

Christian Growth Week 2: Sin

Introduction

In Week One we learned that we have a new standing before God because we are “in Christ.” We stand confidently as children of God with all the privileges that come with that standing.

This week we take up the study of sin and will find that, in Christ, we have security so that we can learn about the depths of our sin.

Growing Christians continue to gain increasing insight into their sin nature as they have a growing awareness of God’s grace. This is why the Bible repeatedly connects realization of our sin, appreciation of God’s grace, and motivation to love and serve God.¹

See the pattern in Isa. 6:1-8. Isaiah (a mature believer who properly rebuked his nation for their sinfulness in chapter 5) sees the holiness of God. This reveals his own sin so that he cries out 6:5. In response, God’s symbol of his forgiveness (6:6,7) must have deeply moved his heart with gratitude—because he begs for the opportunity to serve God without even knowing what the assignment is (6:8).

Isaiah’s experience is a paradigm for this key feature of healthy spiritual growth. As our understanding of God’s holiness and our depravity increases, our appreciation of God’s grace will continue to increase (CROSS DIAGRAM #1-@ end of lecture notes). You realize: *“I am more sinful than I ever imagined—but I am more loved than I ever hoped.”* This is the very heartbeat of healthy spirituality. Conversely, if this is not happening (CROSS DIAGRAM #2), God’s grace will mean little to us, and we will wander from a life of loving God and others.

“God knows who I am: he knows that from head to foot I am full of sin; he knows that I am weakness incarnate; that I can do nothing. The trouble is that I do not know it. I admit that all men are sinners, and that therefore I am a sinner; but I imagine that I am not such a hopeless sinner as some. God must bring us all to the place where we see that we are utterly weak and helpless. While we say so, we do not wholly believe it, and God has to do something to convince us of it.”²

Tonight’s goals:

- To gain an understanding of the Biblical view of sin
- To become more intimately aware of your own sin nature.

The Biblical View of Human Nature and Sin

Most Christians have a woefully superficial understanding of sin. Sin is far deeper than isolated acts of active disobedience to God (EXAMPLES). It is also far deeper than isolated acts of

¹ See also the woman in Lk. 7:36-48 and Saul/Paul in Acts 9:1-20. Paul, who exulted so greatly in God’s grace, expressed a deepening awareness of his own depravity (1 Cor. 15:9; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:15).

² Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers), pp. 157,158.

passive omission to do God's will (EXAMPLES).³ The Bible teaches that, *apart from Christ*, we are completely enmeshed in, deceived by, and enslaved to sin (read Eph. 2:1-3**).

Old Testament

Jer. 17:9, 10a “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it? 10 I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind... (NASB)

The Bible emphatically states that the human heart is not inclined toward good, but toward evil. Therefore, the Bible opposes the optimistic humanist perspective that holds for an inherently positive and good human nature.

The Lord is committed to searching the human heart and testing the mind to bring tension and growth.

Jesus in the New Testament

Mark 7:21-23 “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 “All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.” (NASB)

Jesus opposed any view of human sin that argued that sin was something that came from outside. He clearly states that sin may be stimulated from outside sources, but the heart generates sin.

Paul in Romans 1:18-24

Romans 1:18-23 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Pride drives humanity away from God. Note the issues in this passage:

³ **The Decisive Direction of Sin: Vertical** - Take the example of how people define sin. When considering the nature of sin, Wilberforce said, the vast bulk of Christians in England estimated the guilt of an action “not by the proportion in which, according to scripture, [actions] are offensive to God, but by that in which they are injurious to society.” Now, on the face of it that sounds noble, loving, and practical. Sin hurts people, so don't sin. Wouldn't that definition of sin be good for society? But Wilberforce says, “Their slight notions of the guilt and evil of sin [reveal] an utter [lack] of all suitable reverence for the Divine Majesty.

