

What is sin?

These next two sessions center on the same basic topic and questions: how do we know what to do? How do I know what is right and wrong? How do I know what God expects of me? These questions are important for both living well and living a life in obedience to God. This session focuses on God and those things that offend him. The next session focuses on the general topic of morality. The two topics are similar but from different angles. Some may think that morality leads to the topic of sin and should therefore come first in the sequence. I chose to focus on sin first so that we understand God's principles before moving into philosophical principles.

What is sin?

The best way to approach the topic of sin is to talk about morality. Morality is the subject of right living. How does one live well in society? It governs both the individual well-being of a person and also the proper way to live in a society. The laws that govern morality can come from a variety of sources such as philosophy, religion, personal ethic, social ethic, or gestalt. Nevertheless the topic of morality asks the question: what ought a person to do? Morality is about action and performing the right action. Performing the morally acceptable or right action produces good whereas performing the morally unacceptable action produces bad.

Sin is not the same as morality. Whereas morality was governed by laws and principles that are external to the person or governed by the person, sin is governed by God's laws. Therefore sin is about God. In a more specific way, sin is an action that offends God or violates his laws and rules. God created the universe with rules and laws that govern it. These laws extended to his humans who have the ability to reason and make moral decisions. These laws are codified in the Bible. Following these laws leads one closer to God whereas going against these laws puts one out of relationship with God. Although most people focus on the laws of the Bible as the core set of principles that govern sin, anything that puts a person out of relationship or hurts his/her relationship with God is considered sinful.

One of the best ways to grasp the concept of sin is to examine the word's origin. The word sin is an archery term which describes the effectiveness of a person's shot. The goal in archery is to hit the bullseye. The bullseye, however, is a rather specific spot on the target without a lot of leeway in missing that spot. If a person hits the bullseye, that person made a great shot. If the person misses the bullseye, including to the right, the left, above or below, then the person committed a sin, he missed the mark. This analogy shows the challenges with sin. Sin is any action that is out of conformity with God's laws.

What constitutes sin?

Although we defined sin as any offense against God, it comes with an inherent problem. What offends God? The best starting point is to recognize two foundational points: God's laws are eternal and govern all people. The second point: God gave us his laws.

One of the great challenges with morality, that is not the same challenge in religious laws, is that we have to defend and declare what is considered immoral. Even if we generally agree on the morality of an action, others can disagree. This disagreement has no finality. We can continue to

agree and disagree or agree to disagree indefinitely since nothing defines or sets a foundation for morality. Even if we find a foundation, as many have, we disagree on the right type of foundation for moral principles. Religious laws do not have the same problem. For almost all religious laws a book, code, or handed down traditions become the unquestioned foundation for moral behavior. Christianity is the best example of a divinely inspired code of conduct. For Christianity, morality is set by a combination of the Bible and the reasoned laws that come from it. The first five books of the Bible, called the Law Books, contain the majority of the laws that govern right action for God's people. The rest of the Bible has a smattering of laws or commentary on law until the New Testament. Jesus' words in the New Testament, and St. Paul's commentary on Jesus' words, form the core of the New Testament laws. Yet even the laws of the New Testament are not a new set of laws but the reiteration and solidification of the Old Testament laws. Therefore we have a set of laws that govern right action. With the foundation of these law being God who cannot change or err, it gives Christian morality a solid and firm foundation compared to other systems of morality.

One problem, however, what happens when we disagree on the interpretation of God's laws? Although my last point sounded like God's laws are solid and without confusion, this could not be further from reality. Some of God's laws seem rather specific and clear: you shall have no graven images, honor your father and your mother, you shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery. Regardless of how firm a law sounds, someone will find a way to question or dispute the law. The best principle for dealing with disputes regarding religious law is to interpret the law in context. The context of the law colors it and gives more depth to something that would seem arbitrary or confusing without context. For instance the law governing murder prevents the needless killing of people and prevents revenge, which commonly lead to death. Therefore the context is to prevent the needless death of people and the preservation of the life which God created and made sacred. How about the death penalty? The convict is not considered innocent. Can we kill a guilty person? The Old Testament examples and laws teach that we should stone to death a person convicted of heinous crimes thus encouraging capital punishment. In context the purpose for stoning a person was so that no one had to touch the sinful person and thus become ritually unclean and to keep their sin from infecting others leading to the degradation of society. Since the person couldn't live in the society with such a grave sin and the person had no where to go, then the only solution was to kill the person. Upon entry into the Land of Israel, the people established sanctuary cities to house these people so that stoning was not the only option. Again context colors the laws.

Jesus colors many of the Old Testament laws in significant ways through his ministry and teaching. The example I used above of stoning makes no sense if people are no longer seen as ritually clean but as redeemed by Jesus' blood. Therefore capital punishment can no longer be a viable option since sin is seen in a different context: as an offense against God instead of a ritual uncleanness. Even though many people understand Jesus' laws of the Old Testament as in conflict or renunciation of the old laws, Jesus keeps true to the Old Testament laws. Jesus shows us how to interpret laws and discover the deeper truths behind some of the more obscure or direct laws of the Old Testament. Jesus doesn't deviate from the laws of the Old Testament.

