

The Nature of Sin

Purpose of the Series

- First, I should start by saying this will not be a “fire and brimstone” or “repent or perish” or “you’re a really bad person” type of lesson. Part of it will be informational, but more importantly, I believe I can clear up some difficult passages which led to bad theology around how we are to live our lives in the Christian way, how we can “remain” saved Christians, and how to know if we or someone we care about has left the faith.
- Second, I’d like to study the nature of sin (as the title implies) and, in doing so, discover the heart or essence of what sin is. We’ll see that the Bible uses the word “sin”, from the Hebrew כִּחַת (kha-ta) and the Greek $\text{\u0391}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (ham-ar-tia), fairly loosely and expects the reader to know what is meant.

Part 1: Categories of Sin

I. What does “sin” mean?

- a. As mentioned above, the English word “sin” comes from the Hebrew כִּחַת (kha-ta) and the Greek $\text{\u0391}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (ham-ar-tia). Both the Hebrew and Greek are archery terms meaning “to missing the mark” and, by extension, “to fail to meet one’s goal”.
- b. The Latin word in the Vulgate is “peccatum”, which means, “a moral offense, or transgression”. Obviously, sin and peccatum don’t sound the same. Sin comes from Latin, “sons”, then the proto-German, “sundio”, and, finally, the Old English, “synn”. All these mean “guilty”.
- c. That’s an interesting progression. I’m not good at archery, and basically missed the mark every time I tried—but I never felt guilty or that I’d committed a morel offense. What I’ve discovered in my studies is that “sin” in Christian and Jewish theology developed to encompass a broader, more profound meaning than simply missing a mark—it came to signify willful disobedience, moral failure, or rebellion against God’s commands. So basically, the translators got it right and we shouldn’t read too much into the archery thing.

II. Are there categories? Is it dangerous to make categories?

- a. In some sense there is danger in making categories. Rom 3:22f-23 says, “There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Regardless of whether you just told a lie or you’re a serial killer (though I hope not) you’ve missed the mark.
- b. People like to make artificial spectrums like “Mother Theresa” to “Hitler”. They like to compare themselves to people whose sin they assess is worse than theirs to make themselves feel better. This is definitely not my intention.
- c. Nevertheless, verses in both the Old Testament and New Testament do seem to create certain categories or types of sin.

III. Major categories of sin

- a. From Catholicism: Original, Mortal, and Venial
 - i. I don't believe in these but to cover all the bases.
 - ii. Original: stemming from Adam's disobedience in the garden, present at birth and forgiven by baptism (whether conscious of or not).
 - iii. Mortal: Grave matter done in full knowledge and consent, removes friendship with God, must be confessed. From catholic.com: *Any mortal sins that you confessed or meant to confess but did not through no fault of your own are forgiven. You do need to mention them the next time you go to confession. For the future, I recommend stating all of your mortal sins first, and then state your venial sins. If the priest begins absolution before you are finished confessing, you can politely interrupt him by saying, "I am so sorry, Father, but I still have more mortal sins I must confess."*
 - iv. Venial: Less serious, temporal punishment, forgiven by mass, penance, or purgatory.
- b. Omission vs. Commission. James 4:17 *Anyone who knows the good they ought to do but doesn't do it has sinned.* Here we can see there is no excuse for failing to do God's good work (Eph 2:10).
- c. Individual vs. Corporate.
 - i. This is primarily an Old Covenant thing.
 1. Exodus 32: systemic idolatry. The golden calf story. All who worshipped the calf had their names blotted out of the book, and many of the paid with their lives with a plague that was sent.
 2. Numbers 13 and 14: 10 of the 12 spies give a bad report and many of the assembly doubt they should go in. All of Israel paid with their lives over the next 40 years except Joshua and Caleb.
 - ii. There are a few examples in the New Testament.
 1. 1Cor 11:17-34, esp. v30 says "many are weak and a number had *fallen asleep*" due to improperly taking communion.
 2. Revelation 3: the letters to the churches. We can see God taking an assessment of the general faith and behavior of each church.
- d. Old Covenant vs. New Covenant
 - i. There's definitely a difference in way the OC talks about sin and how the NC does. Remember the NC is more like Acts-Rev, and Mat-John are more OC than NC. See Part 6 of the Pharisaical Lens.
 - ii. In the OC, there were progressively higher sacrifices for different classes of sin: unclean for a time, unclean and wash, sacrifice flour/bird/lamb/bull, excommunication, and death by stoning.
- e. The worst types:
 - i. Forgivable vs. Unforgivable. Mat 12:31-32. What could Jesus possibly be talking about? I spoke about this in Part 4 of "The Era of the Spirit", which you can review, but I will speak more about this in the coming parts of this series.

- ii. Leads to death vs. doesn't lead to death. 1John 5:16-18. This passage is just plain weird...I mean there's a sin that leads to death and he doesn't tell us what it is? Again I'll cover this in upcoming episodes.
- iii. Repentable vs. non-repentable. Heb 6
- iv. Sacrifice left vs. no sacrifice left. Heb 10

IV. Summary

- a. There are some potentially useful ways of categorizing sin.
- b. Next two weeks we're going to tackle important saved vs. unsaved sins and see if we can clear up confusion about the "unforgivable sin", "sins that lead to death", "and sins for which there is no sacrifice left". Hint: I think you'll be relieved by what these terms really mean.

