

# What Is Sin?

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Judging from the feedback I've received lately, some of us don't know what sin is. The word comes from an old English archery term meaning "to miss the mark." Jesus gave us the mark in **Matt. 5:48** "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Anything short of that is missing the mark, and whether by thought, word, or deed, is sin. The main purpose of His three chapter Sermon on the Mount (**Matt. 5-7**) was to change our perception of sin. The Pharisees thought that if they obeyed the commandments they weren't sinning and therefore didn't need a Savior. To achieve their position of authority, they had to have lived such an exemplary life as to appear nearly perfect. This focus on perfection in their behavior made them arrogant, unsympathetic toward their weaker brethren. It had made them worse than useless in advancing the Kingdom. They were actually driving people away.

He began by saying that in judging our behavior, God would not overlook even the smallest detail of the Law. He said that even our thoughts would be held against us. Anger is as bad as murder, He said, lust is as bad as adultery, and so on. He said that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees we will certainly not enter the Kingdom. (**Matt. 5:20**) Later on He said that they were like whitewashed tombs which are beautiful on the outside but full of dead men's bones. He said in the same way they appeared to people as righteous but were full of hypocrisy. (**Matt. 23:27-28**) The Pharisees were compulsive about their behavior, applying the Law to the most minute things in their lives, even giving a tithe of the herbs and spices that grew in their gardens. (**Matt. 23:23**) And our righteousness needs to exceed theirs? In all of their behavior they had achieved perfection.

## Where Did That Come From?

Then where does sin originate if not in our behavior? In **Mark 7:20-23** Jesus said: "*What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.'* For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' "

Jeremiah said, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*" (**Jeremiah 17:9**) This is what he meant. Satan brings evil thoughts to the threshold of our minds. If we immediately take these thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ, there's no harm done. We've fended off an attack. (**2 Cor. 10:3-5**) But the moment we give them any consideration at all, we've sinned. Anger, jealousy, envy, lust, resentment, frustration, self-pity are some of the more obvious ones, but then there's admiration, pride, self-satisfaction, self-righteousness and a long list of others that give glory to someone or something other than God. Our hearts being incurably wicked we do two things that make us sinners. First, we harbor these thoughts, and second we think that because we don't act on them we haven't sinned. But whether acted upon or not, these and

many more are all sins punishable by death. No one sees them, and they're so natural to us that often we ourselves are barely aware of them. To all outward appearances we appear to be fine, upstanding examples of Christian goodness, but inside we're rotten to the core.

Pastor Chuck Smith, the founder of Calvary Chapel, once said, "We aren't sinners because we sin, we sin because we're sinners." It's our nature. Those who claim to have stopped sinning simply don't understand this. The best we can say about ourselves is that because of our conversion we're perhaps a little more aware of our sins, but the research has shown that by and large most of us live lives that aren't any freer of sin than our unbelieving neighbors. Like them, we're after bigger and better stuff for ourselves while ignoring the needs of people around us. Like them we're jealous of the success of others while crediting ourselves with our own success. Like them we get angry about little things. Like them, we wish our lives were different. Like them, we have a secular world view.

But what has been most instructive to me lately is the way so many people actually think they're no longer sinners, just because they're saved. I guess the old saying is true. We all want grace for ourselves while demanding justice for everyone else. We want to be judged by our intentions but we want others judged by their actions.

As the Bible clearly shows, there is no hierarchy of sin. All sin brings death. We don't think there's anything wrong with being angry or envying the possessions of our neighbors or entertaining a lustful thought now and then, but we demand others stop their sinning or else be condemned. Please don't misunderstand me. There's nothing wrong with being uncomfortable around sinful behavior. There's nothing wrong with deciding to withdraw from it. And there's nothing wrong with demanding that the leaders of our churches adhere to Biblical principles about sin. But when we start saying that certain forms of sin disqualify a person for salvation, then we've put ourselves in God's place and risk having the same measure we use in judging others, be used with us.

*"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Matt. 7:1-2)*

*"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:37)*

According to Biblical standards we all willingly, consciously and deliberately sin. The fact that some sins are more obvious to us than others is irrelevant. It's what's in our hearts that counts, and God sees them all. We forget that Jesus said every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. (**Matt. 12:31**) Every sin. And not just once. Enough to last a life time.

