a metaphor to describe sin, Is. 53:6.

15. Uncleanliness or defilement is linked to ceremonial uncleanness but is also used in a moral sense to speak of sin, Ezek. 36:25, ‘I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.’

The NT like the OT has three main terms for sin.

1. The Greek word hamartia was used by the Greek OT to translate the three main Hebrew words interchangeably, so it has brought concepts of sin, rebellion and iniquity in mind. It has the connotations of missing the mark, but it is rarely used with that exact sense in mind, Rom. 3:23.

2. Adikia or unrighteousness is used as the opposite of righteousness.

3. Anomia or lawlessness is used 15 times in the NT, Matt. 7:23, ‘And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ Tit. 2:14, ‘who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.’

4. Acts 3:26, ‘God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.” Wickedness here is the word ‘poneria’ and can also be translated as evil. The adjective poneros is used to describe satan as the evil one.

5. Rom. 2:23, ‘You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.’ Here is another word for sin, parabasis, linked to breaking the law. One of its verbal cognates parabaino has the idea of stepping over a line, 2 John 9, ‘Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.’

6. Rom. 5:19, ‘For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.’ Here is another word—disobedience—the opposite of obedience (hypakoe). It is also linked to other words meaning a refusal to listen and disobedience (parakouo; apeithes).

⁴ P 329-30.

7. Rom. 1:27, 'and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.' The word error (plane) refers to mental deception and moral departure from the right way.

8. Matt. 6:14-15, 'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.' This word paraptoma comes from the idea of 'a culpable moral slip, stumble or fall.'

9. Gal. 5:19, 'Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality.' Akatharsia means unclean or impure and is often used of sexual sin among the Gentiles.

Beeke sums up a biblical view of sin based on all this data:

'First sin is refusing to hear the divine word and respond with faith and faithfulness. We may call this a covenantal view of sin. The Creator is the speaking God who makes a verbal covenant with man. Sin rejects the word of the covenant as untrustworthy and the God of the covenant as evil. Instead sin embraces deceit and the deceiver.

Therefore, sin brings spiritual hardness towards God and foolishness though the sinner retains his essential faculties as a human being, he loses his spiritual eyes and ears, so to speak, and his inner man becomes dead in disbelief and disobedience. God made man to receive, repeat and reflect his word, but man became hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. The result is slavery.

Second, sin is missing the divine mark and failing to fulfil the purpose of being God's image bearer. We may call this a teleological view of sin. The creator made all things very good, but sin is evil, a destructive distortion of the Creator's design. To sin is to depart from him, straying from the path of life under God's blessing and pursuing death.

As a result, sin brings moral pollution and defilement that exclude the sinner from God's holy presence. This is the sacral view of sin's consequences. The Creator placed man in a sacred place to offer his holy worship to God. Sin is spiritual corruption and filth that so stains man that he must be banished from God's presence. God made man to worship and commune with him, but sin disable man as a worshipper and shuts him out from the presence of the Lord. The consequence is shame.

Third, sin is rebellion against divine authority and transgression of God's law. We may call this a political view of sin. The Creator is the owner, and he has the right to order and command his creature as he sees fit. Sin is treason, a foolish attempt to overthrow the reign of the supreme King and to usurp his place. Consequently, sin brings guilt and liability to punishment upon the sinner. This is the judicial view of sin's consequences, for the Creator is the Judge of all the earth. Sin is criminal injustice, a violation of the Creator's righteous order that demands retribution against the sinner.'⁵

The view of sin shows us to be affected in every way, our whole being, our legal standing, our freedom, that we are under the effects of sin as pollution and as condemnation. This is why we need Christ and the salvation found in Him, justification to provide righteousness for our guilt; regeneration to free our hearts from the love of sin and for obedience; sanctification to help us progress in holiness; glorification to finally undo all the effects of sin upon our being.

Mortal and venial sins: the deadliness of sin

⁵ P332-333

A major point of contention between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic church was over the nature of sin, in particular over the Catholic church's distinction between mortal and venial sins. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines mortal sin for us: 'For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: 'mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.' (1857). And its definition for venial sins: 'One commits venial sin when, in a less serious matter he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or full consent.' (1862). This twofold distinction flows from the Catholic understanding of the state of grace within the believer. In other words, you can sin in such a way as to undo the state of grace so that one needs a new work of God's mercy and a new act of conversion to bring one back into a state of grace. A mortal sin causes the loss of a state of grace requiring a new act of God's mercy and conversion; where venial sin is said to only wound the state of grace within hampering good and encouraging bad but not fully extinguishing it. (1861; 1863). Mortal sins would include violating the ten commandments; and venial sins not being with full consent would be sins of passion, or in a right mind; or small acts that do no real harm like only stealing small amounts; also according to Thomas Aquinas venial sins include 'thoughtless chatter and immoderate laughter.' (1856). Mortal sins will receive eternal punishments and venial sins will receive temporal punishment (Purgatory).