This principle [reverence for the Divine Majesty] is justly termed in Scripture, ‘The beginning of wisdom’ [Ps. 111:10].” And without this wisdom, there will be no deep and lasting good done for man, spiritually or politically. Therefore, the supremacy of God's glory in all things is what he calls “the grand governing maxim” in all of life. The good of society may never be put ahead of this. That would dishonor God and, paradoxically, defeat the good of society. For the good of society, the good of society must not be the primary good. (Piper, John, “Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce” (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), pp. 23-24)

- God reveals himself to every person through creation.
- Despite this revelation, many chose not to honor him as God (vs. 21).
- Their heart became dark and they created their own images to worship [?? v. 25 says they worship His creation rather than the Creator], rather than worshipping their creator God. At the heart of sin is the human drive to explain reality and live apart from God.

Paul in Romans 2

Romans 2:1-3 Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. 2 And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. 3 But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God?

Some people (usually religious people), view themselves as morally upright people. They see themselves as generally good people who occasionally make mistakes. They do not see themselves as sinners. Jesus and Paul agree that all people are sinners and fall under God's judgment.

ANTITHESES: Richard Lovelace "Today's non-Christians, encouraged by popular psychology which accentuate positive thinking and self-acceptance, think of themselves as fundamentally good people trying to do the right thing, but missing the mark occasionally."⁴

Paul in Romans 5

Romans 5:12,19 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. (NASB)

Sin entered the world through the original sin of Adam and Eve, and they gave birth to a humanity of sinners. All humans are born with a sin nature and sin naturally.

Paul in Romans 7

Romans 7:14,15,24 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (NASB)

As a Christian, Paul continues to struggle against the power of sin in his life.

Paul in Galatians 5

Galatians 5:17* For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. (NASB)

All Christians face this internal struggle: the Spirit leads toward righteousness and the flesh (or sin nature) leads toward sin.

⁴⁴ Richard F. Lovelace, *Renewal As A Way Of Life*, p. 67.

Conclusion: What is the Biblical view of sin?

Who is sinful? Every human.

Is sin generated externally or internally? Internally

Definitions of sin:

Richard Lovelace “. . . the structure of sin in the human personality is far more complicated than the isolated acts and thoughts of deliberate disobedience commonly designated in the world. In its biblical definition, sin cannot be limited to isolated instances or patterns of wrongdoing; it is something much more akin to the psychological term complex: an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs, and behavior deeply rooted in alienation from God. Sin originated in the darkening of the human mind and heart as man turned from the truth about God to embrace a lie about him and consequently a whole universe of lies about his creation. Sinful thoughts, words and deeds flow forth from this darkened heart automatically and compulsively, as water from a polluted fountain.”⁵

Larry Crabb "Many pastors preach an 'iceberg' view of sin. All they worry about is what is visible above the water line. Like a naive sea captain steering his vessel around the tip of the iceberg with no awareness that there is a mountain of ice beneath the surface that could wreck his ship, Christian (leaders) are too often satisfied when their people turn from church-defined sins of behavior.”⁶

John Stott “Jesus taught the inward origin of human evil. Its source has to be traced neither to a bad environment nor to a faulty education, but rather to our heart: our inherited and twisted nature. [The heart] resembles a very deep well. The thick deposit of mud at the bottom is usually unseen, and even unsuspected. But when the waters of the well are stirred by the winds of violent emotion (or adversity), the most evil looking, evil smelling filth bubbles up from the depths and breaks the surface--rage, hate, lust, cruelty, jealousy and revenge. In our most sensitive moments we are appalled at our potential for evil. Superficial remedies will not do.”⁷

CONCLUSION: We are natural born sinners and we will continue to battle our sin nature as Christians. To make progress in this battle, we must begin to gain an understanding of our own sin nature.

Understanding Our Sin Nature

Since by definition the sinful nature is deceptive, let's consider how we can (if we are honest) gain insight into our sin nature.

Temperaments

Definition: a collection of personality traits that we exhibit as we respond to life situations and relationships.

People, though uniquely made, exhibit patterns of behavior, thought, and attitudes that can be generally (not rigidly or stereotypically) grouped together. Hippocrates in the 5th and 4th

⁵ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 89.

⁶ Larry Crabb, *Understanding People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 129.

⁷ John Stott. *The Contemporary Christian*. InterVarsity Press. Downers Grove. 1992. 41.

centuries BC identified these four temperaments: Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholy, Phlegmatic. It's worth noting that he observed these traits and patterns BEFORE attempting to determine how they were formed. General trait theory is a legitimate area of psychological study. Usually people exhibit a mixture of two or more temperaments, one usually being dominant.

