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What Is Sin? The Essence and Root of All Sinning

Plenary Session – 2015 Conference for Pastors

Where Sin Increased: The Rebellion of Man and the Abundance of Grace

- Message by [John Piper](#)
- Topic: [The Power & Effects of Sin](#)
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Why are we spending an entire pastors' conference talking about sin? Let me give you just one glimpse into why I suggested to the team last summer that we focus on sin. I was reading Stephen Westerholm's new book, [Justification Reconsidered](#); and I was deeply moved by chapters two and three where he focuses on the relationship between Paul's view of sin and the doctrine of justification.

Westerholm is dealing with the New Perspective on Paul, a movement among New Testament Scholars in the last fifty years that goes something like this: For the last five hundred years or more, the church — Protestants in particular — has misunderstood what the Judaism of the first century believed, and therefore have misunderstood the nature of Paul's controversy with the Jews of his day.

The New Perspective would say that the basic mistake of the church has been to think of first-century Judaism as religion which taught the meriting salvation by works of the law rather than receiving it by God's grace. Rather, the New Perspective argued, Judaism is a religion of grace. It has sacrificed atonement and forgiveness of sins flowing from God's grace.

And, the argument goes, if that's true, then Paul could not have been arguing against Jewish legalism when he said, for example,

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. ([Galatians 2:16](#))

The New Perspective says that Paul is not criticizing people who think you can earn your salvation by law-keeping, because, they say, that's not what first century Judaism believed.

I would just confuse you if I tried to give you all the details of the New Perspective *does* think Paul means.

You don't need understand the fine points of the New Perspective to see what struck me as so helpful and skyrocket of the doctrine of sin in my mental horizon. Here's all you need to see.

Even the most seminal thinker in the New Perspective, E. P. Sanders (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 1977) admits that though there was a serious doctrine of grace in Judaism (how could there not be rooted as it was in the Old Testament), nevertheless "grace and merit did not seem to them to be in contradiction to each other . . . Grace and works were not considered alternative roads to salvation" (*Justification Reconsidered*, 30).

But for Paul, reliance on God's grace as the way of right standing with God ruled out all reliance on works as the basis of that right standing

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.
4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ([Galatians 5:3-4](#))

One baby step of reliance on law-keeping undoes everything. If you rely on one single act of your own to be the basis of your right standing with God, you have fallen away from the God's gracious way of declaring you righteous.

In other words, the pioneer of what became the New Perspective (E.P. Sanders) shows that even though Judaism had a serious doctrine of grace, it did not give grace the same role and the same prominence that Paul did. It didn't see reliance on grace and reliance on some good works as alternatives the way the Paul did.

Why not? The answer is that **Paul had a much more radical view of the sinfulness of the human heart than the mainstream of the Judaism of his day. The reason Paul did not think that that any good works — not one — could be added to grace as the foundation for our acceptance with God is that no unregenerate, unjustified human being can do one single good work (see page 32) And even the good works of the justified are imperfect and therefore can't contribute anything to the basis of our right-standing with God.**

Sanders says, "the Rabbis did not have a doctrine of original sin or of the essential sinfulness of each man in the Christian sense" (33). So here's the crucial thing: **the reason Paul preached justification by grace alone, through faith alone, was not because the Jews who opposed him lacked a doctrine of grace, but because they lacked a doctrine of sin, that made the grace of God in Christ the *only* foundation of acceptance with God.**

I recall sitting in chair by the second story window in Knoxville last summer reading this devastating, glorious summary of chapter two in Westerholm's book:

[Paul's] depiction of humanity's condition required a much more rigorous dependence on divine grace than did Judaism's. . . . It is no caricature of Judaism to say, *with Sanders*, that it lacked a

doctrine of the “essential sinfulness” of humankind; no Jew would regard *that* claim as an insult. For Paul, on the other hand, it is precisely the “essential sinfulness” of humankind that requires a salvation based on grace alone, apart from [all] human “works.” (34)

I recall pausing, as I read, and asking myself, “Do I know my condition? Do I know what he means by my essential sinfulness. Do I have a grasp of what it is about me that requires the death of the God-man for me to be saved? Do I have any suitable notion of my own evil?” This is somehow proportionate to what it cost to save me?

