

The real problem with sin

Introduction

The modern church has all sorts of problems with sin.

There are groups and belief systems that effectively condone sin by minimising its importance. False theories about sanctification lead to downplaying what sin is and excusing acts of sin. Perfectionist theologies do this making sanctification a matter of faith alone. They lead to licentious behaviour, justified by merely having faith that proponents are holy, despite committing sinful acts. I once knew a Higher Life teacher who ended up committing adultery with multiple women in the church he led. These deny that we strive against sin¹ as well as believe that we are definitively sanctified before God.² They fail to differentiate definitive sanctification (once for all in heaven) from progressive sanctification³ (continual in this life).

Then there are the antinomians who deny that God's law has any bearing on what they call 'Spirit-filled' believers. Firstly, all believers have the Holy Spirit indwelling them; no true believer is without the Spirit. Secondly, how do you know that a person is filled with the Spirit (something we should all seek to be all the time)? The answer is by seeing the evidence of holy behaviour – doing God's will and glorifying Jesus as Lord. One antinomian apostle I once knew claimed that no believer is ever guilty of anything, clearly never having read the Bible properly.⁴ This also led to licentious behaviour in his church.

Then there are churches, often originally founded in the Holiness, Pentecostal, Charismatic and Word Faith Movements, that just don't know what sin is. They demonstrate it from the platform all the time. The leaders manifest: pride, arrogance, hubris, extortion, exploitation, victimisation, sexual abuse, and even violence.⁵ Leaders have been alcoholics, adulterers, fornicators, frequenters of brothels, tax evaders, sodomites, and convicted criminals. One leading pioneering figure in the Signs and Wonders Movement was a homosexual witch. One famous Bible translator was a convicted criminal, charlatan and adulterer.

So there is a problem with sin in the churches; but what is the real problem with sin?

¹ **Strive, i.e. activity to fight against sin:** Heb 12:4, 'striving against sin'. Heb 12:14, 'Pursue (press on, drive, seek eagerly) peace with all people, and holiness'. 2 Tim 4:7, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith'. 2 Tim 2:22, 'Flee also youthful lusts. 1 Tim 6:11, 'flee these things and pursue righteousness'. 1 Cor 10:14, 'flee from idolatry'. 1 Cor 6:18, 'Flee sexual immorality'

² **Definitively (legally) sanctified:** 1 Cor 1:2, 'to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints'. 1 Cor 6:11, 'you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God'. Jude 1:1, 'those who are called, sanctified by God the Father'.

³ **Progressive sanctification:** 2 Cor 7:1, 'let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God'. 2 Tim 2:21, 'Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master'. Heb 2:11, 'those who are being sanctified'. Heb 10:14, 'those who are being sanctified'. 1 Pt 1:22, 'you have purified your souls in obeying the truth'. 1 Jn 3:3, 'everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself'.

⁴ Such as Gal 2:11, 'Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed'. 'Blamed' here is the Greek word *kataginosko* meaning: to find fault with, blame, condemn. Peter stood condemned; i.e. guilty.

⁵ Such as Todd Bentley kicking someone in the face or Smith Wigglesworth punching a man in the stomach so hard that he died three days later.

What is sin?

The NT uses many words for sin; each demonstrates a certain characteristic of what sin is. I have listed these elsewhere, some are:

- Lawlessness (*anomia*): breaking God's law. Matt 7:23.
- Sin (*harmartia*): Missing the mark. Falling short of God's will; to wander from the truth; an offence against God's will. The most common word used.
- Iniquity (*paranomia*): immoral or grossly unfair behaviour, wickedness. 2 Pt 2:16
- Iniquity (*adikia*): unrighteousness; injustice. Jm 3:6.
- Transgression (*parabasis*): violating God's law. Rm 5:14.
- An evil deed (*hamartema*). 1 Cor 6:18.
- Uncleaness (*akarthasia*). Rm 6:19.

Sin can be both commission and omission (Rm 6:12-17, 7:5-24).

Sin carries both guilt and impurity or pollution. [Justification deals with guilt; sanctification deals with pollution.]

The disposition to sin is itself also sin (Rm 6:12-17; Gal 5:17; Jam 1:14-15).

