

## WEEK 9 | SIN & ITS UNCERTAINTIES

Sin has neither removed anything from humanity nor introduced anything into it. It is the same human person, but now walking, not toward God but away from him, to destruction.

– Herman Bavinck

In this lecture we will seek to answer some of the common questions and misconceptions about the doctrine of sin. In so doing, our hope is that we will arrive at a more complete understanding of sin and how it affects us.

### ARE SOME SINS WORSE THAN OTHERS?

There is a sense in which all sin is equal in God's eyes. At the root of all sin is the desire for autonomy, a violation of the Creator-creature relationship. No matter how large or small, all sin springs from the same well: a desire for self-rule and a rejection of God's rightful authority. Thus, all sin makes a person guilty and deserving of God's righteous wrath. Adam's sin demonstrates this. Though eating the forbidden fruit was a seemingly inconsequential act, it carried with it devastating consequences because, in doing so, Adam was asserting that he could determine what was right and wrong for him.

Grudem is correct when he writes, "In terms of our legal standing before God, any one sin, even what may seem to be a very small one, makes us legally guilty before God and therefore worthy of eternal punishment."<sup>1</sup> James tells us that "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10). In other words, any one sin renders a person a lawbreaker and, thus, accountable to the Lawgiver. For this reason, Paul recognized that anyone who relied on their ability to keep the law was "under a curse," because everyone is a lawbreaker regardless of their best efforts at adherence.

While the above is true, there is another sense in which some sins are worse than others. The following verses demonstrate this principle throughout Scripture:

- **Numbers 15:27-31** – "If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. <sup>28</sup> And the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. <sup>29</sup> You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them. <sup>30</sup> But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he

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<sup>1</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 501.

is native or a sojourner, reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. <sup>31</sup> Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him.”

- **Ezekiel 8:13** – He said also to me, “You will see still greater abominations that they commit.”
- **Matthew 11:20-24** – Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. <sup>21</sup> “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup> But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. <sup>23</sup> And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. <sup>24</sup> But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”
- **Luke 12:47-48** – And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. <sup>48</sup> But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.
- **John 19:11** – Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”
- **James 3:1** – Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

As the above passages make clear, God will judge certain sins more severely than others. Specifically, there is a great emphasis on accountability for what one knows. Ignorance is not an excuse, but it seems that the ignorant are held to a lower standard than the one who has revelation yet chooses to reject it.

## **MORTAL AND VENIAL SINS**

That the Bible identifies certain sins as worse than others leads naturally to a discussion on the extra-Biblical distinction between mortal and venial sins propagated by the Roman Catholic Church. Allegedly, mortal sins are intentional, grave sins that result in spiritual death of the soul. Sins of this nature would include murder, adultery, and fornication. If a person dies with a mortal

sin on his soul, he is lost forever. The only remedy for a mortal sin is the sacrament of Penance, which brings a person back into relationship with God.

A venial sin is a lesser sin that does not break fellowship with God and does not require penance to absolve. A venial sin is unintentional and not as severe in nature as a mortal sin. This distinction is grounded in tradition, not in Scripture. While the Bible does identify some sins as worse than others, it also affirms that all sins incur legal guilt before God and, unless a person receives forgiveness in Christ, they will result in eternal separation from God. Further, the Bible is clear that God can forgive any sin, no matter how severe. The distinction between mortal and venial sins,

. . . operate within a faulty view of salvation in which justification is viewed as a process in which a person can commit certain sins that remove a person from relationship with God while others do not break fellowship. The biblical view is that at the moment of saving faith the Christian has been declared righteous because of the imputed righteousness of Christ. All sins are forgiven so the Christian does not come in and out of fellowship with God.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the Roman Catholic idea of meritorious penance is unbiblical, rendering Christ's sacrifice for sin insufficient. In short, there are several false doctrines involved with this distinction between categories of sin, and it must be rejected.

## **WHAT IS THE UNFORGIVABLE SIN?**

In Matthew 12:31-32 Jesus identifies a sin that "will not be forgiven." In his renunciation of the Pharisees, Jesus says,

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

The context of Jesus' words is critical in understanding what exactly this 'unforgiveable sin' is. Jesus has just healed a "demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute" (12:22), an incredible display of Jesus' authority. The people are amazed and wonder if Jesus is the Messiah, but the Pharisees respond with an accusation that Jesus is performing his miracles "by Beelzebul, the prince of demons" (12:24).

Jesus' response is two-fold. First, he exposes the sheer irrationality of the Pharisees' accusation, saying, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against

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<sup>2</sup> Vlach, "Theology 3 Course Notes," 112.

itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges” (12:25-27). His point is it makes no sense for Satan (Beelzebul) to cast out his own demons. He questions the logic of accepting exorcisms by Jewish exorcists but not himself and on what basis the Pharisees make such judgments. Rather, Jesus argues that his miracles are “by the Spirit of God,” a clear sign that “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (12:28).

