

The Nature and Fact of Sin

An excerpt from John Stott's *Basic Christianity*

“Sin is an unpopular subject, and Christians are often criticized for harping on it too much. But it is only because Christians are realists that they do so. Sin is not a convenient invention of persons to keep them in their job; it is a fact of human experience.

The history of the last hundred years or so has convinced many people that the problem of evil is located in man himself, not merely in his society. In the nineteenth century a liberal optimism flourished. It was then widely believed that human nature was fundamentally good, that evil was largely caused by ignorance and bad housing, and that education and social reform would enable men to live together in happiness and goodwill. But this illusion has been shattered by the hard facts of history. Educational opportunities have been spread rapidly in the Western world, and many welfare states have been created. Yet the atrocities which accompanied both world wars, the subsequent international conflicts, the continuance of political oppression and racial discrimination, and the general increase of violence and crime have forced thoughtful people to acknowledge the existence in every man of a hard core of selfishness.

Much that we take for granted in a ‘civilized’ society is based upon the assumption of human sin. Nearly all legislation has grown up because human beings cannot be trusted to settle their own disputes with justice and without self-interest. A promise is not enough; we need a contract. Doors are not enough; we have to lock and bolt them. The payment of fares is not enough; tickets have to be issued, inspected and collected. Law and order are not enough; we need the police to enforce them. All this is due to man’s sin. We cannot trust each other. We need protection against one another. It is a terrible indictment of human nature.

The biblical writers are quite clear that sin is universal. ‘There is no man who does not sin,’ says Solomon in an aside during his great prayer at the dedication of the temple. ‘Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins,’ adds the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes. Several of the psalms lament the universality of human sin. Psalm 14, which describes the godless ‘fool,’ gives a very pessimistic description of human wickedness:

*‘They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good.
The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any act
wisely, that seek after God.
They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no,
not one.’*

The psalmists’ consciousness tells them that if God were to rise up in judgment against man, none could escape his condemnation. ‘If thou, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?’ Hence the prayer, ‘Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee.’

The prophets are as insistent as the psalmists on the fact that all men are sinners, and no statements are more definite than the two which are to be found in the second half of the book of Isaiah. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way,' and 'We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.'

Nor is this a fancy of Old Testament writers. Paul opens his epistle to the Romans with a closely reasoned argument, which extends over the first three chapters, that all men indiscriminately, Jews and Gentiles, are sinners in God's sight. He depicts the degraded morals of the pagan world and then adds that the Jew is no better, since, possessing God's holy law himself and teaching it to others, he is yet guilty of breaking it. The apostle then quotes from the psalms and the prophet Isaiah to illustrate his theme, and concludes, 'there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' John is, if anything, even more explicit when he declares that 'if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves', and 'if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar.' (1 John 1:8, 10)

But what is sin? Its universal extent is clear; what is its nature? Several words are used in the Bible to describe it. They group themselves into two categories, according to whether wrongdoing is regarded negatively or positively. Negatively, it is shortcoming. One word represents it as a lapse, a slip, a blunder. Another picture is as the failure to hit the mark, as when shooting at a target. Yet another shows it to be an inward badness, a disposition which falls short of what is good. Positively, sin is transgression. One word makes sin the trespass of a boundary. Another reveals it as lawlessness, and another as an act which violates justice.

Both these groups of words imply the existence of a moral standard. It is either an ideal which we fail to reach, or a law that we break. 'Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin,' says James. That is the negative aspect. 'Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness,' says John. That is the positive aspect.

The Bible accepts the fact that men have different standards. The Jews have the law of Moses. The Gentiles have the law of conscience. But all men have broken the law they know and fallen short of their own standard. What is our ethical code? It may be the law of Moses or the law of Jesus. It may be the decent thing, or the thing done of the conventions of society. It may be the Buddhists' noble eightfold path or the Muslim's five pillars of conduct. But whatever it is, we have not succeeded in observing it. We all stand self-condemned.

To some good-living people this comes as a genuine surprise. They have their ideals and think they attain them, more or less. They do not indulge in much introspection. They are not self-critical. They know they have had occasional lapses. They are aware of certain character deficiencies. But they are not particularly alarmed by them, and they consider themselves no worse than other men. All this is understandable enough, until we remember two things. First, our sense of failure depends on how high our standards are. It is quite easy to consider oneself good at

high jumping if the bar is never raised more than waist high. Second, God concerns himself with the thought behind the deed and with the motive behind the action. Jesus clearly taught this in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

Questions:

1. Stott makes a great observation when he states, "Much that we take for granted in a 'civilized' society is based upon the assumption of human sin." After looking at his examples, what are some other examples you see in day-to-day life?
2. Another way to view "negative" and "positive" definitions of sin is to think of sins of "ommission" (what I fail to do; even though I know I should do it) and "commission" (sins I actively engage in). To which of these do you find yourself more inclined?
3. Read the 10 commandments (Exodus 20). How does God define sin? Do they sound like arbitrary rules to keep or relational standards to live by?
4. Read Matthew 5-7. How does Jesus deepen our understanding of the depth of sin?