That’s where this conference came from. And just to complete the illustration. Therefore, the old perspective on Paul, clarified and heralded in the Reformation, is not fundamentally mistaken. *Yes*, there is grace in Judaism — atonement, repentance, forgiveness — but *no* this did not rule out for them the mingling of good works with grace as the basis of a right standing with God. **One thing rules that out: we are so sinful, we can’t contribute any good works to the basis of God’s acceptance of us. There are no good works anywhere in unregenerate humanity, there never have been, ever since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. That’s how bad it is. I defend that statement shortly.**

And at that point last summer, I felt a weight both personally and doctrinally. Doctrinally, it became clear that, if I didn’t see the true nature and depth and power and extent of sin not only would I distort the doctrine of justification, but I would distort almost everything: what happened when Christ died for sin? What happens in conversion — new birth and faith and repentance? How do sanctification and perseverance in faith and holiness come about? What will heaven be like? Will I be safe from sinning there?

And personally, I felt: Do I know the nature of my own sin? Do I have a proper sense of the power and depth and evil of what I am dealing with in what Paul calls “indwelling sin” in believers? Do I have a kind of love to Christ and thankfulness for grace that corresponds to the horrors of what I was rescued from and to the price the most beautiful and innocent person paid for that rescue?

What Is the Deepest Root of Sin?

So what I want to do in this message is mainly answer the question biblically: What is sin? What is the essence and root of all sinning?

Let’s go for deepest root immediately. I want to find out if Westerholm is right: that we humans are so sinful that apart from the grace of God in Christ we cannot do any good works at all. It’s a pressing question, because you know that you call much of what unbelievers do “good” — build hospitals, keep the speed limit, negotiate peace, heal diseases, feed the poor, pay a fair wage, and on and on. And the Bible itself says that ordinary people without reference to their faith can do good works.

Rulers are not a terror to *good conduct*, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do *what is good*, and you will receive his approval. ([Romans 13:3](#))

So what did Westerholm mean when he said “human beings are incapable of doing [good works]” (32)? And why do I agree with him?

The most penetrating and extensive treatment of sin in the Bible is Romans 1–3. And even when the word isn’t used, we know that is what Paul is dealing with because when he comes to summarize it he says, “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are *under sin*” ([Romans 3:9](#)). And he leaves no doubt about his conclusion in the next verse: “None is righteous, no, not one” (verse 10) and in verse 12, “No one does good, not even one.”

So we back up then to Romans 1 in search of the essence of sin. By essence I mean: What’s at the bottom of it? What makes all sinful actions sinful? What is wrong with us at our core that gives rise to so many different kinds of evil?

You might say: Why do you even think that way? Why don’t you just assume that sin is what we *do*? Why do you go beneath the doing to a *root* or a *condition* or a so-called *depravity*?

The reason I go beneath our doings to a root of depravity is because Paul does. And he does so not incidentally but vigorously and forcefully. Paul sees that the essence or the root all sinning is a presence, a force, in us, part of who we are, called sin. For example, in Roman 7:8 he says, “Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”

Now everyone agrees that covetousness is a sin. “Thou shalt not covet” ([Exodus 20:17](#)). It’s a sin in the *heart*. A heart-sin that might produce outward sinning like stealing. But notice, Paul says, “Sin produced covetousness.” Well, covetousness *is* sin. Right. And so there is a sin beneath sin that produces sin. That’s what I want to see. I want to know at the root what is wrong with me. What is at the bottom of all my evils? And all the evils in the world?

Let’s go to Romans 1 and start with verse 18, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness (*adikian*) suppress the truth.” Here mankind in general is described as “ungodly and unrighteous.” John says in [1 John 5:17](#), “All unrighteousness (*adikia*) is sin.” So we are talking about sin here. And Paul chooses to talk about it first in terms of ungodliness and unrighteousness.