The second part of his response clarifies the consequences of such an error. The sin at issue is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, attributing to Satan the works that God’s Spirit has done. If the criticisms of Jesus and his work were coming from a place of ignorance, they could be forgiven (12:32a). Slandering the Holy Spirit in the face of clear evidence of His power, however, is unforgiveable. The Pharisees were demonstrating a willful rejection and slander of the Holy Spirit working through Jesus, a manifestation of hearts hardened in unbelief. This is the unforgiveable sin.

Importantly, the conditions for the unpardonable sin were limited to Jesus’ earthly ministry, where firsthand witness of his person and works was possible. Because no person alive today is able to witness the work of the Spirit through the Messiah firsthand, it is not possible for someone to commit this unforgivable sin.

At the same time, the New Testament recognizes that there is a point at which a person’s heart becomes so hardened to the gospel that they are beyond the possibility of repentance (Hebrews 6:4-6). Specifically, passages like Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-31 refer to people who are familiar with the gospel and have even enjoyed the benefits and blessings of the Spirit’s work in the church and other believers; their rejection of Christ in the face of such clear evidence of the gospel’s power is akin to the Pharisees’ rejection of Christ and his work.

Only God knows when a person has reached this state (and when He has given them over entirely to their rebellion). This state would be marked by a callousness indifference, even hostility to the gospel. For the Christian who is concerned that they have committed this sin, the simple fact that they are concerned demonstrates they have not.

## **WHAT IS THE SIN THAT LEADS TO DEATH?**

Related to the unforgiveable sin of Matthew 12 is the “sin that leads to death” referenced in 1 John 5:16-17. John writes,

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

John distinguishes between two types of sin: sins which “do not lead to death” and a sin “that leads to death.” John has already acknowledged that everyone, believers included, sin (1 John 1:8), but, if a person will confess their sin, God stands ready to forgive them (1:9) on the basis of the atoning sacrifice of Christ (2:2). In light of this, John must have a very particular sin in mind when he says there is a sin that leads to death.

When we take a step back and look at the context in which 1 John was written, the identity of the “sin that leads to death” becomes more clear. John is writing to a church that is under assault by false doctrines being propagated among them by former members. These false teachings include:

- **False teachings about the Savior**
  - Teaching that Jesus was not “the Christ,” the Messiah (2:22)
  - Teaching that Jesus was not “in the flesh,” that he was not truly human, but some sort of spirit or phantom (4:1-3)
  
- **False teachings about sin:** Teaching that one could become perfect and sinless (1:8)
  
- **False teachings about sanctification:** there are significant misunderstandings about the role of obedience in the Christian life. These false teachers taught that obedience was unimportant—that it didn’t matter how you lived.
  - Appears to be elements of platonic dualism in these false teachings.
  - Why John will repeatedly emphasize that a test of a true Christian is that they obey the new commandment given by Christ: to love one another (2:9-11; 3:11, 23-24; 4:7, 20)
  - Why John condemns those who sin habitually without repentance (3:6)

Essentially, the person and work of Christ had been called into question, and the church John writes to has begun to doubt whether they have believed the right message. John writes to reassure them that if they have believed the gospel that they received from him (1:1-4), then they have eternal life (5:13).

Those former members, people who claimed to follow Christ, are actually “antichrists” (2:18) who have shown by their actions that they were never in Christ (2:19). Even though they heard the clear gospel message from John, they have rejected that message and instead embrace and teach lies. This apostasy is similar to the Pharisees’ willful rejection of Jesus, and thus it is a sin leading to death. As mentioned above, we do not have the perspective to determine if a person is in such a state and has been ultimately rejected by God. Thus, while John does not necessarily advocate praying for such a person, he does not prohibit it either (5:17). He simply recognizes that there is a point at which a person is beyond saving.

**WHO IS THE COMING MAN OF SIN?**

In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul writes about the impact that sin will have on humanity's future. In particular, in verses 3-4 he describes a coming "man of lawlessness" who will be revealed. Paul writes,

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

Who is this figure Paul speaks of? We should first note the context surrounding the revelation of this figure. Paul is refuting the false belief that day of the Lord had already started, a belief that some in the Thessalonian church must have held. The day of the Lord, he says, will be accompanied by two other events: 1) the "rebellion" and 2) the coming of the "man of lawlessness." Since neither of those had yet occurred, the Thessalonians could have confidence that the day of the Lord had not begun.

Paul goes on to describe this "man of lawlessness." The word "lawlessness," *anomia*, means "against law." This man will be directly set against God's law and purpose. Further, Paul describes him as "the son of destruction." In the gospel of John, Jesus describes Satan as one who comes to "steal, kill, and destroy" (John 10:10). This lawless man, then, is aligned with Satan against God and Jesus the Messiah. He "opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship. . . proclaiming himself to be God."