Adam's fall illustrates the process of sin:

- He yielded to satanic temptation.
- He accepted deceit; he trusted in the satanic promise.
- He manifested unbelief (he refused to believe what God had said would result).
- He committed a sinful act (eating the forbidden fruit).
- He disobeyed God's word.
- He became guilty of sin.
- He became a rebel against God.
- He lost communion with God.
- His nature became depraved.
- He was penalised by God.

In short, sin is a departure from the will of God for humanity.

God created man to serve him and be a testimony to his divine nature. Man was called to represent God and manifest his glory. Man fell from this position and became depraved. In God's plan this would require a deliverance from sin and death through the intervention of a divine saviour.

The Messiah would bring salvation from sin, death and the world and this would culminate at the end of time at the return of the Lord in glory with his saints. Before that time mankind is called to obey God's will and follow God's instructions in the event of sinning that involve atonement and redemption.

As a guide to conduct that glorifies God, he provided his law which is a written code explaining the will of God for human behaviour. Sin is basically a violation of that code. Sin is straying from the will of God.

Now we could say much more about this matter and discuss the theology of sin in great detail (GC Berkouwer's treatise on sin occupies 600 pages), but that is not my purpose here. I seek to be more practical.

What is the real problem with sins of Christians?

Most people concentrate on the fact that sin defiles. Sin makes us unclean. Christians are desperate to become clean again through the blood of Jesus. They want a clean conscience and not be troubled by the grief that sin causes.

Also Christians are ashamed that they have dishonoured God; they let God down.

Sin might also affect other people and cause damage, depending upon what the sin is. Lies always affect more than one person for example.

Sin always involves an element of deception. A person succumbed to a temptation and fell from the path. The fact that they submitted to a false premise grieves them greatly because they departed from the truth.

All these things are problems and they are true. But is that the main issue?

The threat to the Devil

When the Devil tempts Christians to sin is he focused upon getting them to do something unclean, or wicked, or unrighteous? Is he concentrating on the defilement? Does he just want believers to follow his evil works and mar their testimony?

No; his objective is far more important.

To understand this we must first understand how dangerous holy believers are to the Devil and his plans. They don't even need to perform any activity, their prayers are exceedingly harmful to the Devil's strategies in the world:

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Jm 5:16

James illustrates this point by mentioning the fact that Elijah, through prayer, was able to stop rainfall for three years and six months (Jm 5:17). That is real power. Paul seeks for all of us to understand the greatness of God's power in us.

That you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us [lit. into us] who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. Eph 1:18-19

But such power must come from a clean base; from righteousness. It is the righteous man that achieves much.

And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. 1 Jn 3:22

We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. Jn 9:31

It is those who keep the commandments, who commit no lawlessness, that receive answers to prayer. It is those living in the new nature that have power.

Faithful, holy Christians terrify Satan and his demonic horde. Righteous believers are a powerful weapon in the hand of God that can shatter the enemy.

The purpose in temptation to sin

The Devil is not stupid; he does not waste time on fruitless options; he seeks to do the greatest harm possible to the church of God.

He spends a great amount of effort seeking to get Christians to fall into sin. It matters not how small or how great the sins are, as long as they are lawlessness. It is even better if it regards a Christian leader who is apparently righteous outwardly and has a good reputation so that many follow him, but secretly he is trapped in some sins that don't affect others openly. In the past this has been powerful church leaders who were secret alcoholics, closet homosexuals, hidden fornicators and so on. Their church leadership was pointless because it came from a heart that was sinful not godly.

How many times have I heard Christians tell me how wonderful their church leader was and how much they liked his sermons. I was unimpressed by these people and received criticism for it. Then we found, years later, that all the time the leader was committing adultery. This means that everything that preacher said had no spiritual value whatsoever. Christians were impressed by product arising from an evil heart. So much for discernment.

Satan actively pursues temptation to sin in order to rob believers of their authority, power and spiritual standing. He seeks to make them useless to God, to make their testimony flawed and limp.

When you sin (I should know because I am a sinner saved by grace alone) you lose your spiritual poise; you become spiritually unstable. This makes you ineffective. It even makes your prayers fruitless.

Sin is not just uncleanness; it is powerlessness. You become useless to God. You are a soldier without a rifle; a ship without a sail; a train without a track.

