

QUESTION 1

What Is Sin?

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

—Romans 3:10–12

Paul’s message is loud and clear: Every single person is a sinner, guilty before a holy God. No one is righteous, no, not even one. All of us like sheep have gone astray. We have all turned to our own way (Isa. 53:6). There can be no doubt about it: Sin is real, and each and every one of us is a rebel against God. That raises the most basic of questions, however: What is sin?

What Is Sin?

Sin Is a Failure to Obey God’s Moral Law

Man as lawbreaker captures the essence of sin. Sin “may be defined as lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in act, disposition, or state.”¹ Man’s disobedience of God’s moral law is a theme that runs from Genesis to Revelation. Beginning in Genesis, God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil lest they die (Gen. 2:17). However, Adam and Eve chose to listen to the serpent rather than God, violating his covenant stipulation. As a result, Adam and Eve lost their original righteousness and moral innocence when they broke God’s command. Suddenly they were guilty before God for their disobedience and they were morally corrupt. As we will learn in Questions 2 and 3, Adam’s guilt and corruption would not be limited to himself but would be inherited by his progeny as well, since he acted as their representative (i.e., original sin). But here our focus is restricted to the act of sin (i.e., actual sin) so that we can identify its essential nature or character.

1. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 233.

Satan's deceptive and murderous ways (John 8:44), unfortunately, would not stop with Adam but can be seen once again with Adam's first child, Cain. Cain and his brother Abel both made an offering to the Lord, but while Abel's offering pleased the Lord, Cain's did not (Heb. 11:4). Anger and jealousy consumed Cain, though the Lord warned him that if he did what was right he would be accepted. Yet, sin was crouching at Cain's door and its desire was for him. Cain, God warned, must rule over it (Gen. 4:7). Like his father Adam, rather than obeying God and submitting to his moral instruction, Cain in his anger killed his brother Abel, so that his blood cried out to the Lord (4:8–10). As you can see, the first chapters of Genesis vividly (and painfully) demonstrate that sin is a violation of God's moral commands.

Sin would characterize all of Adam's children thereafter as well. In Genesis 6 we read that the earth was corrupt in God's sight and filled with violence (6:11–12). The intentions of man's heart were evil from youth (8:21), so God sent a flood to destroy the whole earth, with the exception of Noah and his family, whom God graciously spared. The corruption of man did not disappear after the flood, however. God's just wrath was once again unleashed when he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with sulfur and fire from heaven (19:23–29), for their sin was "very grave" (18:20).

The history of Israel is tainted by lawbreaking as well. One would think that God delivering his chosen people from an oppressive dictator like Pharaoh would result in steadfast obedience. And yet, even while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from God himself, Israel had already rejected Yahweh as her God and instead crafted a golden calf to worship (Exod. 32). Israel defiled herself, turning against the commands of Yahweh, and exchanged the one true God for an idol made by the hands of men. Consequently, God's righteous wrath, which burned hot that day, came down against his people, demonstrating his holiness and intolerance for sin.

Sin pervades the rest of the story line of Scripture as well. The history of Israel is one of perpetual disobedience. As God's covenant people, under God's covenant law, they were commanded to love the Lord their God with all their heart (Deut. 6:5). This is the greatest commandment they received. Yet, throughout the Old Testament Israel repeatedly failed to uphold this commandment. The book of Judges summarizes the OT: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6b).

No act reflects the sinfulness of man more than the crucifixion of Christ himself. The sinfulness Paul speaks of in Romans 3 is put on full display when Jesus, the Son of God, was nailed to the cross by wicked men (Acts 2:23). It is tempting to think that if we were there we would have acted differently. Yet, many of those who put Jesus on the cross were the *religious* leaders in Israel. Though they looked clean on the outside, on the inside they were "full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matt. 23:25–26). Many of the religious leaders were hypocrites, full of lawlessness, like whitewashed tombs, "which

outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27–28). They transgressed the commandments of God for the sake of their traditions (Matt. 15:2–3).²

