

## CHAPTER TWO

# DOES ANYONE BELIEVE IN SIN?

ROBIN BOISVERT

One Saturday afternoon some years ago I was hard at work cleaning out the garage. My oldest son, then about four, was on hand to help...so to speak. I watched him as he eyed various dangerous items.

“What’s this, Dad?”

“That’s Daddy’s wood chisel. Don’t touch it.”

“What’s this, Dad?”

“That’s the gasoline can. Stay away from it, please.

Hey! Don’t pick up that saw, son.”

Things went on like that for a while until, finally exasperated, my son blurted out, “Daddy! Everything you tell me not to do is just what I *want* to do!”

*Probably just what Adam said*, I thought to myself. I could now rest secure in the knowledge that my son was an authentic member of the human race. And so it is with all of us.

### What’s the Problem?

Take an informal poll of neighbors, friends, and co-workers and ask them what they consider to be mankind’s most basic problem. The answer would likely be ignorance or a lack of education. “If people were just better - educated, if they could see the bigger picture, then there wouldn’t be all the difficulties,” they might tell you. “More sex education would prevent AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. More education could eliminate racism and the misunderstandings that separate people. Better education would enable the poor to get better jobs and avoid drugs and crime.”

Thomas Greer, in a recent Western Civilization textbook, states that during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period, science and education were considered by

**Meditate on Romans**

**1:22.** What is God's one-word assessment of man's "enlightened" ideas?

important thinkers to be the answers to the human dilemma. Says Greer, "The world would never be quite the same again; the belief in science and education became a feature of the modern world. In the United States, founded at the peak of the Enlightenment, *that belief has remained an article of national faith though it is being questioned today more than ever*" (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> While it's certainly true that ignorance claims its share of victims, there is a problem yet more basic.

One of those questioning that "article of national faith" was the eminent psychiatrist Karl Menninger. In the early 1970s he wrote a small book with the provocative title, "Whatever Became of Sin?" In it he observed that the word "sin" and the concept it represented began to disappear from our culture around the middle of the twentieth century.

In all of the laments and reproaches made by our seers and prophets, one misses any mention of 'sin,' a word which used to be a veritable watchword of prophets. It was a word once in everyone's mind, but now rarely if ever heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles—sin with an 'I' in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty perhaps of a sin that could be repented or repaired or atoned for? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick or criminal— or asleep? Wrong things are being done, we know; tares are being sown in the wheat field at night. But is no one responsible; is no one answerable for these acts? Anxiety and depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sins?...The very word 'sin,' which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being's life plan and life style. But the word went away. It has almost disappeared—the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Menninger should be applauded for going much further than others in his field. And he is surely correct in his observations as far as they go. A moral model of understanding human responsibilities and problems has been all but replaced by a medical model, so that individuals who commit heinous crimes are rarely referred to as

““ The best preparation for the study of [justification] is neither great intellectual ability nor much scholastic learning but a conscience impressed with a sense of our actual condition as sinners in the sight of God.<sup>3</sup>

— James Buchanan ””

“wicked” or “evil” or “sinful,” but as “sick” or “mentally ill” or “insane.” A closer examination of Dr.

Menninger’s book, however, shows that despite his appeal for society to reconsider sin as a means for understanding human nature, he himself has a grossly inadequate grasp of the issue. He views

sin on an entirely horizontal level, the sin of one person against another or perhaps against oneself. To fully comprehend the nature of sin, though, we must recognize its vertical dimension: sin is primarily an *offense toward God*.

Psalms 51 provides us with a vivid example of this truth. In this psalm David pours out his heart to God in repentance. He had been outwardly rebuked by the prophet Nathan and inwardly convicted by the Spirit for his adultery with Bathsheba and for arranging the death of her husband as a cover-up. Yet in spite of what he had done, David cries to God, “Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:4). David was not denying his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, but he was acknowledging the ugliest characteristic of any sin, regardless of its type: it is against God.

Sin—what an *unpleasant* subject! And a difficult one, besides. But it is absolutely essential that we consider this matter, because if our perception of sin is incorrect, so will be our knowledge of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the law of God, the gospel, and the way of salvation. An accurate understanding of sin is the bottom button on the shirt of Christian theology. If it’s out of place, the whole garment will be hopelessly askew.

