

THE NATURE OF SIN¹

What is the greatest affliction in the world today? Is it cancer? Is it drug addiction? Is it war? Is it a communicable disease such as coronavirus? No, it is not any of these. By far the most terrible affliction in the world today is sin. Sin causes more misery and heartache than any other tribulation. And if it is not overcome with God's help, it will result in isolation from other people and, finally, separation from God, our Creator and Sustainer, who is Lord over all.

What is sin? John says, "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3.4; KJV). A transgressor is one who goes beyond a boundary or limit. When we go beyond the prescribed boundary or limit of God's law, then we transgress his law or sin. John also says that "all unrighteousness is sin" (1 John 5.17; KJV). Since God is righteous, then all that is not righteous is against God. And that which is against God is sin. But the word "sin" (Greek *hamartia*) means "a missing of the mark." Those who participate in the sport of archery use a bow and arrow to hit a target, or a mark, that is set before them at some distance. We also as Christians have a mark or a target—the standard of living that God has set before us in his word. If we miss that mark, and we do (see Romans 3.23; 1 John 1.8), we sin. So Paul encourages us to "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3.14).

Today, we will examine three types of sin: (1) sins of immorality; (2) sins of omission; and (3) sins of offense against fellow believers. Note, however, that many things which our society approves of are condemned by God. Friends and neighbors are not our standard for determining what is and what is not right and acceptable to our Father in heaven. Rather, our basis for deciding what is pleasing to God must be the word of God instead of the opinions of

¹Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (1989) unless indicated otherwise.

others. If we love God, and if we try our best to follow his word, surely he will give us help with his Holy Spirit.

Sins of Immorality

In his letters, Paul condemns many immoral acts that were prevalent in the Greco-Roman world. He writes to the churches of Galatia and says:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (5.19-21).

Other “vice and virtue” lists from Paul enumerate the different “works of the flesh” as these are called (see Ephesians 4.25-32; Colossians 3.5-9; 2 Timothy 3.1-5). Such scriptures seem to indicate that sins of immorality can be separated into sins of thinking, sins of speaking, and sins of doing. The sins that we commit by wrong speaking or by wrong doing originate in our innermost self, our “heart” (Greek *kardia*) as the Bible calls it. Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12.34). He also said, “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” (Matthew 15.18-20). Often we think that only the deed is unacceptable to God, but Jesus says that the thoughts that produce the wrong deeds also are sinful. Accordingly, Paul tells the Philippians, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4.8).

A good illustration of a sin of improper thought comes from the teachings of Jesus about adultery. This is one of the “difficult” or “hard” sayings from the Lord, so it will be interpreted in a variety of ways by different scholars. We will examine the saying from a straightforward

reading of the verse without looking at the broader context. In Matthew, chapter 5, it is recorded that Jesus said:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust already has committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell” (verses 27-30).

“Adultery” (Greek *moicheia*) involves the breaking of the covenant union of marriage, and it usually occurs as a result of sexual immorality. But Jesus goes beyond any act, sexual or otherwise (such as the physical or psychological abuse of a spouse), and takes the matter of adultery to the level of the intent of the heart. He says that, even though you have heard that the act itself is sinful, the lust (or desire, from the Greek *epithumeo*)² within a man’s heart for a woman other than his wife also is to be understood as adultery. Note what he says, “everyone who looks . . . with lust already has committed adultery . . . in his heart.” This revision by Jesus concerning the Mosaic stipulations about adultery (compare Matthew 19.1-12) has strong and consequential ethical implications in a world, our world, that is filled with provocative images of a sexual nature on the internet, in movies, and on television. But the point here is that human sinfulness begins in our hearts, even before any wrong actions. And this seems to be the general meaning of several statements from our Lord in what is called his Sermon on the Mount.

