

BACK TO BIBLE STUDY

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Objective: What is sin, and why should the believer avoid it?

Sin is against God

In Psalm 51:4 a repentant David says to God, “against You, You only, have I sinned and done evil in Your sight”. Although other people were adversely affected by David’s sin, the spiritual sin was not against them: it was against God.

David repeats this thought in 2 Samuel 12:13. Job asks God, “Have I sinned? What have I done to you, O watcher of men?” (Job 7:20).

Of course, in hurting others it is as if we sin against them. Paul points out that, in so doing, actually we “sin against Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:12), who is Lord and God.

This has important implications.

First of all, since Christ is the revelation of God against Whom sin is directed, sin should be viewed Christologically, that is, through the perspective of Jesus Christ. Sometimes sin is defined chronologically (in other words, because the Old Testament was written first, it has priority over the new in defining sin and other teachings). However, it is the viewpoint of Christ that matters to the Christian.

Secondly, since sin is against all that God is, we cannot expect God to be indifferent towards it or complacent about it. Because sin is so contrary to God’s love and goodness, it alienates our minds and hearts from God (Isaiah 59:2), who is the Source of our very existence. Without Christ’s offer of reconciliation (Colossians 1:19-21), we

would have no hope for anything but death (Romans 6:23). God wants human beings to experience loving fellowship and joy with Him and with one another. Sin destroys that loving fellowship and joy. That is why God hates sin and will destroy it. God’s reaction to sin is one of wrath (Ephesians 5:6). God’s wrath is His positive and resolute determination to destroy sin and its consequences. This is not because He is bitter and vindictive as humans can be, but because He loves humans so much that He will not stand by and see them destroy themselves and others by sin.

Thirdly, God alone can judge us on this matter, and only He can forgive sin because sin is uniquely against Him. “To the Lord God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him” (Daniel 9:9). “With Him is abundant redemption” (Psalm 130:7). Those who accept God’s merciful judgment and His forgiveness of their sins are not appointed “to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Thessalonians 5:9).

Reflection

Why is it important to understand that sin is against God?

If God alone can forgive sin, how does that affect your prayer life?

The responsibility for sin

Although it is common to place responsibility on Satan for the introduction of sin to humanity, humanity is responsible for its own sin. “...through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

Although Satan tempted, Adam and Eve made the choice – the responsibility was theirs. In Psalm 51:1-4 David refers to the fact that, because he was born a human being, he is predisposed to sin. He also acknowledges his own sins and iniquities.

We all suffer from the collective results of the sins of those who have gone before us to the degree that our world and environment have been shaped by them. However, that does not mean our sin is inherited from them, and that they are somehow to blame.

A discussion about placing blame for personal sin on the “sins of the fathers” took place at the time of the prophet Ezekiel. See Ezekiel 18, and note in particular the conclusion in verse 20: “the soul who sins shall die”. In other words, each individual is responsible for his or her own sins.

Because we have personal responsibility for our own sins and own spiritual state, repentance becomes individual. We have all sinned (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8), and Scripture urges each of us individually to repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38).

Paul goes to great length to point out that just as sin entered the world by one man, so salvation is available only through one man, Jesus Christ. “For if by one man’s offence many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many” (Romans 5:15 and see also verses 17 to 19).

The offence of sin is ours, but the grace of salvation is Christ’s.

Reflection

Being human, often we make excuses for our sins in order to divert responsibility away from us. What are the common excuses you make for your sins?

Studying words used to describe sin

A wide variety of Hebrew and Greek words is used to describe sin, and each term adds a complementary component to the definition of sin. A deeper study of these words is available through lexicons, commentaries and other Bible study aids. Most of the words used imply an attitude of the heart and mind.

From the most commonly used Hebrew terms come the ideas of sin as missing the mark or missing the goal (Genesis 20:9; Exodus 32:21; 2 Kings 17:21; Psalm 40:6; etc); of a break in relationship, hence rebellion (transgression/rebellion as in 1 Samuel 24:11; Isaiah 1:28; 42:25; etc); making something crooked, hence deliberate perversion of something from its intended use (wicked acts as in 2 Samuel 24:17; Daniel 9:5; Psalm 106:6; etc); of fault and therefore guilt (iniquities in Psalm 38:4; Isaiah 1:4; Jeremiah 1:22; etc); of erring or straying away from the main path or route (see err in Job 6:24; Isaiah 28:7; etc); and also of causing hurt to others (evil and mistreating in Deuteronomy 26:6; Proverbs 24:1,8; etc).

The Greek words used in the New Testament are terms to do with missing the mark (John 8:46; 1 Corinthians 15:56; Hebrews 3:13; James 1:15; 1 John 1:7; etc); with error or fault (trespasses in Matthew 11:25; Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13; etc); with breaking a boundary (transgressions in Romans 4:15; Hebrews 2:2; etc); with acting against God (ungodliness in Romans 1:18; Titus 2:12; Jude 15; etc); and with lawlessness (iniquity and transgression in Matthew 7:23; 24:12; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 John 3:4; etc).

