

# GROWING IN GRACE

## CEDAR CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH

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### A Quick Review:

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- “As we find our minds expanded by the grace of God, our hearts should be correspondingly enlarged with love to him for all that he has done for us in Christ.”<sup>31</sup>
- By way of review, we have covered the need to study the doctrine of salvation or what is commonly called soteriology.
- It is not a study which ends by gathering information, but one which should spark our hearts and minds into greater depths of God’s love towards us.
- If what we learn is not shaping how we live, then we are missing something in our study. If our only hope and goal is to gain more knowledge, then we have missed the person of Christ and the relationship that He desires to have with us.
  - Jesus said in **John 5:39** “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me.”
  - The Rabbis spent their time searching the Scriptures for what could only be found in the person of Jesus Christ...namely eternal life.
  - But their focus was not on Christ or learning about Christ, their focus was exclusively on the goal of learning the Scriptures.
- Paul wrote in **Romans 12:1-2** “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”
  - “Here are all the essential elements of a life of devoted loyalty to Christ. But perhaps the most astonishing thing is the plea these words contain: Christians, use your minds! Give

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<sup>31</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, 7.

your bodies to the Lord ‘as an act of intelligent worship’. Let ‘God re-mould your minds from within’.<sup>32</sup>

- As we learn more about Christ and about what He has done for us on the cross. As we learn more about God the Father and His plan of salvation from the beginning. As we learn more about the Holy Spirit and how He seals us for our future life and empowers us for our present life.
  - As we learn about all the ways that the Trinity has accomplished redemption for us, *it should leave an indelible mark upon our minds, our hearts and be evident through how we live out each day to the glory of God.*
- We also looked briefly at both the biblical teachings of man (anthropology) and what the Bible says about God the Father (Theology Proper).
- We have also very briefly discussed the problem that separates mankind from a holy God.
  - Since mankind was created by God, they are accountable to God and *must* follow what He says.
  - The Bible says that all men will one day bow before Jesus.
- As was previously stated, mankind was born with a sinful nature. This means that all people who have ever been born (except Jesus) were born as enemies of God and bent to accomplish only what they desired.
- Not only was all of mankind born as enemies of God; they were also born without any comprehension of who God is and what God desires of them.
  - Mankind did not comprehend God and there was no desire within them to truly know what God required of them.
- We also briefly studied how God has revealed Himself to man through both general and special revelation.
- While general revelation is seen by everyone, only special revelation saves people.
- All of mankind will stand before God accountable for the knowledge they have been given. Both inside of them (the conscience) and outside of them (creation).
- God has given us what we need to know about Him and us in the Bible...His holy Scriptures.
- This now leads us to our current study...

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 5.

## THE DOCTRINE OF SIN (HAMARTIOLOGY)

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- In studying the doctrine of sin, there will be many questions and many of those questions will be without satisfactory answers.
- When studying about something as vast as sin, we must, at times, simply take what the Bible says at face value; even when we don't fully understand.
- This is why a full spectrum view of the study of God is vitally important.
- When we know that God is not evil, and know that no evil is in God, and understand that He is love and goodness and that all He does is goodness and love...when we know this and understand this...we have a grid or paradigm to filter the unknown through.
- “We admit that we are often unable to reconcile God’s sovereignty and goodness in the face of widespread tragedy or personal adversity, but we believe that, although we often do not understand God’s ways, He is sovereignly at work in all of our circumstances.”<sup>33</sup>
  - All mankind suffers under the weight of sin. We suffer because sin has affected the world and the world is simply falling apart. Things die, fall apart, are never perfect, etc. all the created world has been infected with sin.
  - Secondly, we all suffer because others have sinned against us both directly and indirectly. When people choose to hurt us or not act in accordance with the rules, people will feel the consequences of those choices.
  - Lastly, we are affected by our own sin. When we choose to sin, knowing that we are breaking God’s perfect standards, we will reap what we have sown. While not punished like the unsaved, the believer is disciplined by God’s loving hand.
- When we know who God is, that all of who He is does not change, then when we face adversity because of sin (no matter the source), we know that we can ultimately trust God.
- As I said at the beginning, studying sin may leave more questions in your mind than answers.
- It may leave you with a gap in your understanding. But, if we start with who God is, when we cannot fully understand something, we will *always* be in a place to simply trust God.

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<sup>33</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, 21.

