

Digital Resources

Theology

What is Sin?

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There are many different words used to denote sin in the Bible. These include in Hebrew: 'hattat' – 'missing the mark', which is often translated as 'sin' (Judges 20:16; Ex 20.20); 'pesha' – 'rebellion', which usually appears in English translations as 'transgression' (1 Ki 12.19; Is 1:28); 'awon' – 'perversion' or 'twisting', usually rendered 'iniquity' (Is 24:1; Dan 9:5).

And in Greek we have: 'hamartia' – falling short or wrong direction (Jn 8:46; Jam 1:15); 'asebia' – ungodliness (Roms 1:18); and 'anomia' – lawlessness (Mt 7:23; 1 Jn 3:4).

All these words imply something right and true which has not been attained: a mark is missed, a boundary is crossed, something good is spoilt, a demand is not met, and so forth.

What is this that is right and true and good which has not been attained? It is the law which God has given. Sin is missing the mark God has set; it is crossing the boundary God has drawn; it is spoiling something good God has set up; it is failing to meet a demand God has made. So the fundamental and most important thing about the character of sin is this: it is against God. (Notice what David says when he has committed adultery with Bathsheba: He says to the LORD, "Against you, you only have I sinned..." Psalm 51:4.)

We can define sin briefly then like this: "Sin is any failure to conform to the law of God in thought, word or deed". Notice the two different ways we fail to conform to the law of God: there are sins of omission (not doing what we are supposed to do) and sins of commission (doing what we are not supposed to do). So stealing from you is a sin of commission; but failing to give to you when you are in need (of food, clothing or shelter) is a sin of omission

Why is sin so serious? What makes it so terrible? You may ask,

“What is really so bad about sexual immorality?” Well, this particular sin destroys families, spreads diseases, brings misery and does not satisfy those who indulge in it. But the thing that is so bad about this sin, as it is with all sin, is that it is shaking our fist at God. It is saying to the LORD, “I know better than you what is good and right. I know better than you what will make me happy. Go away! I will not do what you want; I will not go your way”. And it is saying these things to the very one who made us and sustains us, and who provides the very strength with which we rebel against him!

Let me quote from Jerry Bridges:

I fear that in our day, even among sincere believers, we have lost sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. By contrast, godly men of earlier centuries saw their best deeds as falling so far short of the perfection God requires that they could be justly condemned for even their most fervent prayers.

And the world, of course, tries to downplay or completely ignore the sinfulness of sin. People speak of ‘taking money without permission’ rather than ‘stealing’! We hear people admit they ‘misspoke’, when what they really did was lie! People nowadays do not ‘commit adultery’, they ‘have a love affair’ (and because ‘love’ is involved, it sounds all rather nice and wonderful, rather than what it is: an affront to the majesty of the living God!).

Others think of sin mainly in terms of unsociable behaviour: doing things that other people do not like or that society as a whole finds unacceptable. Sometimes we talk about “little sins” or “respectable sins”: but any sin is dreadful because it makes us a rebel, a traitor against God.