Paul describes this man's activity in his rebellion against God. He will come "with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing" (2:9-10). The man of lawless will be empowered by Satan to work false signs and wonders that will deceive unbelievers, "in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2:12). He will demand to be worshipped (2:4) and will even sit in the temple in Jerusalem and declare himself God (Dan 9:27; Matt 24:15). Presently he is being restrained from coming by the Holy Spirit (2:6), but when that restraint is removed he will be unleashed on the earth.

This figure "will be the complete embodiment of sin and evil. During the coming day of the Lord this person will be Satan's counterpart to Jesus (2 Thess. 2:3-4). Jesus is the God-man who is the embodiment of righteousness and love. But Satan's man will be the opposite."<sup>3</sup> Just as Jesus did his works by the power of the Spirit, so this man will do works by the power of Satan. This Antichrist will deceive the nations for a time, but ultimately he will be destroyed when "the Lord Jesus will kill [him] with the breath of his mouth and bring [him] to nothing by the appearance of

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<sup>3</sup> Vlach, "Theology 3 Lecture Notes," 113.

his coming” (2:9). At that time his wicked kingdom will be replaced by the kingdom of righteousness under the reign of the Messiah (Isaiah 11).

## SIN AND THE CHRISTIAN

How do believers reconcile the continued presence of sin in their lives? What is the believer’s relationship to sin? In connection to the relationship between Adam and Jesus Christ to humanity, the New Testament paints a contrast between the “old self” and the “new self.” Paul writes:

- Ephesians 4:22-24 – . . . put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
- Colossians 3:9-10 – Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

In both passages, the word translated “self” is *anthropos*, which could be more literally translated “man.” In Colossians 3 Paul is telling believers that they “have put off the old man. . . and have put on the new man,” a statement of fact, whereas in Ephesians he calls on believers to put off the old and put on the new. In Christ, a significant anthropological transition has occurred for believers, and it is now incumbent upon us that we walk in light of this reality.

What does Paul mean when he refers to “the old man” and “the new man?” How do these categories relate to the doctrine of sin? The “old man” refers to the unregenerate self, the sin nature inherited from Adam (the first “man”). The “new man” is the regenerated self, the new nature a believer receives and the new creation they become (2 Corinthians 5:17) by virtue of their union with Christ. The “old man” is gone forever, having been put to death through Christ’s vicarious death on the cross. Thus, for the believer, anthropologically we are not the same as we once were—we have been made new.

At the same time, because the physical body has not experienced glorification yet, our new self remains tied to the flesh and thus must wage war against fleshly desires, the sin principal that remains in us. Hence, Paul calls on believers to “put off your old self” which is “corrupt through deceitful desires” (Ephesians 4:9). Elsewhere he exhorts believers to “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires;” instead, we are to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14). We do this by walking by the power of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16).

Vlach summarizes the anthropological significance of these categories when he writes:

These paradigms of “old man” and “new man” are important to anthropology and contrast humanity in Adam and humanity in Christ. One is either in Adam or in Christ, no other options exists. According to Romans 5:18–19, being in Adam means death, guilt, and condemnation. Being in Christ, however, means life, justification and righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

In a very real sense, Christians have been delivered from the power of sin in their lives. Believers are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:18); we have been called to “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions” (Romans 6:11-12). At the same time, every believer is keenly aware of the presence of sin in their lives. The Bible does not teach perfectionism—the idea that Christians will achieve a state of sinlessness in this life. John writes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

When we sin we grieve God’s Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) and we incur God’s loving discipline (Hebrews 12:6-11; Revelation 3:19). We must always be examining ourselves and open to the loving rebuke and exhortation from other believers (Galatians 6:1). Jesus himself instituted a process of church discipline in order to address sin in the life of a professing Christian (Matthew 18:15–20). If a sin is not repented of, it can lead to expulsion from the church (1 Cor. 5:13). We are also promised that there will be a day when “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10). The Bible takes sin seriously, and as Christians we must as well.

Despite the continued presence of sin in a believer’s life, we take great comfort in what is, indeed, the finished work of Christ. As Michael Vlach writes,

But when a person trusts in Christ he receives forgiveness of sins and Christ’s righteousness. As a result, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3), so all sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven. God, who began a good work in us, will be faithful to complete what he started (Phil. 1:6). Sin will not remove a Christian from God’s love. Paul says nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).<sup>5</sup>

Part of the redemptive work accomplished by Christ is that in the future we will be completely freed from sin’s presence in our lives. As the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, he conforms us more and more to the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18), a process that will be brought to completion when we find ourselves in the Lord’s presence (1 John 3:2).

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<sup>4</sup> Vlach, “Theology 3 Course Notes,” 118.

<sup>5</sup> Vlach, “Theology 3 Course Notes,” 116.