## Introduction

- “He that wishes to attain right views about Christian holiness, must begin by examining the vast and solemn subject of *sin*. He must dig down very low if he would build high. A mistake here is most mischievous. Wrong views about holiness are generally traceable to wrong views about human corruption. I make no apology for beginning this volume of papers about holiness by making some plain statements about *sin*. The plain truth is that a right knowledge of sin lies at the root of all saving Christianity. Without it such doctrines as justification, conversion, sanctification, are “words and names” which convey no meaning to the mind. The first thing, therefore, that God does when He makes any one a new creature in Christ, is to send light into his heart, and show him that he is a guilty sinner.”<sup>34</sup>
- Notice a couple of points that Ryle says that we would do well to pay attention to:
  - When we view holiness without defining it the way God does, we will not understand our own deep corruption.
  - If we view God as *mostly holy* and mankind as *mostly good*, then we are not going to truly see our need for a Savior. Words like grace, mercy, and peace are going to be simply words that carry no experiential meaning in life.
  - If we do not understand the greatness of God’s holiness and the depths of our own sinful hearts, then our minds are not going to be changed when we see the goodness of God.
  - When His love becomes real to us we will have a fuller understanding of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross on our behalf.
- To start with sin is to start with the Bible’s most talked about subject.
- Of the Bible’s sixty-six books and 1,189 chapters, only two books and four chapters do not mention sin or sinners. **Genesis 1–2** and **Revelation 21–22** stand alone as unique chapters that rehearse the creation before sin and the new heaven and new earth, which will never be infected by sin. The rest of the Bible, from **Genesis 3:1** to **Revelation 20:15**, abounds with the themes of human sin and the need for salvation. Sin is a major doctrine.<sup>35</sup>
- As was stated before, if we do not see the need for our salvation through and from Christ, then we will never appreciate what He did for us.

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<sup>34</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots* (London: William Hunt and Company, 1889), 1.

<sup>35</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine*: (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 452.

- The only way to truly appreciate His sacrifice is to know where we were without Him.
- Christ did not *add* something to us so that we would be better people.
- By His sacrifice on the cross, He has *literally* made us alive in the Spirit.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SIN?

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- **The study of sin is called hamartiology.** This designation comes from the Greek word for “sin,” hamartia (ἀμαρτία). Several associated terms and concepts indicate that sin is a multifaceted and complex reality. In the Old Testament Hebrew, khata’ (חַטָּאת) is often translated “sinning” or “sinned” (Gen. 20:6; Ex. 10:16). The word is also linked with **missing the mark** (Judg. 20:16; Pro 19:2). This term is closely related to the Greek noun hamartia (“sin”) and its verb form hamartanō (ἀμαρτάνω), meaning “miss the mark,” “err,” or “be mistaken.”
- Also found in **Romans 3:23**: “For all have sinned [hamartanō] and fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>36</sup>
- Various Greek terms for “sin” exist in the NT. The word adikia means “unrighteousness” or “injustice” (Rom. 1:18; 2 Thess. 2:12).
- The term planaō emphasizes “wandering” or “straying” (2 Tim. 3:13; 2 Pet. 3:17), anomia, which means “lawlessness,” that is, rejecting God’s law.
  - First **John 3:4** simply declares, “Sin is lawlessness.”
- Apeitheō carries the sense of being disobedient and willfully obstinate toward God’s will (Rom. 11:31).
- Asebeia can be translated “ungodliness,” “wickedness,” or “impiety” (Jude 18).
- Agnoia refers to ignorance or the absence of understanding (Eph. 4:18).
- Parabasis is a breaking of or deviation from God’s law. (Romans 2:23).<sup>37</sup>
- These are just some of the ways that the Bible defines sin. The reason for so many different definitions is to show us the multidimensional nature of sin.
- God wants us to know His standards and expectations for us.
- God wants us to have a full understanding of what sin is and what it looks like.

“Contrary to some popular assumptions, when the biblical authors talk about sin, they are talking about something much deeper and more complex than regulatory lists of good and bad behaviors or

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 453.

good guys versus bad guys. They're talking about a corruption of God's good world that shows up in human relationships and choices, something that we do and something that happens to us. The story starts with God creating everything and repeatedly calling it good (or *tov* in Hebrew; see Gen. 1 for all seven references). But then a snake enters the narrative, corrupting that goodness. As the story unfolds, the biblical authors use language like "sin," "iniquity," and "transgression" to explain this corruption and the harm it causes."<sup>38</sup>

- We often times think of sin *flatly*, or in one dimension. This means that we simply see that we have done something wrong and that's the end of it.
- In fact, that's where many of us stay when we have sinned, not seeing the roots or causes behind our actual act of sinning.
- All (that's right...all) of our sin can be traced to a lack of trust in God. Since sin is acting against God's perfect standard of holiness in our life, when we sin, we no longer are trusting in God for what we need/want, but we are taking things into our own hands.
  - Our actions (or fruit) will all look at times vastly different and in different situations, but when we sin, we are ultimately putting ourselves on the throne of our life and making decisions based upon what we think is best.