## The Seriousness of Sin

Minimizing sin is as common as sin itself. It’s not unusual to hear people refer to their own sin as a “weakness” or “shortcoming.” “Nobody’s perfect,” they say. They may even be courageous enough to admit, “I made an error in judgment.” But sin is no minor issue. If there is no sin, then there is no salvation. If we are not great sinners, then Christ is no great Savior.

The fact that we’re all affected by sin puts us at a disad-

### For Further Study:

What three things does an inaccurate view of sin reveal about us? (See 1 John 1:8-10)

“ Sin is the dare of God’s justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power and the contempt of his love.<sup>4</sup>

— John Bunyan

vantage in our attempt to understand it. On our own, we simply cannot come to clear views on the matter. Thankfully, God has provided us with his infallible Word on the subject. The beginning chapters of

Genesis spell out humanity’s sinful dilemma, and the remainder of Scripture can be read as God’s solution to the problem.

Within the space of five short verses the Bible describes us as helpless, ungodly, sinners, and enemies of God (Ro 5:6-10). God’s Word tells us that sin is universal. Sin is deceitful. Sin is also tenacious and powerful. Sin is so overwhelming that only one force in the universe can overcome it. Only one force, resident in one Person, can overcome it because only one Person has ever been without it. As the angel told Mary, “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21).

Complementing the teaching of Scripture are the testimonies of godly men and women throughout the Church’s history who have been aware of their sinfulness in direct proportion to their nearness to God. Just listen to how these great saints of the Bible evaluated themselves:

David: “I have sinned against the Lord” (2Sa 12:13).

Isaiah: “I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5).

Peter: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Lk 5:8)

Paul: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1Ti 1:15).

Sin is the transgression of the law (1Jn 3:4). God gave the law and stands behind it. When we break God’s laws, he takes it personally. If we could see God standing behind every situation where his law is broken and feel his righteous anger, we would better comprehend the seriousness of sin.

prehend the seriousness of sin.

The Israelite priest Eli reprovved his foolish and immoral sons with these words: “If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?” (1Sa 2:25). Unfortunately, his words were too little and too late to turn his sons around. They were not sufficiently aware of the seriousness of sin.

### **Meditate on John**

**1:29.** What’s the significance of the title John the Baptist gives Jesus? (See Exodus 12:21-23)

**1** Paul’s claim to be the worst of sinners must have been challenged many, many times since he wrote those words. What evidence could you present from the last 24 hours to argue that you are actually history’s worst sinner? (Think about it just long enough to genuinely repent, then go on.)

### **For Further Study:**

Note the atrocities committed by Eli’s sons (1 Samuel 2:12-25) and God’s response (1 Samuel 2:27-34).

## Welcome to the Pig Pen

The essence of sin has been described as self-centeredness. This thought is captured well in Isaiah 53:6: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” Let’s take a closer look at the implications of this verse.

*Like sheep.* Among the least intelligent of all barnyard animals, sheep are usually unaware of danger until it’s too late.

*Gone astray.* The natural tendency of sheep is to wander. Unless the shepherd keeps them in the flock, they quickly get off track.

*Each of us.* Sin is a universal problem, affecting us all.

*His own way.* This is the heart of the matter. We want to live our lives without reference to the God who made us and sustains us, and to whom we are indebted for our next breath. Hear these words by William Ernest Henley, a “stray sheep” who seems to have been hardened in his own way:

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishment the scroll;  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.<sup>5</sup>

The scope of sin is so great that the Bible uses many words to convey its appalling nature and disastrous effects. Wrapped up in that one little word are ideas such as rebellion, wickedness, confusion, shame, missing the mark, unfaithfulness, lawlessness, ignorance, disobedience, perversion, and more.

Anyone reading the first three chapters of Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians is struck by his scathing indictment of the human race. Both Jew and Gentile are locked up in the bondage of sin. Paul’s words are so forceful and unequivocal that the reader’s tendency is to regard Paul’s reasoning as extreme. “Hey, he must be talking about Jack the Ripper or Adolf Hitler!” But he’s not. He’s talking about you and me. “There is no one righteous, not even one... There is no one who does good...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Ro 3:10, 12, 23). This paints an extremely uncomplimentary portrait of the human race.