The words of Jesus in Matthew 23 are important, for they demonstrate that sin, or lawlessness, is not merely a disobedient *act* but is a corruption of the *heart*. In other words, external behavior is the outflow of one's internal disposition.³ This much was evident in Cain's murder of Abel. While Cain's murder was a sin, his actions stemmed from the anger within his heart (Gen. 4:7). Jesus makes such a point in his Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matt. 5:22). The Heidelberg Catechism reiterates the words of Jesus precisely: "By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness. In God's sight all such are murder" (A. 106). Therefore, sin is not only a violation of God's moral law in one's external behavior, but it is first and foremost a violation of God's moral law in one's *internal* attitude and desires.⁴

The internal nature of sin is a reminder that sin not only is rooted in one's internal motivations and desires—whereby the sinner fails to conform to what God has commanded—but sin is first and foremost due to our *corrupt moral nature* (see Questions 2 and 3). Our nature (that which is our very essence) does not escape the grip of sin. In short, we are sinners *by nature*. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:3, we "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Or as David acknowledges, we were "brought forth in iniquity" and we were conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). In the end, when we rebelliously break God's moral law (Rom. 1:18–23; 2:23; 1 John 3:4), such an action is ultimately rooted in who we are as children of Adam in a post-Fall world. Most fundamentally, this means that sin does not first and foremost have to do with the bad things we do, but with our inherent condition as those in solidarity with Adam. Our sinful *actions* stem from our sinful *condition*.⁵ Our wicked decisions reflect our polluted identity.

2. "Transgression" is another word that appropriately conveys the meaning of lawbreaking (see Num. 14:41–42; Deut. 17:2; 26:13; Jer. 34:18; Dan. 9:11; Hos. 6:7; 8:1; Rom. 2:23–27; Gal. 3:19; 1 Tim. 2:14; Heb. 2:2; 9:15).

3. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 13.

4. For an extensive treatment of this point, see John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

5. "The basic assumption is that we become bad people by doing bad things and we can correct this by doing good things instead. By contrast, Scripture locates sin deep within the fallen heart and treats it first of all as an all-encompassing *condition* that yields specific actions" (Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 151).

Sin Is a Failure to Live in Covenant with God

This second point is a helpful qualification to the first point for this reason: Sin is not an impersonal violation of law but most fundamentally a violation against God himself. Remember, it is *God's* law that has been transgressed. Given that God is our covenant Lord, we can describe sin as covenant unfaithfulness. Ultimately, sin is not just a rupture in our covenantal relations with others but is most importantly a rupture in our covenantal relation with God (Ps. 51:4). Sin's offense is first vertical, then horizontal.

In the Old Testament God entered into a covenant relationship with his chosen people. As seen already, however, Israel's entire history was one of covenant infidelity. Though God's covenant was made with Abraham and confirmed with the patriarchs (Gen. 15:1–21; 17:1–14; 22:15–18; 26:24; 28:13–15; 35:9–12), and while God later covenanted with Israel through Moses (Exod. 6:2–8) and then Joshua (Josh. 24:1–27), nevertheless, Israel failed to keep the covenant God made with her at Sinai, despite the fact that God even sent prophets to warn them of the punishment that would result. Unquestionably, Israel's covenantal treachery was characterized by her habitual attitude of ingratitude toward God, her Savior and Redeemer.⁶

But God, in his great mercy and grace, spoke through his prophets of a day to come when he would establish a *new* covenant (Heb. 1:1–4). In this new covenant God would put his law within and write it on the heart. "I will be their God, and they shall be my people," he promised through Jeremiah (Jer. 31:33). In the new covenant all would know the Lord, for he promised to forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more (31:34). Furthermore, God would give his people a new heart and a new spirit. He even promised to put *his* Spirit within, causing his people to walk in his statutes (Ezek. 36:26–27). Of course, this new covenant was accomplished through the blood of Jesus Christ, the great high priest (Heb. 8–10), and applied by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–41; cf. Joel 2:28–32). New covenant believers, therefore, have been cleansed of all their uncleanness and idolatry (Ezek. 36:25). What great news: While man failed to live in covenant with God, God himself established a new covenant so that his redeemed people now live in communion with their Creator and Savior.