And the first thing he says about it is that it causes people to suppress the truth. Sin repels the light of truth and runs to the darkness of falsehood. Jesus said that we are guilty sinners not because we are victims of the darkness but because we are lovers of the darkness. [John 3:19](#), “Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light.” So sin by nature inclines and empowers us to suppress the truth.

What truth particularly does sin hate? The next verse tells us. [Romans 1:19](#). The reason we know that men suppress the truth is “Because what can be *known about God* is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” Knowledge of God is repulsive to sin. So, Paul says, when this knowledge is suppressed, we have no excuse. Why? Verses 20–21: “So they are without excuse. *For [because]* although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give thanks to him.”

So the root of suppressing the knowledge of God is the desire to avoid glorifying and thanking God. Sin does not love to glorify God. Sin does not love to thank God. Sin hates glorifying God and thanking God. That's what "ungodly" meant in verse 18. In "ungodliness and unrighteousness," he said, we suppress the truth — namely, the truth that God is infinitely worthy of glory and thanks from our hearts. Sin hates that and therefore suppresses that truth.

But sin is not just a hater. Sin is a lover. When the hated truth is suppressed, the loved lie is embraced. This is described over and over in the rest of chapter 1. Look at verse 22–23: "Claiming to be wise, they (that is, those who suppress the truth and have darkened hearts) have become fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images." They don't just bury truth; they embrace alternative lovers. There's no vacuum. When the real God is rejected, images are embraced. They "exchanged the glory of God for images." Sin hates the real God and loves his God-substituting images.

Is this the root of sinning? And if there ever was an age devoted to images, it is our age. We spend most of our leisure time looking at images. Watch how Paul describes now the relationship between this exchange, this suppressing of true God and this embracing of replacement gods—the relationship between that, and the outpouring of sinning in the world.

Verse 24: "*Therefore* [*because* of this exchange in verse 23] God gave them up in the lusts [desires] of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." Because of the exchange of verse 23, God goes hands off and godlessness and unrighteousness of the human heart goes unrestrained into sinning.

And lest we missed the connection between verses 23 and 24 (the root of suppressing God and the shoot of impurity of life), he states it again in the connection between verse 24 and 25.

Why did "the desires of their hearts run to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies" (verse 24)? Verse 25: "Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator." The impurities of active sinning have a root. And the root is this: Sin hates the truth of God, suppresses it, and exchanges it for what sin loves and worships. Sin loves to worship and serve the creature not the Creator. That's the root of sinning.

And just in case we missed it in the connection between verse 23 and 24 and in case we missed it in the connection between verse 24 and 25 Paul shows it again in the connection between verse 25 and 26. Verse 26: "For this reason" — for what reason? For the reason of verse 25, because we exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature — for *this* reason (now continue in verse 26), "God gave them up to dishonorable passions." The flood of dishonorable passions in the world, with all their behaviors, has root. And the root is that sin hates the truth about God and worships, serves, loves God-substitutes.

And, please forgive Paul, if you think he is overdoing it — I said he probes vigorously and forcefully down into the root of depravity beneath our sinning. But he does it here one more time — for a fourth time (not only the connection between verse 23 and 24, and 24 and 25, and 25 and 26) but now look at verse 28. "And since (or "just as") they did not see fit [or did not approve,

edokimasan] to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”

“They did not see fit to acknowledge God,” is, I think, a bland translation that would be more forcefully rendered, “They did not approve to have God in their knowledge.” The truth of God comes to them from every direction and they feel, “I don’t approve of you! I don’t want you. I don’t like you. I will not let you in as part of my knowledge.” And then comes the connection that we have seen four times now: So, “God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”

Notice two crucial terms: because they prefer lies to truth (verse 25) and images to God (verse 23), therefore God hands them over to “a debased mind.” Another good translation of debased would be depraved. So if you are ever wondering: Where does that idea of human depravity come from, here is one answer. Without redeeming grace through Jesus Christ, we are handed over to a mental depravity that does not want God.