The Bible is full of different types of laws. Many of the laws in the Book of Leviticus are religious laws that govern worship of God and the administration of the sacrifices. The social laws of the Book of Deuteronomy govern the leadership of the tribes, their placement in Israel, and the social laws that govern intratribal disputes. The final type of laws don't fit the other two categories. The best way to describe these laws are God's laws; laws that govern our relationship with God. The two most notable of these laws are the first two commandments: God alone shall you worship and keep holy the Sabbath. From this overview of the laws of the Old Testament a few themes emerge. All of God's laws of the Bible focus on right worship of God and right relationships with each other. With so many different kinds of laws, many of which don't seem to apply today, how can we assume that God's laws are eternal?

This question is fundamentally important for Christians. If God is real and what we say about him is true, then the following must be true: God cannot change, God is eternal, he is all good and all-knowing, his ways are perfect. Therefore God's laws must essentially be perfect, good, and unchanging. This becomes one of the greatest problems or controversies in Christianity. Not only does it look like God's laws change between the Old and New Testament, the laws actually change and intentionally change.

The starting premise for understanding God's laws is to recognize that a core value exists that underlies all the laws. These core values govern our relationship with God and one another. For instance the 10 Commandments never change. The truth of these laws holds for all Christians and for all Jews, you could even argue for all people. Jesus doesn't change these laws neither did the Church change them but expanded upon them. The laws governing ritual purity such as separating types of foods and keeping them separate, the animals we could eat, and the things we can do and touch all focus on preparing ourselves to be God's people and making us ritually clean for the sacrifices. If we no longer need to be ready for sacrifices and God has taken away all our sins, what value are these laws governing ritual purity? None. Therefore Jesus' sacrifice made all those baptized in him ritually pure so that we no longer need to focus on ritual purity. The same idea applies to all of the laws of the Old Testament. God's ways are timeless but the specific expression of those ways for us can change as we come to know God more fully.

The Challenge: God's laws and a personal relationship

The vast majority of God's laws regard society and the way to behave in God's society. These laws then seem to be of social nature meaning that all sin became a social sin and not personal. I only sin in relation to the person that I hurt. Although a vast majority of our sins are social in nature and directly affect the people whom we hurt, sin also has a personal side. This personal side to sin greatly colors the conversation thus far and complicates the more black-and-white nature of God's laws from the Old Testament.

Sin is missing the mark of following what God intends or wishes from us. This can come in many different forms. The easiest form to understand are the laws from the Bible. If I murdered someone, God is not happy and I have committed a grave sin. If I didn't keep the Sabbath holy, then I have not done as God anticipated for me. But this can branch out into much more specific categories. If a mother of children does not wish to teach her children about God, is this a sin. If

a married man prefers not to spend time with his wife, is this not also a sin? Since sin is about our relationship with God, whenever we fall out of conformity with God's will in our lives, we have sinned. This can be as simple as God told me to do something and I chose not to. Therefore sin is anything that goes against God's will for us.

The three elements of sin:

Although sin is personal, it doesn't react like a law. If I break the law by stealing a loaf of bread from the store, I am fined or sent to prison as a consequence of my action. This is a legal reaction. Sin is about God. Therefore God knows our hearts and whether we are liable for that sin. If I stole the loaf of bread because I had no way to feed my starving family, then God would not consider this a sin. If I stole the loaf of bread because I didn't want to work or ask for food, then I am liable of the sin of omission, not willing to do what was right. Therefore sin has three necessary elements: the action is bad, knowledge that the action was, bad and an ill intention behind the action.

The Catholic Church uses the distinction between mortal and venial sin to describe the gravity and level of concupiscence that a person has when committing a sin. A venial sin is any sin a person commits. This can be as minor as forgetting to pray or accidentally hurting someone's feelings to white lies and gossip. These sins are not major but become worse the more we commit them. Mortal sins are grave sins that break our relationship with God. The best examples are murder, adultery, abortion, lying, creating false Gods. Anything that breaks the 10 Commandments is considered a mortal sin. In order to commit a mortal sin three conditions must be met: 1. Knowledge that the action is bad, 2. The action must be a serious sin, 3. Full consent of the will.

Let's expand upon these three conditions. In order to be liable for an action I need to know the action was bad. If I grew up in a violent house and only knew violence as a way of solving problems, am I held accountable for using violence? No, this is all that I know. If I go to a foreign country and break one of their laws, am I responsible for knowing their laws? Kind of. That is the responsibility of each traveler. Therefore we are held accountable for both whether we know the action is bad and whether we were willing to learn what is right. Yes, both. The last criterion is the consent of the will. How can we be held accountable for something that we didn't do? For instance if I was drugged, how could I have sinned in killing someone? We have to choose to do the action for it to be sinful. We can't just think about the action or dream about it, we have to do it. Pondering on a thought too long or letting evil thoughts cultivate in our minds is considered sinful because we choose to dwell on them. Every sin is related to an action. Lastly, the action has to be a serious sin. Minor sins like off-handed comments, distractions, and minor offenses against God are not serious sins. These actions are bad must don't break your relationship with God. Mortal sins break our relationship with God and make it difficult to want to follow him and pray.