(Gordon Allport) "The characteristic phenomena of an individual's nature, including his susceptibility to emotional stimulation, his customary strength and speed of response, the quality of his prevailing mood, and all the peculiarities of fluctuation and intensity of mood, these being regarded as dependent on constitutional make-up, and therefore largely hereditary in origin."⁸

See also O. Hallesby, *Temperament and the Christian Faith*.

WARNING: Don't use temperaments carelessly:

- Don't use them to unrighteously condemn others. Instead we should use them to help others. Temperaments are helpful in identifying a person's strengths to be developed, and in identifying and addressing their chronic (besetting) sins.
- Don't use them insensitively around others who are unfamiliar with the terms. Good community often does have "in-house" terms that are helpful and efficient, but must be used sensitively.
- Don't use them with the view that some temperaments are superior/inferior to others.
- Don't throw out the use of temperaments just because "it rubs you the wrong way." Instead, work through your bias against them and learn how to use this in a godly way to help your own growth (so that you can serve others more lovingly), as well as others.

Consider yourself through the lens of the four temperaments.

We'll look at the strengths and weaknesses of the temperaments, and hopefully you will gain insight into your sin nature.

Active Temperaments: Sanguine and Choleric

Sanguine Strengths	Sanguine Sins	Choleric Strengths	Choleric Sins
Talkative	Poor Listener	Strong-willed	Angry Outbursts
Outgoing	Weak-willed	Determined	Cruel Sarcasm
Enthusiastic	Unstable	Independent	Domineering
Warm	Undisciplined	Optimistic	Inconsiderate
Personable	Restless	Practical	Resists Correction
Friendly	Undependable	Productive	Self-sufficient
Compassionate	Exaggerates	Decisive	Cold

⁸ G. W. Allport, *Pattern and Growth in Personality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 34.

Carefree	Fearful	Leader	Manipulative
		Confident	Messiah Complex

Reflective Temperaments: Melancholy and Phlegmatic

Melancholy Strengths	Melancholy Sins	Phlegmatic Strengths	Phlegmatic Sins
Creative	Unhappily self-centered	Calm	Stingy
Analytical	Moody	Easy-Going	Fearful
Deep Emotions	Negative	Dependable	Indecisive
Perfectionist	Theoretical/Impractical	Efficient	Spectator
Artistic	Unsociable	Conservative	Self-Protective
Idealistic	Critical	Practical	Lazy
Loyal	Vengeful	Diplomat	Self-Righteous
Sincere	Rigid	Dry Humor	Traitors

- Appreciate temperamental diversity. In some areas, we are simply not as strong as someone more temperamentally suited (e.g., the melancholic will never be as effusive as the sanguine; the phlegmatic will never be as visionary as the choleric, etc.). Nevertheless, we can make substantial progress in areas of temperamental weakness. We should not condemn ourselves in the non-strengths, but accept and embrace God-given diversity in one another—much like spiritual gifts. Don't envy other's temperamental strengths.
- Besetting sins often run along temperamental lines: specific areas of vulnerability to sin and deeply ingrained sin habits. Since we are totally depraved, our temperaments have been corrupted by the Fall. Therefore we find that many of our besetting sins run along temperamental lines: e.g., the melancholic's critical spirit; the choleric's aversion to apologize; the phlegmatic's laziness; the sanguine's lack of self-discipline.
- Don't use temperaments to rationalize your sin: "That's just the way I am! That's just my personality." Our tendency is to rationalize these besetting sins as amoral, like our temperamental non-strengths (qualities that people with other temperaments have that I lack). However, when we hold them up to the light (God's love that we are called to express), we see plenty of need for God's sanctifying grace. These are the areas, as they come under God's discipline and grace, that revolutionize our relationships and ministry.

Sin as Idolatry

Rom. 1:22,23 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

One of the key manifestations of human rebellion against God is idolatry.

Col. 3:5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.

Materialistic greed is a key form of idolatry to which Christians are vulnerable.

James 4:4 You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.
⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”?

James calls Jewish Christians spiritual “adulteresses” (an Old Testament figurative term for idolaters – see Ezek. 16:8-29) because of their lust for the things of the world-system.