And the second crucial term to notice in verse 28 is “to do what ought not to be done.” “God gave them up to a depraved mind *to do what ought not to be done.*” This depravity that does not want God *does things* that ought not to be done. In other words the root of sinful *action* is a sinful *nature*. And the bottom of the sinfulness of the sinful nature is: We don’t like the true and living God. We suppress truth that leads to him. We exchange his glory for images. We disapprove of having him in our knowledge. We have a deep, unshakeable, compelling preference for other things rather than God. That is the bottom.

So, when we get to the end of Paul’s analysis and indictment of our condition and he starts to turn to the great work of God to save us from our sin and from his wrath against our sin, we are not surprised that we would sum it up with these words in [Romans 3:23](#), “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The word for “fall short” is literally “lack” (*husterountai*). What does this mean?

Well, if you *come short* of something you *lack* it. You don’t have it. But you can lack, or come short of, or not have, something in more than one way. So here we come short of or lack the glory of God. Does that mean: Come short of being glorious with the glory of God? Or does it mean come short of having God’s glory as our supreme treasure — our highest perspective?

Now we know from [Romans 8:17](#) that if we have the glory of God as our supreme treasure, we will be glorified with the glory of God. But what is meant here? What’s the focus of [Romans 3:23](#)? And my answer is: He means that all have sinned, that is all have come short of embracing God as our supreme treasure. And the reason I think that’s what he means is because that is what he has said at least four times leading to this conclusion.

[Romans 1:18](#), we suppress the truth about God. [Romans 1:21](#), we don’t glorify him or thank him. [Romans 1:23](#), we exchange his glory for images. [Romans 1:25](#), we exchange the truth about God for a lie. We worship — we stand in awe of what God made, not God. [Romans 1:28](#), we disapprove of having the true God in our knowledge. We don’t want him. We prefer others things and other persons more than God. He is not our supreme treasure. We have come short of

this: knowing, cherishing, prizing, loving, treasuring God above all things. That is the essence of our sinful condition and that is the root of all sinful action. This is the bottom.

A Definition of Sin

So my definition of sinning is: *Sinning is any feeling or thought or speech or action that comes from a heart that does not treasure God over all other things. And the bottom of sin, the root of all sinning, is such a heart — a heart that prefers anything above God, a heart that does not treasure God over all other person and all other things.* Or, as I once tried to express it in a message years ago. What is sin? Sin is:

- The glory of God not honored.
- The holiness of God not revered.
- The greatness of God not admired.
- The power of God not praised.
- The truth of God not sought.
- The wisdom of God not esteemed.
- The beauty of God not treasured.
- The goodness of God not savored.
- The faithfulness of God not trusted.
- The promises of God not believed.
- The commandments of God not obeyed.
- The justice of God not respected.
- The wrath of God not feared.
- The grace of God not cherished.
- The presence of God not prized.
- The person of God not loved.

Why is it that people can become emotionally and morally indignant over poverty and exploitation and prejudice and abortion and the infractions of religious liberty and the manifold injustices of man against man, and yet feel little, or no, remorse or indignation or outrage that God is disregarded, disbelieved, disobeyed, dishonored, and thus belittled, by millions and millions of people in the world? And the answer is: sin. And that is the ultimate outrage of the universe.

Once Paul has made clear what the essence or root of sin is in Romans 1–3, he now makes clear in the following chapters the magnitude of its power in us. He speaks of sin *reigning like a king in death (5:21), holding dominion like a Lord (6:14), enslaving like a slavemaster (6:6, 16f, 20), to whom we have been sold (7:14), as a force that produces other sins (7:8), as a power that seizes the law and kills (7:11), as a hostile occupying tenant that dwells in us (7:17, 20), and a law that takes us captive (7:23). And this powerful presence in us, defines us until we are born again.*

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” ([John 3:6](#)). And Paul adds, “Nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” ([Romans 7:18](#)). What we are apart from new birth, new creation by the Spirit of God because Christ, is the embodiment of

resistance to God. [Romans 8:7](#), “The mind of flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.” Because it doesn’t want to. We disapprove of God as supreme treasure. We prefer other things.

