

Theology

The Scriptural Idea of Sin

Louis Berkhof

Several details are necessary to understand the Scriptural idea of sin.

First, sin is a specific kind of evil. It must not be confused with physical evil, that which is injurious, painful, or calamitous. Sickness may be called an evil, but in a different sense. Sin belongs to the ethical sphere, where the contrast is between moral good and moral evil. It is not merely a misfortune that has overtaken man, nor a defect arising from the limitations of his creaturely state. Scripture represents it as a deliberate departure from the right way, a revolt against rightful authority, a breaking of the covenant, and a guilty transgression of the law. It is therefore not something passive, such as a weakness, fault, or imperfection for which man cannot be held responsible. Fundamentally, sin is active opposition to God and a positive transgression of His law. It is the result of a free but evil choice by man.

Second, sin is absolute; there is no room for exception, no neutral territory exists between good and evil. There may be varying degrees of goodness and wickedness; however, there are no gradations by which an individual progressively moves from moral good to moral evil. The transition is qualitative, not merely quantitative. A moral being does not become evil simply by possessing less goodness, but by turning away from what is good to sin. There is no position of neutrality. Man is either on the side of God or against Him; he is either walking in the way of righteousness or has turned to the way of evil.

Third, sin always relates to God and His will. The older theologians were right to define it formally as “lack of conformity to the law of God.” The central demand of the law is love of God. Moral goodness consists in love of God, and moral evil therefore consists in its opposite. Sin is separation from, opposition to, and hatred of God. It reveals itself in transgressions of the divine law in thought, word, deed, disposition, and state, whether that will is written on the heart of man or revealed in the law of God.

Fourth, sin includes both guilt and pollution.

- Guilt has two parts: condemnation and liability to punishment.
 - The guilt of fault. In one sense, guilt is the ill-deserving or demerit inseparable from sin itself. It is a simple fact that we’ve done something wrong.
 - The guilt of penalty. In another sense, guilt is the obligation to satisfy the law's just demands. We’ve not only done something wrong, and that will never change, but there is a debt that needs to be settled. This guilt is only removed by satisfaction, whether rendered personally or vicariously.
- Pollution is the inherent corruption of the sinner. It is not merely an outward stain or a substance infused into the soul, but a real corruption of human nature. Guilt and pollution must be distinguished, yet they cannot ultimately be separated in the sinful life of man. The sinner is both guilty before God and inwardly defiled by sin.

Fifth, the seat of sin is the heart. In Scriptural phraseology, the heart is the central organ of the soul, from which the issues of life flow. Sin does not reside in a single faculty alone, as if the intellect, the will, or the affections could be isolated from the rest of man. From the corrupt heart, its influence extends to the whole person: intellect, will, affections, body, and conduct.

Sixth, sin is not limited to visible actions. Sin comprises sinful deeds, sinful habits, and a sinful state

or condition. The sinful state is the root from which sinful habits arise, and these, in turn, manifest as sinful acts. At the same time, repeated sinful deeds establish and strengthen sinful habits. Thus, the acts and dispositions of man find their explanation in his corrupt nature. Sin is therefore seen in act, disposition, and state of being.

What is Sin?

Martin Bussey

The Bible uses many different words to denote sin. 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 (Rom 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? “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.

Hebrew Words Used for Sin

Hebrew and transliteration	Meaning	References
רָעָה / רָע — ra ^c / rā ^c â	Evil, wickedness, harm, trouble or calamity	Genesis 6:5; 8:21; 39:9; Deuteronomy 9:18; Psalm 34:14; Jeremiah 17:9
עָבַר — ‘abar	To cross or pass over; morally, to cross a commanded boundary	Numbers 14:41; Deuteronomy 17:2; Joshua 7:11, 15; Judges 2:20; Hosea 6:7
חַטָּאת — ḥattā’t	Sin, sinful offence or sin offering	Genesis 4:7; 18:20; Leviticus 4:3; Psalm 51:2–3; Isaiah 53:12
רָשָׁע — rāšā ^c	Wicked or guilty person; one opposed to righteousness	Genesis 18:23; Exodus 23:7; Psalm 1:1, 4–6; Proverbs 10:24; Isaiah 57:20–21
חָטָא — ḥāṭā’	To sin, fail, go wrong or incur guilt	Genesis 20:6; 39:9; Exodus 32:30–33; 2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51:4; Ecclesiastes 7:20