There are other attitudes of our hearts that are sinful. John writes, “All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them” (1 John 3.15). “Hate” is from the Greek word *miseo* and means “have strong dislike for

²Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 142, defines *epithumeo* as “have strong desire for, desire, long for,” and in Matthew 5.28 means “inordinate desire, implying intent to acquire, lust for.”

some person or thing.”³ John’s striking statement indicates that those who have hatred in their hearts are the same as those who commit murder. This seems extreme, but he is reflecting the teaching of his Lord, the Lord of love. No wonder John is called the apostle of love. Haters are murderers not because they have literally and intentionally killed another person, but because in their hearts they have killed the one whom they hate. If you hate someone, you would just as soon see him or her dead. And murder often occurs as a result of hatred. If the thought had not existed first, then the deed probably would not have followed. Similarly, the deed of theft often is brought about by covetousness. “Covetousness” (Greek *pleonexia*) properly denotes “the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others.”⁴ This greed or avarice, which is “extreme greed for wealth or material gain,” is an unrighteous desire and can lead a person to steal from others. In the New Testament, *pleonexia* can indicate “the expression or exhibition of greed, greedy act, extortion.”⁵ So concerning “covetousness,” both desire and deed are related closely. This could be because the corrupt attitude of the heart of one who is covetous is so strong. The excessively greedy person cannot resist the temptation to take what belongs to another, and there are many examples of this in today’s world.

Two more sins that involve our innermost thoughts are jealousy and envy. Job 5.2 tells us, “Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy slays the simple.” Yes, it is true that “a tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion [i.e., envy] makes the bones rot” (Proverbs 14.30). “Envy” (Greek *phthonos*) and “jealousy” (Greek *zelos*) are similar. Like a cancer, envy or

³Ibid., 234.

⁴English word definitions are from Oxford Languages provided by the online Google English Dictionary.

⁵Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 286.

jealousy eats away at the life of one's soul, and envy has been the root cause of some of the foulest deeds in history (for example, Cain's killing of his brother Abel, the brothers of Joseph selling him into slavery, and the betraying of Jesus by Judas Iscariot). When one is discontented because of the excellence or good fortune of another, and this is what envy is, that person literally will devour himself or herself either in self-pity or malice ("the intention or desire to do evil; ill will").

There is a fable of an eagle who was jealous of another eagle that could fly faster than he could. One day he saw a sportsman and said to him, "I wish you would bring down that eagle." The sportsman replied that he would if he only had some feathers to put into his arrow. So the eagle pulled one out of his wing and gave it to the sportsman. The arrow was shot, but it didn't reach the rival eagle that was flying too high. The envious eagle kept pulling out more feathers until he lost so many that he could not fly. Then, the sportsman turned around and killed him.

You see, if you are jealous, the only person you hurt is yourself. Each of us should try our best to be confident and satisfied with what God has given to us—our material possessions, our physical bodies, our talents, skills, and proficiencies, and our circumstances in life.

To these sins of our hearts (i.e., our minds, our thoughts) such as lustful adultery, hatred, envy and jealousy, we can add the sins we commit by the words which come from our mouths. Jesus said, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12.36-37). Our Lord is telling us that we should think seriously about the language we use. James, the Lord's brother, compares the tongue to the small rudder of a much larger ship. "Or look at ships," he says, "though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits" (James 3.4-5). Just like a large

ocean liner is turned by a small helm that steers the rudder, our tongue, which is a small part of the body, is able to corrupt and defile the whole body if we use it improperly. James continues:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, or reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so” (James 3.5-10).

If we praise God in church on Sunday and curse others at work on Monday, then we stand under the judgment of James and of our Lord. “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree . . . yield olives, or a grapevine figs?” (James 3.11-12). This ought not to be so. But the tongue, according to James, cannot be tamed. This implies that it will take constant vigilance and practice to learn how to control our speech.