So you may lay to rest forever the notion that your sin is mainly what you do or don’t do. It’s not mainly what you do. It is mainly who you are—until you are a new creature in Christ. And even then, for us who are born of God, it is an ever-present, indwelling enemy to be put to death every day by the Spirit ([Romans 8:13](#)).

Before Christ, sin is not an alien power. Sin is *our* preference for anything over God. Sin is *our* disapproval of God. Sin is *our* exchange of his glory for substitutes. Sin is *our* suppression of the truth of God. Sin is *our* heart’s hostility to God. It is who we are to the bottom of our hearts. Until Christ.

So can such sinners do good works — build hospitals, keep the speed limit, negotiate peace, heal diseases, feed the poor, pay a fair wage? And of course the answer from one angle is yes.

Rulers are not a terror to *good conduct*, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do *what is good*, and you will receive his approval. ([Romans 13:3](#))

So what did Westerholm mean when he said “human beings are incapable of doing [good works]” (p. 32)? Was he just wrong?

No. Because there is another angle from which to look. Another *biblical* angle.

The other angle starts in [Romans 3:10, 12](#), “None is righteous, no, not one; . . . no one does good, not even one.” From this angle, without Christ we cannot do good. The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this: “Without faith it is impossible to please God” ([Hebrews 11:6](#)). And Paul puts it like this: “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” ([Romans 14:23](#)).

In other words, the reason some deeds of unbelievers are called “good” in the New Testament is because in the ordinary use of language we sometimes describe deeds according to ordinary human standards. Committing adultery is bad. Not committing adultery is good.

But there is another angle. If not committing adultery comes from a heart that has no love for God and treasures many things more than God, then that act of chastity is not an expression of love to God. It’s not a way of expressing his value. And so it is a dishonor to God. He is neglected, ignored, not a decisive factor, and in that sense the fruit of that heart is not good. Westerholm put it like this: “Where God is not honored, something basic is awry, spoiling even what would otherwise be good” (48).

What this calls for is a radical God-centeredness in the way you think about everything. If God is not central and supreme. If his honor and glory are not uppermost in your affections, then God-ignoring kindness, God-ignoring, truth-telling, God-ignoring generosity will not be seen by you as evil. You won’t have a category for that. That only makes sense if God’s glory is the all-defining, all-pervasive good in the universe.

Paul had to undergo a massive reorientation of his mind when he was converted — a reorientation concerning God and sin and most everything else. He said in [Philippians 3:6-8](#) that before he was a Christ he was “blameless in the law.” That included many good deeds, and the avoidance of much evil. And after he became a Christian, he said, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. . . . and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ” ([Philippians 3:8](#)). In other words, unless all those good deeds come from faith in Christ, they are refuse and loss. That was his new orientation.

The reason Paul says that “whatever is not from faith is sin” ([Romans 14:23](#)) is that faith is a receiving of God in Christ as our Savior, and Lord, and supreme Treasure. Which means that actions which don’t come from faith, don’t come from treasuring God over all things. And that’s what sin *is* — not treasuring God above all things, preferring anything more than God.

Grace Becomes Sweeter

So there I am sitting in my chair in Knoxville, Tennessee last summer, realizing as never before the horrible and glorious truth that the reason my justification, my right standing with God, cannot be founded on 99.99% grace and .01% good works is that there are no truly good works in those who are not yet justified. They don’t exist, and have never existed since the fall. The question for the unbeliever is not, Can you do enough good works to outweigh your bad works? The question is, can you do one good work and contribute that as part of the basis of your acceptance with God? And the answer is no. “No one does good. Not even one” ([Romans 3:12](#)).

It was a weighty moment of realization. And justification by grace alone through faith alone on the basis of Christ alone, to the glory of God alone has never been more sweet. I pray that will be true for you.



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