The New Testament adds further dimensions. Sin is failure to take an opportunity to practice godly behaviour towards others (James 4:17). Also, “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

Reflection

Do any of the above ideas convict you of sin? What will you do about it?

How does living outside the framework of faith relate to sin?

Sin from the perspective of Jesus

A study of words helps us, but it does not alone point us to a complete understanding of sin. As mentioned earlier, we need to look at sin Christologically, that is, from the perspective of God the Son. Jesus is the true image of the very heart of the Father (Hebrews 1:3), and the Father tells us to “Hear Him!” (Matthew 17: 5).

In studies 3 and 4 it was explained that Jesus Christ is God made flesh, and that His words are the words of life. What He has to say not only reflects the mind of the Father, but also carries with it the moral and ethical authority of God

Sin is not just an act against God. It is more. Jesus explained that sin originates from sin-laden human hearts and minds. “For from within, out of the hearts of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mark 7:21-23).

We make a mistake in looking for a specific, definitive list of do's and don'ts. It is not the individual action so much as the attitude of mind that is behind it that God wants us to understand. Nevertheless the Mark passage above is one of many where Jesus or His apostles list or compare sinful practice and the expression of faith. Among others are Matthew 5 through 7; Matthew 25:31-46; I Corinthians 13:4-8; Galatians 5:19-26; Colossians 3; etc.

Jesus describes sin as addictive behaviour, noting that “whoever commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 10:34).

Sin crosses boundaries of godly behaviour toward other people. It is acting as if we are not answerable to any power higher than ourselves. For the Christian it is not letting Jesus love others through us, not honoring what James calls “pure and undefiled religion” (James 1:27) and “the royal law according to the Scripture” (2:8). Jesus explained that those who love Him will observe His sayings (John 14:15; Matthew 7:24), thus fulfilling the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

The theme of our inherent sinfulness is consistent throughout the Scriptures (see also Genesis 6:5, 8:21; Ecclesiastes 9:3; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 1:21; etc). Thus God says “cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:31).

It is by God sending forth His son into our hearts that we obtain a new heart and a new spirit whereby we profess that we belong to God (Galatians 4:6; Romans 7:6). Since we belong to God we should “no longer be slaves to sin” (Romans 6:6), “foolish, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another” (Titus 3:3).

The context of the first recorded sin in the book of Genesis can help inform us. Adam and Eve were in fellowship with the Father, and it was when they broke that fellowship by paying heed to another voice that sin occurred (Read Genesis 2).

The mark that sin misses is the prize of our calling upward to God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14) that we may be called the children of God (1 John 3:1) through adoption into the fellowship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. If we move out of that fellowship with the Godhead, we miss the mark.

Jesus dwells in our hearts that we may be “filled with the fullness of God” (See Ephesians 3:17-19), and breaking our fulfilling relationship with Him is sin.

When we commit sin we rebel against all that God is. It creates a rift in the holy relationship Jesus envisioned with us before the foundation of the world. It is a refusal to let the Holy Spirit work in us to do the Father’s will. Jesus came to call all sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32), that is, that they may turn back into a relationship with God and with His will for humankind.

Sin involves taking something wonderful that God in His holiness designed and perverting it for selfish desires against others. It is to stray out of God’s intended purpose for humankind of incorporating every one into his life.

Sin is also not placing our faith in Jesus as the guide and authority for our spiritual life. Sin, which is spiritual, is not defined by man’s logic or assumptions, but by God.

If we need one-liner definitions, we could say that sin is the state of living without fellowship with Christ.

Reflection

Why should Jesus be central to this discussion about sin?

Conclusion

Christians need to avoid sin because sin is a break in our relationship with God that takes us out of the harmony of fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

From the Statement of Beliefs of the Grace Communion International/ Worldwide Church of God UK:

Sin

<http://www.wcg.org/lit/aboutus/beliefs/default.htm#Sin>

"Sin is the state of alienation from God of all humanity and consists of anything that is contrary to God’s will, including acts of wrongdoing, neglect to do good and unbelief in the God of grace and love as made known in Jesus Christ. The Bible associates sin with the devil, whose work Jesus came to destroy. Sin results in damaged relationships, suffering and death. Because all humans are sinners, all humans need the good news that God loves them unconditionally and has forgiven their sins and reconciled them to himself through Jesus Christ."

(1 John 3:4; James 4:17; Romans 14:23; Romans 5:12, 17-19; 7:24-25; Mark 7:21-23; 1 John 3:8; Ephesians 2:2; Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 6:23; 3:23-24; Ephesians 2:12-13)

Christian Conduct

<http://www.wcg.org/lit/aboutus/beliefs/default.htm#Conduct>

"Christian conduct is characterized by trust in and loving allegiance to Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. Trust in Jesus Christ is expressed by belief in the gospel and by participation in Jesus Christ’s works of love. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ transforms the hearts of believers, producing in them love, joy, peace, faithfulness, meekness, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, righteousness, and truth."

(1 John 3:16, 23-24; 4:20-21; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Ephesians 2:10; Galatians 5:6, 22-23; Ephesians 5:9)

Next Study

***What are Baptism and the
Lord's Supper, and why are
they relevant to the believer?***