## **Is there a core of sin?**

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- All that leads to what we believe about the central core or root of our sin problem.
- A question that is commonly debated regards a central element or core of sin. **In other words, is there a place in all mankind that is the "hub" for sin?** Is there *something* that all our sin stems from?
- Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century contended that the root of all sin is pride. He believed that the motive behind every sin was that man wanted to live his own life without the presence or influence of God. He believed that man, *when left to his own power*, made decisions based upon himself only.
- Throughout history, some have thought that it was a lack of peace that was the central element for sin. They would argue that because sin always brings pain and disorder, sin at its core lacks peace.
- Others have thought that it was selfishness and idolatry. When we love ourselves more than we love God, we are going to do what makes our own hearts happy regardless of what God desires. If we

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<sup>38</sup> <https://bibleproject.com/articles/sin-iniquity-and-transgression-in-the-bible/>

have our own wants in focus, we are only going to be doing what brings us comfort, happiness and contentment.

- Regarding idolatry, if we worship something other than God, putting that “thing” in God’s place, it is going to be the driving force behind all that we do. While most people in the Western world are not working with carved images which they worship, anything that drives our decisions is our idol.
- **Sin must be understood from a theocentric or God-centered standpoint.** At its core, sin is a violation of the Creator-creature relationship. Man, only exists because God made him, and man is in every sense obligated to serve his Creator. Sin causes man to assume the role of God and to assert autonomy for himself.
- **The most all-encompassing view of sin’s mainspring, therefore, is the demand for autonomy.**<sup>39</sup>
- **The essence of sin is simply failure to let God be God.** It is placing something else, anything else, in the supreme place which is his. Thus, choosing oneself rather than God is not wrong because self is chosen, but because something other than God is chosen. Choosing any finite object over God is wrong, no matter how selfless such an act might be.<sup>40</sup>
- The point that MacArthur and Erickson are making is not to be missed. When we talk about pride, lack of peace, selfishness and idolatry...**they all have one thing in common**...a desire to be autonomous or independent or self-sufficient and not allow God to be God in our life.
  - I would say that all the other words which have been attempted to point to the core of sin are merely words which are *descriptive* of sin.
  - In other words, it is prideful to think that you can do it on your own. You will not have peace apart from God and when you are on your own path with pride, you will not have peace.
    - **James 4:6** “But He gives a greater grace. Therefore, it says, ‘God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”
    - To be autonomous is not only prideful but also putting yourself as your idol. You are going to sin to make sure that you are pleased. This is also the definition of selfishness.
    - God will *always* be opposed to the proud.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 453.

<sup>40</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 530.

- “Those who wrap up their selfishness and self-sufficiency in arrogance will receive the full measure of divine rejection. Such is the universal announcement throughout Scripture and the extrabiblical writings.”<sup>41</sup>
  - Conversely, God will *always* give grace to the humble.
    - “But precisely this attitude, which he maintained in spite of gross sin throughout his life, made David a man after God’s own heart, that is, favored, graced. David exemplifies what the proverb is intent to teach: God is always ready to accept those who accept him and to give them more grace.”<sup>42</sup>
- This has been the story of mankind since the beginning.
- Mankind has always had a bent to do what he has wanted to, not regarding God’s perfect plan.
- Even when walking with God, talking with God, being cared for directly by God...sin enticed.
- We can see how this is played out in the beginning chapters of Genesis.
- After receiving the commands from God to eat of any tree but not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (**Gen 2:16-17**), we read in Genesis 3:6 “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.”
  - **Notice what happened here:**
  - The woman saw it but did not have God’s command in her mind. She was not walking around thinking about her Creator. As she was not meditating on what she knew to be true, she was in a place where a lie could possibly overtake her.
  - She made an independent evaluation of the tree’s fruit, without God. Her evaluation was all about herself...***the tree was good for food***...not, God commanded us not to eat of the tree.
  - She decided that her evaluation of the situation was better than God’s and she ate it...***disobeying what God had commanded her to do.***
  - Because she pridefully thought that her thoughts were better than God’s thoughts, she did what she wanted to do...not what God wanted her to do.
- This is exactly what we do today, we desire to act independently of what God commands because we think that we know the situation better.