A Christian with faith and authority can move a mountain but once sin enters the picture nothing is going to happen.

What really happens in sin

A Christian has two natures. The old nature (old man) is the life in Adam that we were saved from and delivered out of. The new nature is the life of Christ that dwells in our heart and spirit.

Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:22-24

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts. Rm 13:14

Christ in you, the hope of glory. Col 1:27

That Christ may dwell in your hearts. Eph 3:17

All the blessing and authority of God is in the new man.

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ. Eph 1:3

We are exhorted to remain in this nature all the time by many different commands: abide in Christ, put on Christ, be filled with the Spirit; be in Christ, be renewed in the spirit of your mind, put on the new man etc. This is the place of constant communion with God in the spirit. The Holy Spirit can then direct us easily; a mere whisper in our heart and we obey instantly.

Being in the new nature is the place of power and authority. We are walking in Christ like lights in the world of darkness. When such Christians gather together, the light gets stronger and the darkness cannot stand it.

The Devil must strive to eradicate this light by getting Christians to abandon their new nature and return to their old nature, the flesh, the Adamic former life which he can easily manipulate and control. He does this through sin. By committing sin we fall back into the flesh, into the old nature and become useless to God.

The sin does not even need to be a moral issue; it could be a lack of faith, replaced with legalism. That is sin because it is ignoring the will of God and fellowship in the Spirit replacing them with human regulations and traditions.

The sin does not have to be gross and public, like committing murder or adultery, it can be hidden and small, such as arrogance, pride, malice, and selfishness. It matters not. The sin gets us off the ground of the new man; of the life of Christ.

Now our union with God is not severed by this sin because the salvation of God is so great and the doctrines of grace so amazing, that we are preserved by God's grace; we are still God's sons. David was still the covenant king even when he committed terrible sins.

However, in practical terms, in our experience, we feel severed from our Father because we have sinned. The prodigal son was still the father's son, but he was far from his father and miserable in sin. Our union in Christ is secure because it is maintained by the Spirit but our experience of union with God is shattered. Our spirit is still communing with God intuitively but our soul is suffering and polluted until there is restoration in confession and application of the blood of Christ.

Only once we have been cleansed can we again be of use to God.

'Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.' But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honour and some for dishonour. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. 2 Tim 2:19-21

'I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.' Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. 2 Cor 6:18-7:1

So the deceit of sin not only makes us feel lost and separated from God, but it chiefly makes us ineffective and useless to God. It is the equivalent of a soldier on the frontline shooting himself in the foot.

An illustration

This is not a perfect analogy by any means but the basic principle applies well.

A military platoon on the frontline receives orders from the command centre by radio transmissions. There is a direct line of communication from command to the soldiers and they are effective in operations. If that radio is broken, the soldiers have no orders, no reconnaissance and no direction. They could well end up as casualties by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their actions are futile.

There is a sense in which believers have a direct channel to God through the Holy Spirit of Christ that is within them. This is not an indirect channel, as if there is some mechanism of communication; no, the communing is direct as a result of being in union with Christ.

However, sin breaks our experience of that channel. The link to God is not actually broken because we are still in Christ (if true saints) but sin breaks down our grasp of it in our soul. We lose cognitive appropriation of spiritual issues. It is the soul that is damaged and needs restoration.

The sin has made us ineffective in the war against the enemy; we lose the felt experience of fellowship with God and feel dirty.

It is only by confessing our sins; apologising to God and asking for the cleansing of the blood of Christ that restores our usefulness to God. We are renewed in the spirit of our mind and put on the new nature again, becoming effective in prayer.

The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. ... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *oursins* and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 Jn 1:7-9

He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Ps 23:3

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Rm 12:2

Be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man. Eph 4:23-24

It is righteousness that forms the breastplate in the armour of God. A breastplate (cf. the modern bullet-proof vest) was probably the most important single piece of defensive equipment for a soldier. This protects the heart. The heart must be protected from sin. Failure to do this results in sin damaging the effectiveness of the soldier.

Conclusion

So, the real problem with sin is that it ruins our spiritual experience in practice (not in ultimate terms) and nullifies our threat to the enemy.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honour. 1 Thess 4:3-4

That He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. Titus 2:14

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