Part 2: The Sin that Leads to Death

Review from last week:

- We talked about the etymology and evolution of the word “sin”, how it comes from the Hebrew חַטָּא (kha-ta) and the Greek ἁμαρτία (ham-ar-tia), and that it signifies willful disobedience, moral failure, or rebellion against God’s commands.
- There is danger in making categories of sin when the purpose is to compare oneself against someone else. “There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- There are several ways to categorize sin (little vs. big, committed vs. omitted, by mistake vs. intentionally), but the most serious category is forgivable vs. unforgivable.

- I. What could possibly make is sin unforgivable?
 - a. Isn’t God all-powerful?
 - b. Isa 59:1-2. It’s not about a limitation of God, but about humans. In a way it’s about a definition or truth: If God provides a way to connect with him, you must believe it and accept it—you cannot make your own method.
 - c. John 3:16-18 is the perfect example of this: but whoever *does not believe* is *condemned already* because they have not believed.
- II. Unforgivable Sins
 - a. Mat 12:30-32 (also in Mark 3:28-29, Luke 12:10) – If this means, “Say something bad about the Holy Spirit and you’re done!” then why would saying bad things about Jesus (who is also God) be okay? It makes much more sense that if it’s the indwelling Spirit that saves us, then while we reject and until we accept the Spirit we’re in a lost state. (Just like John 3 said: while we don’t believe and until we do believe, we’re condemned.
 - b. Two passages from Hebrews.
 - i. Firstly, is Hebrews written to Jews who needed to become Christians or to Jewish Christians considering returning to Judaism? It could be either or both. The first 4 chapters seem to be to the first group, as the author argues the superiority of Christ. How you take it determines whether he’s talking about “missing out on salvation” or “losing one’s salvation”.
 1. Note that simply using the words brother and sister do not necessarily mean “in Christ”.
 2. The use of “sin” is contextual since it could mean disobedience to the Law or the rejection of the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. Heb 6:4-6 – This is the “falling away” passage. If you interpret “once been enlightened”, “tasted the heavenly gift”, and “shared in the Holy Spirit” as “one who is already saved”, then the passage would mean that they

committed the unforgivable sin of rejecting (blaspheming) the Holy Spirit and now the Spirit will depart from them. But the words “once”, “tasted” and “shared” seem to be carefully written to Jews who have participated in God’s plan of salvation but who must now transition to the New Covenant.

- iii. Heb 10:26-27 – ooh that sounds bad, and it is.
 - 1. If Hebrews is to Jews who need to convert, this means if they keep rejecting the Holy Spirit (“keep on sinning”) their current way of forgiving sins via the sacrifice of animals no longer works (i.e. “no sacrifice for sins left”) and they should be in fear of hell.
 - 2. If Hebrews is to Jewish Christians, the sin would be if they keep on deliberately participating in the sacrifice animals, they will lose the Spirit and they should expect hell because there is no sacrifice of sins left. “Deliberate” may point to sacrifices still happening at the temple where they go, but they’re not participating.
- iv. 1 John 5:16-18 – Hmm...this is bizarre.
 - 1. Remember that life and death can be spiritual or physical or both.
 - 2. The “shouldn’t pray for them” clause seems counterintuitive to Christianity. Is there a scenario under which it would be wrong to pray for someone who is doing something wrong?
 - 3. I think v18 is key: “...does not continue to sin”? Of course we continue to sin! John himself says in chapter 1 verse 8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”. Thus, identifying the sin John is referring to is paramount. If the sin is the same as Hebrews, “continuing to participate in the OC sacrificial system”, then everything makes sense.
 - a. From earlier, the use of brother and sister doesn’t have to be a fellow Christian; it could be a fellow Jew.
 - b. Verse 16, “pray that God will give them life” could mean, “pray that God will give them the indwelling Holy Spirit which is life”.
 - c. The “leads to death” could mean the death of an animal, for instance, the death of the person (i.e. Sabbath breaking, murder, infidelity), or the death of one’s soul like Heb 10:26.
 - d. Verse 17, “all wrongdoing is sin” and “there is a sin that does not lead to death” would mean “breaking any law of Moses is wrong, but in most cases the remedy is not the death of an animal or the execution of lawbreaker”.
 - e. Verse 18, “anyone born of God does not continue to sin” would mean, “Christians know that Christ was the final

sacrifice and therefore they do not participate in any more animal sacrifices”, or “anyone born again is filled with the Spirit and can no longer sin because Christ’s blood justified them”.

- f. Verse 18f, “the One who was born of God” is Jesus and he keeps them safe from the evil one.
 - g. Verse 18 really rings of John 3:3 and 5: “unless they are born again” and, “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”
- v. Act 5:1-5 Lying about being led by the Spirit is a serious offense in the Church.
- 1. Were they not saved, saved and then lost, or saved and then dead? Who knows.

III. Summary

- a. The answer to “what are unforgivable sins” is: Rebellion or rejection of God’s Covenant.
 - i. Adam and Eve rebelled against the Covenant of the Garden: Don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—if you do you’ll die. As I talked about in Part X the Era of the Spirit, the death was a spiritual one.
 - ii. Israel rebelled against God’s promise that he would bring them into a great land when they listened to the 10 spies. And they all died physically in the desert wandering around. Often Israel’s physical things are spiritual things in the New Covenant.
 - iii. Israel rebelled against God when they wanted a human king. After Israel did this, their spiritual condition was forever linked to the king’s heart’s condition.
 - iv. Under the New Covenant, the unforgivable sin is rejecting God’s Holy Spirit either through ignorance or willfulness. There are many ways to say this: grace vs works, surrender vs resist, trust vs. doubt, faith vs. fear, etc.
 - v. Therefore, it’s not that there’s some sin out there that’s so terrible that once you’ve committed it God can never forgive you.

Next week we’ll talk about what it means that, “Jesus died for the sins of the world”.