Part of our problem is that we tend to evaluate our sinfulness in relation to other people. Compared to Attila the Hun, I’m doing swell. But compared to Mother Teresa, I’m not. Unless God reveals the extent of our sin to us, we cannot discern our own depravity.

### For Further Study:

Broaden your understanding of sin’s seriousness by reading Romans 8:6-7, Colossians 1:21, and Ephesians 2:1-2.

During the 1980s I lived in the beautiful farm country of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Life there was pleasant in all respects but one: I never got used to the smell of manure. Pigs were by far the worst. But interestingly, though I

“ He that hath slight thoughts of sin,  
never had great thoughts of God.<sup>6</sup> ”

— John Owen

found their odor disgusting, the pigs didn't seem to mind in the least. As J.C. Ryle has put it, “The very animals whose smell is most offensive to us have no idea they are offensive and are not

offensive to one another.”<sup>7</sup> Fallen man, it seems, can have no adequate idea what a vile thing sin is in the sight of a holy and perfect God.

How did we fall into this sad state of affairs?

What ever happened to the human race?

### **Can a Leopard Change Its Spots?**

In the fifth chapter of Romans (verses 12-21), Paul explains both the source of our sin and the source of our ultimate forgiveness. It should be noted at the outset that our discussion of man's sinfulness relates to his natural state apart from grace. Through Christ's redemptive work, man's relationship to sin has been radically changed.

Sin came upon all men because of the sin of one man—Adam. This is proven by the fact that all men die, physical death being the penalty for sin.

When I was a junior in high school, we studied the Puritan era in America. I recall seeing an illustration of a reading primer containing the following: “In Adam's fall, we sinned all.” I can still remember how provoked I was by those words. At the time I thought, *It's just wrong to brainwash children like that!* Then, thinking more in terms of myself, I really got upset. *I don't see why I should be dragged down with Adam. After all, I don't know him from Adam!* To say I found this doctrine offensive would be an understatement. It offends our sense of fairness. The natural man finds it extremely objectionable. (Which is one of the main reasons I now believe it's true.)

Paul's point in describing our inherent sinfulness is not to irritate but to inform. Understanding our relationship to Adam gives us a fresh appreciation for our relationship with Jesus Christ. Renowned pastor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written, “If you say to me, ‘Is it fair that the sin of Adam should be imputed (charged) to me?’ I

will reply by asking, 'Is it fair that the righteousness of Christ should be imputed to you?'"<sup>9</sup>

Sin is the universal inheritance handed down from our

common father, Adam. We are by nature guilty and antagonistic toward God. This teaching is known as original sin and it describes man's fallen condition. It directly contradicts the idea that we all enter the world with a clean slate, sinless and innocent. Although man continues to bear the image and likeness of God, that image has been defaced. He is now like the ruins of an ancient temple. The marks of grandeur are still evident, but the glory has departed. As with a cracked mirror, the image remains but is largely distorted.

Original sin involves two further aspects:

*Total depravity.* This is a term generally misunderstood and therefore discounted. It does not mean that man is as bad as he could possibly be. That would be *utter* depravity. Total depravity indicates that sin's corruption affects man in every part of his being: his mind, his emotions, his will, and his body. There is nothing in man that has not been affected by sin.

*Total inability.* This does not mean that man cannot do anything good by *human* standards. He can still perform outward acts of righteousness and may possess many fine qualities. But in

### HOW WE GOT INTO THE PIT

Suppose God said to a man, "I want you to trim these bushes by three o'clock this afternoon. But be careful. There is a large open pit at the edge of the garden. If you fall into that pit, you will not be able to get yourself out. So whatever you do, stay away from that pit."

Suppose that as soon as God leaves the garden the man runs over and jumps into the pit. At three o'clock God returns and finds the bushes untrimmed. He calls for the gardener and hears a faint cry from the edge of the garden. He walks to the edge of the pit and sees the gardener helplessly flailing around on the bottom. He says to the gardener, "Why haven't you trimmed the bushes I told you to trim?" The gardener responds in anger, "How do you expect me to trim these bushes when I am trapped in this pit? If you hadn't left this empty pit here, I would not be in this predicament."