John Calvin said: “The human heart is a factory of idols . . . every one of us is . . . expert in inventing idols . . . The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.”⁹ Our upbringing, society, personality, and our personal reactions shape *what* idols we worship, but not *whether* we will worship idols.

Definition of an idol: Any person(s) or thing(s) other than God that we look to for our identity, security, or significance.

EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY IDOLS: SEX & ROMANCE; PORNOGRAPHY; HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS; MARRIAGE & FAMILY; SCHOOL/CAREER ACHIEVEMENT; DRUGS & ALCOHOL; POSSESSIONS & SHOPPING; MONEY & INVESTMENTS; ETHNIC/RACIAL BACKGROUND; CULTURAL TASTES; POLITICAL VIEWS; FOOD & DRINK PREFERENCES; CIVIC SERVICE & MINISTRY; ETC.

The New Testament frequently refers to this compulsive idolatrous worship as *epithumia* (literally “inordinate” or “over-desires”)—wanting a good thing too much (Rom. 1:24).¹⁰ Rather than being able to thankfully enjoy these God-given blessings but depending on Him for our CORE NEEDS (e.g., security, significance, identity), we are driven to get them (even if it means *chronically disobeying God’s will*) because we are empty without them. When getting them fails or even threatened, we experience *inordinate negative emotions* (e.g., inordinate anger, anxiety, discouragement). It also leads to the corruption of our lives, because the idols don’t fulfill us when we get them and because our sinful choices to get/keep them damage ourselves and others (Rom. 1:24,25). EXAMPLES:

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xi, 8.

¹⁰ See also Eph. 4:22; 1 Jn. 2:15-17; 2 Tim. 2:22; 2 Pet. 1:4. Interestingly, *epithumia* is also used in a positive sense about our desire for God and his grace (cf. 1 Pet. 1:12). We regard many of these over-desires negatively, calling them “compulsions” or “addictions.” But we regard others positively (e.g., “He is driven to excel in his career.”).

- Why did Alex Rodriguez use steroids? Not to make the major leagues or to be a major league star—he already was the top player. “With an outsized craving for approval and status, his identity firmly woven into his numbers, Rodriguez felt the need to justify a contract . . . (criticized) for its excess. As (a) former teammate . . . explained . . . the scrutiny left A-Rod with ‘the mentality of needing to hit a three-run homer with nobody on base.’ It is that pressure, Rodriguez says now, that drove him to experiment with banned substances.”¹¹
- Your over-desire for admiration/security through a romantic relationship compels you into sexual expression without life-long commitment, and “serial monogamy.” As you age and lose your physical attractiveness, you become more lonely, more desperate, and more hopeless about finding real security.
- Your over-desire for significance through career success compels you to work 80 hours a week, and move wherever the next promotion demands. It also compels you to become extremely manipulative, and anxious about whether you will get the next promotion. And it compels you to neglect your spouse and children and lose whatever friends you may have had. In the latter part of your life, you have “gained the world but lost your soul.” You have financial security and the esteem of your profession—but you lost your family, your integrity, etc. (This can also “morph” a compulsion to get significance through accomplishment in Christian ministry.)
- Your over-desire for approval/acceptance through your children may compel you to spoil them. Your over-desire for significance through your children may compel you to push them into all kinds of activities and accomplishments because you need to validate your life through what they achieve. When your children rebel, you are devastated—not just because they are making choices that will hurt them, but because your approval and significance has been destroyed. And this leads you to make more poor choices in the way you treat them. (This can also “morph” a compulsion to get human approval from others through Christian ministry.)
- Your over-desire for stimulation/comfort through digital entertainment may compel you to spend hours a day playing video games, surfing the net, friending and unfriending people on Facebook, etc. This addiction prevents or deters many areas of development that God says are vital: reading and meditation on biblical truth, other-centered listening, time alone to wait on God, prioritizing face-to-face relating to people, etc.

Understanding our Sin Nature: Conclusion

- I am a sinner and I continue to sin.
- I will gain increasing insight into my sin nature as I grow spiritually.

We see this pattern in Paul’s experience; as he grew in Christ he used more disparaging terms to describe himself as a sinner.