## Repent And Be Saved

Having talked about sin, we should also take a look at repentance. The Greek word translated repent is metanoeo. Meta means after and noeo means to understand. To repent literally means to understand afterward. As it's used in the New Testament it means to change one's mind. The phrase "Repent and be saved" means change your mind about your behavior and realize that you're a sinner in need of a savior. It was first used with Jews who

thought that keeping the Law would save them. When John the Baptist (**Matt. 3:2**), Jesus (**Matt. 4:17**), and Peter (**Acts 2:38**) told the people to repent, they were telling them to change their minds about believing that their own works could save them. Only people who know their behavior is sinful will realize their need for a Savior. Once it becomes clear to us that we're sinners and can't save ourselves, we're ready to ask for salvation. We've repented.

But nowhere in the Bible is anyone required to change their behavior before they can ask for salvation. The old hymn "Just as I Am" makes that clear. To say that the word repent implies that behavioral change is a condition of salvation is an incorrect understanding of the word. The notion that Christians stop sinning once we're saved is similarly incorrect. The fact that God chooses to see us as a new creation is a function of His ability to look ahead to what we'll be in the resurrection. It's not due to our suddenly exemplary behavior.

There was a time in ancient history when people looked forward to cloudy days, because they thought the Lord wouldn't be able to look down and catch them sinning. It was like a free day. Today we understand how absurd that was. When a person is caught in adultery, or theft, or homosexuality it's obvious to everyone that he or she has been sinning. But the person who secretly envies his neighbor's possessions, is jealous, harbors resentment, or is self righteous, is every bit as much a sinner. The only difference is that nobody knows. Nobody on Earth, that is.

And then there's the sin we're not even aware of. This is what caused David to write, "*Who can discern His errors? Lord, forgive my hidden faults.*" (**Psalms 19:12**) We can't even figure out our own motives and yet are often quick to judge the motives of others. We say they could stop their sinning whenever they want to, and are only doing it by choice, while we remain in our secret sins having convinced ourselves that we're not sinning, and seeing no need to stop.

Do we think that condemning others and questioning their salvation, as so many in the Church do, is helping them? With the woman caught in adultery, Jesus saved her life by exposing the secret sins of her accusers. Once they understood that He knew the hidden flaws in their behavior, they no longer had the stomach for condemning her. This was a demonstration of his admonition in **Matt. 7:1-2**

to avoid judging others unless we want to be judged in like manner. He said He would use the same measure on us that we use on others. When He said, "*Let him who is without sin cast the first stone*" (**John 8:7**), He was saying in effect, "If you want to start killing people for their sins, are you willing to face the same judgment for yours?" He can expose our hypocrisy just as easily, you know. If we want other believers kicked out of the rapture for their sins, are we willing to be kicked out for ours? We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It's true, Jesus said. "Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of Heaven." But He can do that. He's Jesus. We're not.

After they fled, Jesus asked "*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*" she said, "*No one, sir. Then neither do I condemn you,*" Jesus declared. "*Go now and leave your life of sin.*" (**John 8:10-11**) My guess is that she stopped committing adultery. Of course she also would have stopped if her accusers had killed her, but would she have been delivered from her sin?

The Pharisees were upset with Jesus because they considered Him “soft” on sin. After all, He palled around with “sinners”, had dinner in their homes, and said He came to save them, not to condemn them. I've noticed that the closer people came to Jesus, the more they became aware of their sins. They were often on their knees, weeping, pleading for mercy. The Pharisees stood in the back, scowling, arms folded across their chests, silently condemning. I think Paul was writing about such people when he said they *show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance.* (**Romans 2:4**)

Jesus said that prostitutes and tax collectors would enter the Kingdom before the Pharisees did. Why? Because they knew they were sinners in need of a savior. They had repented, whereas the Pharisees had not. (**Matt. 21:32**)

I think you get the point of this, which is to remind us that we're all sinners who deserve only judgment. There's not a single one of us who has earned the right to go in the Rapture. We should be so thrilled to know He's going to take us anyway that we search high and low trying to find a way to say thanks, instead of looking around for people we want to have excluded. And those of you who think that you only sin occasionally, if at all, and others are just weak, it's time you repent. Admit you're a sinner and ask the Lord to forgive you. He will immediately agree, and perhaps for the first time you'll experience the full measure of God's Grace, because he who has been forgiven much, loves much.