Greek words used for Sin

Greek and transliteration	Meaning	References
ἁμαρτία — hamartia	Sin: an act, condition, guilt or ruling power	Matthew 1:21; John 1:29; Romans 3:9; 5:12; 6:1–23; 1 John 1:8–9
ἁμαρτάνω — hamartanō	To sin, do wrong or fail to meet God’s standard	Matthew 18:15; Luke 15:18, 21; John 5:14; Romans 2:12; 3:23
ἀδικία — adikia	Unrighteousness, injustice or wrongdoing	Luke 13:27; John 7:18; Romans 1:18, 29; 1 John 1:9; 5:17
παράπτωμα — paraptōma	Trespass, offence, false step or sinful fall	Matthew 6:14–15; Romans 4:25; 5:15–20; Ephesians 2:1, 5
ἀνομία — anomia	Lawlessness or disregard for God’s law	Matthew 7:23; 13:41; 24:12; Titus 2:14; 1 John 3:4

Teaching Module

The Scriptural Idea of Sin

Five connected biblical case studies for a 90-minute session

AIM: To recognise sin as active opposition to God, trace its movement from the heart into conduct, distinguish guilt from pollution, and see the sinner's need for divine mercy.

SUGGESTED PLAN: Introduction and reading (10 minutes); five case studies (14 minutes each); conclusion and prayer (10 minutes).

1. A deliberate revolt against God

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: Genesis 3:1–13

Adam and Eve hear God's command, accept the serpent's contradiction and choose another authority. Their sin is not merely a misfortune or limitation; it is a conscious departure from God's revealed will. Everything the woman said about the tree was what God said (compare Genesis 2:9 and 3:6), but it was not a tree to be desired ("coveted"; Exodus 20:17).

DISCUSSION: Which details show that their act is a specific moral evil and a revolt against rightful authority?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Trace the movement from desire, to choice, to action, to concealment. Identify where guilt and inward pollution appear in the account (See James 1:15).

2. Sin moving from the heart into action

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: Genesis 4:1–16

Cain's anger and fallen countenance precede the murder of Abel. God warns that sin is "crouching at the door," but Cain allows the disposition of his heart to issue in a sinful deed.

DISCUSSION: How does Cain's story connect sinful state, sinful disposition and sinful action?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: List the stages in Cain's response: worship, anger, warning, murder, denial and judgment. Discuss where a different response to God was required, and what alternatives Cain had in the process from worship to judgment; how should he have acted?

3. Guilt and pollution exposed

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: 2 Samuel 11:1–12:14; Psalm 51:1–12; Psalm 32

David commits *adultery*, *deception* and *murder*. Nathan exposes his **guilt** before God, while Psalm 51 shows David recognising both the transgression he has committed and the **inward corruption** from which it arose, and Psalm 32 reveals the weight of this on the **conscience**.

DISCUSSION: How do these passages distinguish the guilt of David's acts from the pollution of his heart without separating them, and the burden on his conscience?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Use two headings—"Guilt" and "Pollution" and "Conscience"—and place David's

words from Psalm 51 and 32 beneath the appropriate heading. Note any words that belong under both.

4. No neutral territory in the heart

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: Mark 10:17–27

The rich man appears morally serious and outwardly obedient, yet Jesus' command exposes a ruling love that competes with love for God. He must not merely add one more good deed; he must turn and follow Christ.

DISCUSSION: What does this encounter teach about the absolute character of sin and the impossibility of moral neutrality?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Identify the man's visible virtues and his hidden allegiance. Discuss how a good possession can become the occasion for opposition to God's will.

5. Guilty sinners seeking mercy

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: Luke 18:9–14

The Pharisee trusts in his visible actions, while the tax collector confesses his guilt and asks God for mercy. Jesus declares that the repentant sinner, rather than the self-righteous man, goes home justified.

DISCUSSION: How does this case bring together the law of God, the heart, guilt and the need for a righteousness we cannot supply?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Compare the two prayers. Mark every statement directed toward self and every appeal directed toward God.

Conclusion

Review the developing theme: sin is not merely weakness or misfortune; it is opposition to God arising from the heart, bringing guilt and pollution, and appearing in thought, disposition, word and deed. The proper response is confession, repentance and an appeal to God's mercy.