Sin Is Unbelief

So far we have looked at sin as the breaking of God's law and as covenant unfaithfulness, which really are the essence of sin. But describing sin *as unbelief* takes us deeper still into the inner chambers of the heart where we see the root reason and cause of man's transgressions. At the center of Adam and Eve's first sin is unbelief, a failure to trust in God.

6. David Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 317.

In Scripture unbelief is a central motif when describing sin. Those who receive eternal life are those who believe in Christ (John 3:16), while those who are condemned are those who do not believe in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:18). According to Jesus, those who do not believe are spiritually blind (John 9:39–41). The sinner who rejects Christ and his words will be condemned by those same words on the last day (John 12:48). Additionally, when Jesus describes the Helper, the Spirit, Jesus states that he will “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me” (John 16:6–9). In each of these passages, unbelief is sin, a sin that will bring judgment. And what sin could be greater than unbelief in God's own Son (John 10:25–38; 12:37–39; Matt. 12:22–32)?

Sin Is Idolatry

Sin as unbelief is a natural segue into sin as idolatry.⁷ Those who do not believe in the one true God have instead turned to idols, idols of their own making. As we have already seen, certainly this was the case with Israel.⁸ Indeed, the first commandment makes clear Yahweh's stance on idolatry: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). Nevertheless, from Sinai to Israel's exile, God's people chose to worship the idols of neighboring nations (Exod. 32:1–35; Num 25:1–5), despite the attempt of some to lead Israel in worshiping Yahweh alone (2 Chron. 15:8–18; 2 Kings 18:1–4; 23:4). In fact, idolatry was one of the major reasons God gave Israel over to her enemies resulting in her exile.⁹

Idolatry, however, is not limited to those who have special revelation (like Israel did). Those who only have general revelation commit idolatry as well. As Paul explains, though what can be known about God is “plain to them” (Rom. 1:19–20), they did not “honor him as God or give him thanks” but “exchanged his glory” for images of mortal man and animals (Rom. 1:22–23). They “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen” (Rom. 1:25). Idolatry is the height of *selfishness* because rather than loving, serving, obeying, worshipping, and giving one's Creator the honor that is reserved for him alone, one has elevated another, perhaps even oneself, instead. As R. Stanton Norman explains, “If love of God is the essence of all virtue, then the antithesis is the choice of self as the supreme end.”¹⁰

7. Idolatry is when someone worships or exalts an object, person, and especially themselves in the place of God. Idolatry is trusting in a false god. In short, idolatry is worship of the creature (or created) instead of the Creator (see Gen. 11:4–9; Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7; Ps. 115:4–8; Isa. 40:18–20; Jer. 10:1–5; Mark 12:30; Rom. 1:22–25).

8. For an extensive study of idolatry, see G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

9. Smith, *With Willful Intent*, 317.

10. R. Stanton Norman, “Human Sinfulness,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 348.

The temptation for us today, in the twenty-first century, is to look back on the biblical time period and laugh: “How ridiculous to bow down and worship something you made with your own hands.” There are two problems with such an attitude. (1) Millions of people all around the world today still practice such a form of idolatry (e.g., Eastern religions). In other words, the hands-on, very material/physical idolatry we see in biblical times is very much alive today. Therefore, it should not be dismissed or taken lightly. (2) Such an attitude overlooks the definition of idolatry—namely, the elevation and worship of *anything*, material or non-material, above God and instead of God. While some may choose to bow down to a god they have made out of wood or stone, for others their idolatry is far more sophisticated, worshipping sex, drugs, money, fame, politics, ideologies, etc. In short, no unbeliever escapes idolatry. There is something or someone he is placing on the throne of his or her life other than God himself. There is something or someone he loves *more* than God. Naturally, then, idolatry is the very opposite of the greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37–38; cf. Mark 12:30).