There are more sins of speech. Jesus talks about “swearing” (from the Greek *omnuo*)⁶ in Matthew 5.33-37. He says:

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Jesus calls his followers to be direct and plain, straightforward and honest in their speech (cf. James 5.12). I think Jesus instructs us to avoid oaths or vows (perhaps in the sense of not using circumlocutions) to help us avoid the ever-present temptation to say what is not true, that is, to deceive or lie. One of the strongest condemnations in the word of God is for “the false ones” or

⁶Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 250, says *omnuo* means to “take an oath affirming veracity of what one says, swear, [but] . . . not mere profanity.”

“liars” (Greek *pseudes*). Revelation 21.8 says, “As for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” The severity of the punishment for “liars” is to be noted along with their inclusion with the likes of murderers, the faithless, and idolaters. Could it be that lying is to be avoided at all costs, since the chief of deceivers is Satan himself (see John 8.44) and, contrarily, God is the source of all truth? Of course, those who slander others (see Romans 1.30) and those who gossip about others (see 1 Timothy 5.13) do not speak the truth. These sins of the tongue likewise are to be categorized as lying and make one liable to God’s judgment. As Christians we are to be bearers of good news rather than corrupt and calloused communication to others. Is there no good for us to tell about others?

The little girl coaxed her daddy to the front door to see what was there. Looking out the window, her father never had seen such a hideous looking creature. There it was—an old, skinny, mangy, sickly dog. When he expressed this opinion to his little daughter, she responded, “Yes, daddy, but he wags his tail.”

We can find the good in others, if we will look for the good in others. Yes, Paul says, speak the truth. But speak the truth “in love” (Ephesians 4.15).

Railing (“complaining and protesting strongly and persistently about someone or something”) and reviling (“criticizing in an abusive or insulting manner”) are two more sins of speech, and both of these sins involve harsh language that is unnecessary. While it is true that sometimes it is necessary to rebuke another person, we never should criticize in a way that is cruel and demeaning to that person. Sometimes family members rail and revile each other, and they fuss and fume bitterly, critically, with sarcasm. This should not be true of us as Christians. Colossians 4.6 says, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” And if our hearts are filled with the love of God, our words will be couched in kindness. Paul writes, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not

envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful” (1 Corinthians 13.4). So Paul encourages us and says:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 5.30-32).

Perhaps the largest number of sins of immorality, however, involve human actions.

Adultery, theft, and murder are common in today’s world. Marriage as God intended—one husband, one wife, for life—is no longer believed to be something honorable and sacred.

Robberies and homicides are daily occurrences in our country’s largest cities and now have become commonplace in rural areas as well. Unfortunately, the crime rate continues to grow.

Drunkenness, strife, factions, deceit—though seldom condemned by society—still remain as evils according to the word of God. According to Paul in Galatians 5.19-21 (quoted at the beginning of the lesson; cf. 1 Corinthians 6.9-11), these sins will prevent many from participation in the kingdom of God. No doubt, the expert agents of advertising, through their commercials, prey on human weakness and our carnal appetites. They portray products such as alcohol and nicotine and activities such as gambling and physical sex as extremely appealing. But these products and activities can be highly addictive and destructive of both body and spirit. Paul asks, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6.19). We would do well in these matters to avoid the temptation to sin.

James encourages us:

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, “God

opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you (James 4.4-10).

The encouragement from Peter is, “Prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1.13-16). And there is a good reason for this call to resist the devil, to humble ourselves, and to strive to be holy in our thoughts, in our speech, and in our actions. Paul gives the reason in 2 Corinthians 5.10, “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.”

Sins of Omission

In addition to sins of thought, word, and deed are sins of omission, that is, failing to do those good things that we have opportunity to do and that, in some cases, we must do. The principle is outlined for us in the book of James. “Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin” (4.17). In its context in the message of James, this statement is found to be in antithesis to boasting about “doing business and making money.” And it comes before strong condemnation of the rich who defraud the poor day laborers while they themselves live “in luxury and in pleasure” (see James 4.13-16, 5.1-6). The context in James indicates that the sin of failing to do the right thing is the sin of failing to care for or to help the defenseless, the needy, and the poor in their time of need (cf. James 1.27). A corollary to this is the failure to

treat others equally—both those who are well-to-do and those who are less fortunate—without partiality (see James 2.1 ff.).