¹¹ Selena Roberts and David Epstein, “Confronting A-Rod,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 16, 2009, p. 28.

1 Cor. 15:8-10 And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (9) For I am the **least of the apostles** and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (10) But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

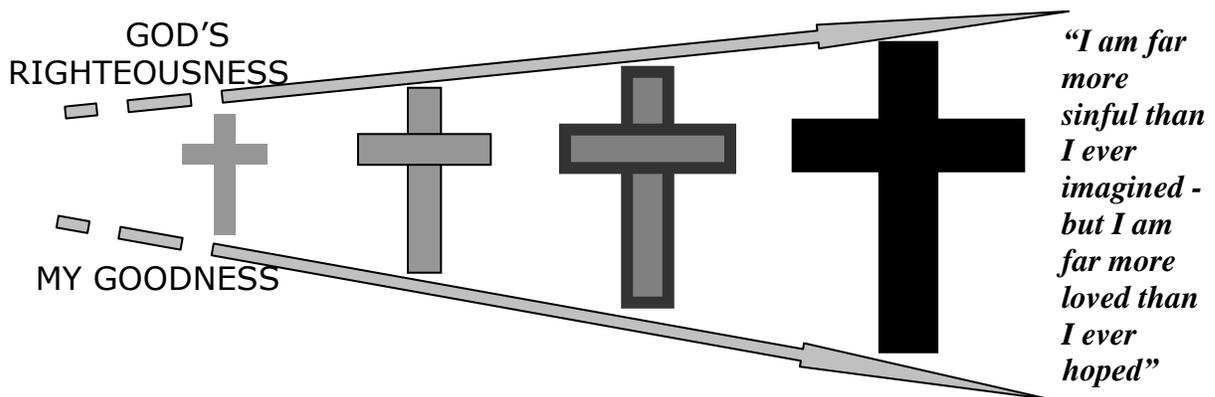
Note: “abnormally born” literally means, “I was a miscarriage, an abortion” -

Eph. 3:8 To me, the very **least of all saints**, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,

1 Tim. 1:15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world **to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.**

C.S. Lewis had a similar realization of his sin.

"Burrowing into his past, he was appalled at what he found... 'I have found out ludicrous and terrible things about my own character. Sitting by, watching the rising thoughts to break their necks as they pop up, one learns to know the sort of thoughts that do come. And, will you believe it, one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration: when everything else fails, having had its neck broken, up comes the thought "What an admirable fellow I am to have broken their necks!" I catch myself posturing before the mirror, so to speak, all day long. I pretend I am carefully thinking out what to say to the next pupil (for his good, of course) and then suddenly realize I am really thinking how frightfully clever I'm going to be and how he will admire me.... when you force yourself to stop it, you admire yourself for doing that. It's like fighting the hydra... There seems to be no end to it. Depth under depth of self-love and self-admiration... *Pride*... is the mother of all sins, and the original sin of Lucifer."¹²



Understand your sin, but don't focus on your sin.

Some people tend to have an unhealthy focus on their sinfulness, while others tend to neglect awareness of their sin nature. We need to trust that God will reveal our sin to us at the right time and be willing to respond when He provides that revelation.

¹² Green and Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. p. 105.

We need to hold these two perspectives in tension:

- Psalm 139:23,24 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

At times we may need to seek insight from God into our character and sin so we can grow and move forward.

- Phil. 3:13b,14 Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

At other times we find that God calls us to look away from the past and our failings and press forward to a new direction that he calls us to. Of course, God expects us to learn from our mistakes as we press forward.

John Newton

Author of the famous hymn, Amazing Grace, was a slave ship captain, turned pastor. He lived a life completely contrary to God's ways for many years before coming to personal faith. He understood that he was a sinner saved by grace and expressed it eloquently.

“I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am”

— John Newton

The following quote was from the end of his life as his memory was failing.

“Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.”

— John Newton

This week's study is only part of the picture.

Over the next two weeks, we will see how our New Identity and the Holy Spirit give us the basis for progressive victory over the power of sin, so that we will no longer be slaves to sin. These provisions through our union with Christ, rather than our sinfulness, should be our main focus!

Memory Verses

Eph. 2:1-3**

Gal. 5:17*