Adam jumped into the pit. In Adam we all jumped into the pit. God did not throw us into the pit. Adam was clearly warned about the pit. God told him to stay away. The consequences Adam experienced from being in the pit were a direct punishment for jumping into it...

We are born sinners because in Adam all fell. Even the word "fall" is a bit of a euphemism. It is a rose-colored view of the matter. The word "fall" suggests an accident of sorts. Adam's sin was not an accident. He was not Humpty-Dumpty. Adam didn't simply slip into sin; he jumped into it with both feet. We jumped headlong with him.<sup>8</sup>

— R.C. Sproul

regard to *spiritual* things, he is powerless. Even the “good” things he does are tainted by sin. To paraphrase

**2** Which of the following suggest that even children are tainted by original sin?

- The ease with which they learn to say “No!”
- The ease with which they can forget to do what they’re told.
- The amazing way that two children can to want the same toy—the one they haven’t cared about for six weeks—at the same time, ignoring all other available toys.
- The universality of tantrums and sulking.

**For Further Study:**

What role does water baptism play in our struggle against sin? (See Ro 6:1-11)

the Westminster Confession on the subject, “having fallen into sin, man has completely lost his ability to do anything to contribute to his salvation.”

Donald MacLeod says, “[Total inability] means that conversion is beyond the capacity of the natural man.”<sup>10</sup> Apart from Christ, nothing that a man does can please God because he is neither motivated by God’s grace nor concerned for God’s glory. And God is supremely concerned with our motives.

Jeremiah gives expression to total inability when he asks, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer 13:23). When Paul told the Ephesians that they had been *dead* in trespasses and sins, he was helping them understand not only the overwhelming grace of God in saving them, but their absolute need for that grace. A dead person can in no way participate in his salvation.

So what happens after conversion? Is sin no longer present? Oh, if that were only the case! Sin’s power over one who has been born again is certainly broken. Romans 6

clarifies that while the presence of sin is still a factor, our connection with it has been radically altered. The Holy Spirit now dwells within us, showing us the way to walk in God. We are no longer enslaved to sin. It doesn’t dominate or master us; we’re not obligated to obey sin’s promptings. The threat of judgment no longer hangs over our heads. Yet we continue to feel sin’s influence.

One helpful way of understanding our deliverance from sin employs three different verb tenses: We *have*

““ He who looks upon sin merely as a fiction, as a misfortune, or as a trifle, sees no necessity either for deep repentance or a great atonement. He who sees no sin in himself will feel no need of a Saviour. He who is conscious of no evil at work in his heart, will desire no change of nature. He who regards sin as a slight affair will think a few tears or an outward reformation ample satisfaction. The truth is no man ever thought himself a greater sinner before God than he really was. Nor was any man ever more distressed at his sin than he had just cause to be.<sup>11</sup>

— William S. Plumer



been delivered from the **penalty** of sin; we *are being* delivered from the **power** of sin; we *shall be* delivered from the

**3** What one or two words would you associate with the penalty of sin? The power of sin? The presence of sin? Write those under the appropriate headings below.

**Penalty**

**Power**

**Presence**

**presence** of sin. Nevertheless, as ironic as it sounds, the closer one walks with God, the greater will be his knowledge and awareness of sin. I recall as a child being fascinated by dust particles dancing about in a ray of light beaming through the window. The dust was everywhere present, but was only made visible by the light. So also with sin. It is made manifest by the light of God's Word and Spirit. The stronger the light, the more evident the dust.

**Meditate on Romans 5:20-21.** How does an awareness of sin deepen our gratitude for the grace of God?

### Ugly Weeds with Deep Roots

As a lover of old books, especially the writings of the Puritans, I have often found myself struggling with the emphasis earlier generations put on sin, even in the lives of the converted. *Where was the victory in their lives?* I wondered during my initial encounters with their writings. I've since come to understand that their awareness of sin, as acute as it was, did not exceed their awareness of the grace and mercy of God in forgiveness of that sin.