This instruction from James corresponds to what Jesus taught in his discourse on the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25.31-46 (cf. Luke 16.19-31). Those who gave food to the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the strangers, gave clothes to the naked, took care of the sick, and visited those in prison were deemed to be righteous, inherited the kingdom that had been prepared for them “from the foundation of the world,” and went away “into eternal life.” But those who failed to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, who did not welcome the stranger, and who did not visit the sick or those in prison were deemed to be accursed and were forced to go away “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels . . . into eternal punishment.” Jesus, the king, gives the explanation for this complete and radical separation. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to [or, did not do it to] one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to [or, did not do it to] me.” This shows us that the religion of Jesus, that is, to follow him or be his disciple, is not just the cessation of wrong. It also involves the doing of what is good and right.

Who am I? I never was guilty of wrong action but on my account lives have been lost, trains have been wrecked, ships have gone down at sea, cities have burned, battles have been lost, and governments have failed.

I never struck a blow nor spoke an unkind word, but because of me homes have been broken up, friends have grown cold, the laughter of children has ceased, wives have shed bitter tears, brothers and sisters have been forgotten, and fathers and mothers have gone brokenhearted to their graves.

I have intended no evil, but because of me talent and genius have come to nothing, courtesy and kindness have failed, and the promise of success and happiness has yielded sorrow and disaster.

I have no color, no sound just silence, no cause for being myself, no progeny. You may not be able to call me by name, but surely you personally are acquainted with me. Who am I? I am Neglect.

To this passive attitude of neglect and omission, Paul says:

“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5.14-20).

We do well when we help others in their times of need, and we do well when we take time to cultivate and nurture our spirits (e.g., by prayer to God, by listening and meditating on the word of God, and by meeting with other believers and encouraging one another).

Sins of Offense Against Fellow Believers

A final category of sins can be called sins of offense against other believers. Every Christian has a responsibility to other Christians. Paul discusses this in 1 Corinthians 8. Here he writes about the eating of meats from the marketplace in Corinth that had been consecrated to pagan idols. And he says, “When you thus sin against members of your family [i.e., the church family], and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (verses 12-13). While it was not wrong, in and of itself, to eat meats that had been consecrated to idols, if Christians at Corinth did so and this caused those weak in faith to go against their conscience by likewise eating meats offered to idols, then they sinned by influencing their brothers and sisters to participate in that which they thought or believed to be wrong. While we do not have this problem today with respect to eating meats offered to idols, the principle perhaps applies in various ways. Yes, we must avoid those things which we know are wrong. And, we must consider the effect that our habits and practices, though they may be right, will have on others. Many times it is better to refrain from a practice, which may be okay, because of others who

believe such to be wrong and would sin against their conscience if they were to do the same. In other words, as followers of Christ we cannot say, “What I do is my own business.” As expressed by Paul in Romans, “Do not let your good be spoken of as evil” (14.16).

These are some of the sins mentioned in the Bible—sins of immorality, sins of omission, and sins of offense against fellow believers. We live in a world filled with sin. It always has been this way. Even though God created us and loves us, we as feeble and frail human beings turn our backs on him. But where sin has run amok in our fallen world, God’s grace in Jesus Christ has abounded all the more. Paul writes:

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 5.18-21).

This is good news! And the good news is that our sins can be forgiven through Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul, a Jew, was sent to the Gentiles (Greek *ethnoi*, literally, “the nations”) “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith” (Acts 26.18). At the beginning of his work here on earth, Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1.15). Then after the completion of his work here on earth, the Lord told his disciples, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24.46-48). It is true that “all the prophets testify about

him [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”

(Acts 10.43). Our God is willing to forgive us of our sins if we are willing to let him.

POSTSCRIPT

The following prayer is a confession of sin by believers that is used commonly in Christian liturgies when celebrating Holy Communion or The Lord’s Supper.

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.