Sin as Pride

If idolatry reveals the selfishness of sin, pride will be exposed as well. Pride and selfishness go hand in hand, and both are present at the very start of mankind’s history.¹¹ Many of the early church fathers, medieval theologians, and Reformers made such a point. For example, Augustine, in his commentary on Psalm 19:15, saw pride behind the first sin in the garden. John Calvin comments on Augustine’s point, saying, “Hence it is not hard to deduce by what means Adam provoked God’s wrath upon himself. Indeed, Augustine speaks rightly when he declares that pride was the beginning of all evils. For if ambition had not raised man higher than was meet and right, he could have remained in his original state.”¹² If pride is an exalted view of oneself or a trust in one’s own understanding (rather than God’s wisdom), then it is not hard to see why pride is sin.¹³

In Scripture, pride lurks behind the sinful actions of both individuals and nations at every turn. When God pronounces his judgment on Edom, it is because of her pride that he sends invaders to destroy her (Jer. 49:16). Pride deceives the human heart, making it think it is safe when in reality the judgment of God is at hand. Consider Daniel 4:28, where Nebuchadnezzar boasts,

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11. We can even go further and say pride, selfishness, idolatry, and rebellion all go hand in hand. See Norman, “Human Sinfulness,” 351–53.
 12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC, vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.1.4.
 13. Gerald B. Stanton, “Pride,” *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 419; Donald K. McKim, “Pride,” *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 220.

claiming credit for the “great Babylon” which he built by his “mighty power” and for the glory of his majesty. What was God’s response? God brought him to his knees, to crawl on all fours, to eat grass like an ox. When God restored him, Nebuchadnezzar gave glory and honor to God alone (4:34–37) and acknowledged that those who “walk in pride he [God] is able to humble” (4:37; cf. Ps. 73:6). Nebuchadnezzar experienced firsthand the wisdom of the proverb: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18; cf. 28:5; Jer. 50:32).

Truly pride, as Proverbs 16:5 states, “is an abomination to the Lord” and will not go “unpunished” (cf. 6:17). It is no surprise that pride is considered the mother of other forms of sinfulness, including discontent, ingratitude, presumption, sensuality, perversion, treachery, extravagance, bigotry, hopelessness, indifference (apathy), and much more.¹⁴ This is not to say that pride is the essence of sin, but nonetheless pride is encompassing and acts in many ways as a parent to other types of sinfulness.

The Viciousness of Sin

No matter how hard we try to escape it, the reality is that sin is destructive, vicious, dangerous, and deadly. Why? Not merely because sin threatens our very existence, both physically and spiritually, but first and foremost because sin ruins our relationship with God, our Creator. If our chief end in life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, then sin dismantles such a purpose. We fail to give glory to God and instead, as Calvin said, become idol factories.¹⁵ Our delight, treasure, and satisfaction in life is no longer in our Maker but in the things he has made. In short, the sinner is one who has “displaced God as the primary Object of his affection.”¹⁶ And we have done this, Paul states, by exchanging the “glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man” (Rom. 1:23). As a result, the one relationship we were made to live for has been destroyed. As seen with Adam and Eve, so also is it true with each and every one of us: Sin results in alienation. We live east of Eden.

Is this not a sobering reminder that sin’s grip is just as tight as ever? In every way we transgress God’s law, disbelieve his commands and promises, reject his covenant love, whore after false gods, and revel in our pride and self-righteousness. Sin is all around us. But worse, sin is everywhere within us. It defines us, our thoughts, our actions, and even our inclinations. There is no aspect of us that escapes sin. Paul’s words are our words: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24–25).

14. Smith, *With Willful Intent*, 155–334; Norman, “Human Sinfulness,” 339–51.

15. Man’s “nature is a perpetual factory of idols” (Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.8).

16. Smith, *With Willful Intent*, 316.

Summary

Most fundamentally, sin is a failure to obey God's moral law. Sin, however, is not only a breach of God's moral law by one's external actions, but is rooted in one's internal attitude, motives, disposition, and ultimately is due to one's sinful nature inherited from Adam. Sin can also be defined as covenant unfaithfulness, unbelief, idolatry, and pride, among other things.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways have you failed to uphold God's moral law?
2. What does Scripture say are the consequences of rebelling against God's commands?
3. What is idolatry and why is it so offensive to the God who not only created all things but deserves our exclusive worship?
4. How does pride act as a mother that gives birth to other sins?
5. Do you think non-Christians understand what a personal offense it is to live for themselves rather than God's glory (review Romans 1–2)?