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<sup>41</sup> Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 181–182.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

- We then act on our own assessment, independent of what God has said, and make the decision to sin.
- Remember, our hope and goal is to experience God's grace and mercy. If God gives grace to the humble, then when we face temptation like Eve, our desire should be to be humble.
- We prepare our minds by thinking about things that are true and filling them with the truth. We prepare our hearts by being content with what God has given us and knowing that His provisions are enough.
- Then, when that temptation comes upon us, we will be ready and able to say no to sin and yes to God. This means that we will make a *righteous* choice in the heat of sinful temptations.

### **Excuses: The High Calling and Purpose of Obedience to God**

- **Deuteronomy 27:10** “You shall therefore **obey the LORD** your God, and do His commandments and His statutes which I command you today.”
- **Judges 3:4** “They were for testing Israel, to find out if they would **obey the commandments of the LORD**, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses.”
- **Jeremiah 38:20** “But Jeremiah said, ‘They will not give you over. **Please obey the LORD** in what I am saying to you, that it may go well with you and you may live.’”
- Jesus said in **Matthew 28:20** “...teaching them **to observe** [*to attend to carefully, to guard, to keep*] all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
- **Obedience begins with the gospel:**
- **Romans 2:8** “...but to those who are **selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth**, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.”
- **2 Thessalonians 1:8** “...dealing out retribution to those who do not know God **and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.**”
- **1 Peter 4:17** “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome **for those who do not obey the gospel of God?**”
- God has called (starting with Adam and Eve) all His creation to obey Him.
  - He is *the* Creator of all things and therefore has the right to call all things to obey Him.
- When we reject obeying God, we are casting Him aside for our own personal desires and choices.
- This is the core of all sin, ***a desire to do it by ourselves***. A desire to show that we do not need God and that we can get along just fine without Him.

- **Disobedience to God in our day and age is a rejection of the gospel.** We know that no one can follow God's command on their own, but they need to be regenerated. God's call to obedience today is a call to submit to His way and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Obedience has been given a bad reputation and inside the church it seems that there is either obedience or condemnation for a lack of obedience.
- Going back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, one man named Augustine set in motion a concept of grace that has split the church for evermore.
- In his book, *Confessions*, he writes (translated from Latin...not by me...) "Give what You command, and command what You will."
- God does command and expects obedience, but as Augustine famously put it, *He must also give us the grace to follow His commands.*
- God does not expect anything out of us that He has not given us the power to do.
- Listen to the Apostle Paul and what he went through and where he found strength:
- **2 Corinthians 1:8-9** "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, **beyond our strength**, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, *we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead...*"
- He knew that the strength to be obedient to what God had commanded did not come from within himself. In fact, when he looked within him what did he see?
  - He says that they *despaired even of life*. He knew that he had to die (sentence of death within himself) in order to follow God's commands.
  - "We frequently need a good dose of helplessness when we are reduced to extremities and stripped of all false self-confidence before we learn humility and open ourselves up to God's power."<sup>43</sup>
- I hope that you see the connection here. God's commands are fulfilled by us through God's power.
- I like what Kevin DeYoung brings to light about obedience, "...it's good to recall the distinction between true obedience and perfect obedience."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 79–80.

<sup>44</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity*, 95.

- In true obedience, we will still falter in areas and come up short because we cannot have perfect obedience.
- Speaking about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from **Matthew 5**, DeYoung points out, "The commands of Jesus are not meant to crush us any more than Jesus means to crush us."<sup>45</sup>
- The commands throughout the Bible are there for us to learn about God and our Savior Jesus Christ. They are not meant to be a burden but for us to draw closer to God as we come to know more and more that it is only by His grace that we can do anything.

## A CHANGE IN OUR SOCIETY<sup>46</sup>

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- With the rise of *self* in our modern world and specifically in the United States, the concept of obedience can clash with contemporary Western cultural values. These values highly prize self-reliance, independence, and personal freedom.
  - In a culture which encourages forging one's own path and questioning authority, the idea of submission can be seen as restrictive or oppressive.
- The universal sinfulness of man is obvious and verifiable. Sin permeates every aspect of our existence. It impacts us individually and societally. It is deeply rooted within us and is manifested continually.
- Throughout history, societies have consistently acknowledged man's natural sinfulness. Since the Enlightenment, however, Western civilization has become increasingly antagonistic to the reality of sin, especially as it is defined biblically.
- Obedience has become a *trigger* word for many and brings about feelings and thoughts of inadequacy and domineering personalities.
  - In fact, there is nothing more beautiful and joyful in the Bible than to obey Christ. True obedience to the gospel and to the teachings of Christ not only bring true life but it also brings true freedom.
- This is why there has been a shift in the language of the church from obey Jesus to follow Jesus.
- People don't like the terms *righteous living* but would rather *live a Spirit-filled life*.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>46</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 451.