Consider Jonathan Edwards, for example, known as much for his holy life as for his great learning. Edwards referred to having a "vastly greater sense of my own wickedness and the badness of my heart than ever I had before my conversion"—a sign of spiritual health, in his opinion!<sup>12</sup> His descendant and biographer, Serano Dwight, felt the need to explain his grandfather's thinking. It wasn't that Edwards *had* more wickedness, wrote Dwight, but that he had a greater *sense* of it. He then clarified his observation with an analogy:

Suppose a blind man had a garden full of ugly and poisonous weeds. They are present in his garden but he is not aware of them. Now suppose that garden is, for the most part, cleared of the weeds, and many beautiful and worthwhile plants and flowers have replaced them. The man then regains his sight. There are *fewer* weeds, but he is more aware of them. So, the clearer our spiritual vision, the greater our awareness of sin.<sup>13</sup>

The following words by J.C. Ryle provide an eloquent conclusion for our chapter on the doctrine of sin:

Sin—this infection of nature does remain, yes even in them that are regenerate. So deeply planted are the roots of human corruption, that even after we are born again, renewed, washed, sanctified, justified, and made living members of Christ, these roots remain alive in

“ I have no tolerance for those who exalt psychology above Scripture, intercession, and the perfect sufficiency of our God. And I have no encouragement for people who wish to mix psychology with the divine resources and sell the mixture as a spiritual elixir. Their methodology amounts to a tacit admission that what God has given us in Christ is not really adequate to meet our deepest needs and salve our troubled lives.<sup>14</sup>

— John MacArthur, Jr.

the bottom of our hearts and, like the leprosy in the walls of the house, we never get rid of them until the earthly house of this tabernacle is dissolved. Sin, no doubt, in the believer's heart, no longer has dominion. It is checked, controlled, mortified, and crucified by the expulsive power of the new principle of grace. The life of a believer is a life of victory and not of failure. But the very struggles that go on within

him, the fight that he finds it needful to fight daily, the watchful jealousy he is obliged to exercise over his inner man, the contest between the flesh and the spirit, the inward groanings *which no one knows but he who has experienced them*—all testify to the same great truth: the enormous power and vitality of sin.... Happy is the believer who understands it and, while he rejoices in Christ Jesus, has no confidence in the flesh, and while he says thanks be to God who gives us the victory, never forgets to watch and pray lest he fall into temptation.”<sup>15</sup> ■

- GROUP DISCUSSION**
1. Split the group into two teams, the “Science/ Education” side and the “Salvation” side. Let each team alternate in proposing social ills it could cure. Which team did the most good for humanity?
  2. “A moral model of understanding human responsibilities and problems has been all but replaced by a medical model,” says the author (Page 14). What evidence of that shift do you see in the body of Christ?

3. Isn't God mature enough not to be bothered by our insignificant little sins?
4. On a scale of one to ten, rate what your lifestyle says about the seriousness of sin. (1 = not at all serious, 10 = very serious)
5. How is the essence of sin defined? (Page 17) Do you agree?
6. Read Romans 3:10-18 aloud. Be totally honest: Do you struggle with the fact that this describes *you* apart from God's redeeming grace?
7. What did we inherit from Adam? From Jesus?
8. How would you explain "total inability" (Pages 19-20) to a non-Christian?
9. Review the three tenses of our deliverance from sin (Pages 20-21). How did this explanation strike you?
10. Discuss the final sentence in the concluding quotation by J.C. Ryle (Page 22).

**RECOMMENDED READING** *Chosen by God* by R.C. Sproul (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986)

## NOTES

1. Thomas Greer, *A Brief History of the Western World, 5th Ed.* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1987), p. 378.
2. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1973), pp. 15–16.
3. James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1867, 1955), p. 222.
4. John Bunyan from *Gathered Gold* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), p. 291.
5. William Ernest Henley from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1919), p. 829.
6. William S. Plumer, *The Grace of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1853), p. 24.
7. J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1879, 1979), p. 65.
8. R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), pp. 97–98.
9. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Assurance, Chapter Five* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), p. 219.
10. Donald MacLeod from *Gathered Gold* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), p. 65.
11. William Plumer, *The Grace of Christ*, p. 20.
12. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. xlvii.
13. Ibid.
14. John MacArthur, Jr., *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1991), p. 70.
15. J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, p. 5.