How would we respond to this argument that not all sin is equal?

There are ways we can agree with the statement with careful qualifications. It is true that there will be greater and lesser punishments in hell, not all sins are equal but all sins do damn. It is true that not all sins result in the same dire consequences in this life naturally or by the law; but all sins deserve God's eternal punishments. Or if we want to be cheeky we would say with Francis Turretin that all a Christian's sins are venial for they cannot kill because we are in Christ; but all an unbeliever's sins are mortal for they condemn.

What verses would we turn to in order to prove this?

Romans 6:23, 'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Ezekiel 18:20, 'The soul who sins shall die.'

Galatians 3:10, 'For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."

James 2:10, 'For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.'

Matthew 12:36, 'I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.'

We also have the teaching of Christ Himself who shows us how to apply the law properly in the sermon on the mount where he intensifies and internalizes the law showing that not only the sin of murder makes one liable for judgement but even the seed of murder which is anger and angry speech. Matt. 5:21-22, 'You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of

fire.' Matt. 5:27-28, "'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' Not only anger but he does the same with lust showing that the very thought of lust makes one a law breaker.

Paul in Ephesians 5:5 groups the sin of coveting with sexual immorality showing how both disqualify for heaven, 'For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.' And again in Gal. 5:19-21, 'Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.'

Francis Turretin reminds us that all sin is against God and the guilt of sin is ultimately determined by who our sins are against. On top of that Christ died for all sin because all sin kills, not just so called mortal sin.

We can see why this is so important. If sin is not deadly, then why did Christ die? If we can minimize sin with the excuses of passion or I was not feeling well or I was under pressure we will come up with excuses for all our sins and not look for salvation in Christ. If we are worried about a person's assurance of salvation, the wrong route to take is to redefine sin. A true understanding of the gospel gives us the courage to look into the full horror of how sinful we are without needing to try and diminish its seriousness. Christ is enough to cover all of our guilt.

Another aspect of this discussion which needs to be brought up is the issue of willful sin and desire. We have recently had a lot of questions raised around the matter of same sex attraction. There are Christians who say that same sex attraction is not a sin, and maybe you have heard the logic around this. When I was a young Christians and struggling with sexual thoughts I always felt guilty for those thoughts and a youth pastor shared some of Luther's thoughts saying, 'You can't stop a bird flying over your head but you can stop it from nesting in your hair.' This was a way to distinguish between temptation and sin. This has carried into the same sex attraction debate, is the desire for the sin a sin? Some have answered no, including Roman Catholics; and some have answered yes the desire is a sin. A few years ago the PCA had a problem where one of their churches put on a conference called the Revoice conference, this conference was seen as a place where those who identified as Gay Christians, those who said that SSA was not sinful, and allies supporting these people who said they were Christians and were against the act but not identity or desire gathered together to support one another in what they thought of as an intolerant evangelical environment. The PCA made a response and put a report together and there are a few key statements that are worth quoting on this matter because how we view sinful desire will decide where you fall on this matter.

Statement 4, 'We affirm not only that our inclination toward sin is a result of the Fall, but that our fallen desires are in themselves sinful (Rom 6:11-12; 1 Peter 1:14; 2:11). The desire for an illicit end—whether in sexual desire for a person of the same sex or in sexual desire disconnected from the context of Biblical marriage—is itself an illicit desire. Therefore, the experience of same-sex attraction is not morally neutral; the attraction is an expression of original or indwelling sin that must be repented of and put to death (Rom. 8:13).'

Statement 5, 'We affirm that impure thoughts and desires arising in us prior to and apart from a conscious act of the will are still sin. We reject the Roman

Catholic understanding of concupiscence whereby disordered desires that afflict us due to the Fall do not become sin without a consenting act of the will. These desires within us are not mere weaknesses or inclinations to sin but are themselves idolatrous and sinful.'

When we confess our sin, we also confess our sinfulness. We not only mourn what we want and do, but what we are. It has been the united opinion of the Reformation that the motions of our fallen nature are sinful. And so in statement 6 it says, 'When temptations come from without, the temptation itself is not sin, unless we enter into the temptation. But when the temptation arises from within, it is our own act and is rightly called sin.' Jesus was tempted from without and did not sin in being tempted, but we are tempted from within having natures opposed to God.