

Chapter I

THE PROBLEM OF SIN

There are many problems facing the world today, such as poverty, injustice, famine, and disease. Great amounts of time, effort, and resources are used to try to find solutions to these problems. Even if we have not felt the effects of these ourselves, it is natural as human beings to feel empathy toward those who are suffering. This is particularly true if we heed Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

As difficult as these problems are to face, there is something that is much more destructive and prevalent. That problem is sin.

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The problem of sin is not limited to a particular time, region, or people – it is universal. Sin was introduced into the world not long after Creation and will continue to be present until the universe is destroyed. While it is good that one desires to help alleviate the other problems people face in the world, our primary focus should be on fixing the problem of sin – first in our own life, then also in the lives of others.

Jesus came to Earth to provide forgiveness for our sins. "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter

3:18). His blood cleanses us from sin (1 John 1:7). Thus, the remedy for sin is found in Christ.

However, Jesus' work in dealing with sin was not limited simply to His providing forgiveness. Forgiveness is certainly important – it is essential, in fact, for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). When we are forgiven, then through the grace of God we no longer stand to face the penalty for the sins we have committed. Those transgressions will not be remembered against us anymore. Thanks be to God for this fact!

But there is something else that Jesus provides for us in His death. It carries with it a charge that we have been given. Besides forgiveness of sins, Jesus also gives us freedom from sin.

Many do not understand this gift of freedom that Jesus has given. They desire forgiveness, but they also want to continue in their sin. They want the benefits of God's grace without the responsibility of service to Christ. Paul addresses this attitude among the saints in Rome. His words are just as needful for us today.

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2).

The thinking of the Romans (as well as the thinking of many Christians today) only covers half of the picture. Does the grace of God provide forgiveness? Absolutely! We need His grace because of our sin. That much is completely true.

But then they developed a false assumption based on this fact. In their mind, the more they sinned, the more grace they received. However, this idea is simply not true. Why? Paul answers with a question: “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”

Those who have become Christians have been forgiven of their sins. But there is more to it than that. Not only have we been forgiven, but we have become *dead to sin*. Paul stresses this point as he addresses the Roman saints' misconception about grace and sin:

“Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin” (Romans 6:6-7).

“Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11).

When we are crucified with Christ, we are made *free from sin*. God's grace does not give us freedom to sin without punishment. God's grace forgives us *and* sets us free from the shackles of sin. “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14).

Paul then addresses the obvious question: “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!” (Romans 6:15). Why not? If God has forgiven us and His grace saves us, why do we need to be concerned about sin?

“Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:16-18).

Sin enslaves us. This can happen even after one has obeyed the gospel and has had his sins forgiven. A Christian can still fall into sin, “obey its lusts” (Romans 6:12), and once again become enslaved to it. Paul tells us, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). We would be wise to take advantage of God's grace to obtain both forgiveness of sins and freedom from the bondage of sin.

Christians, therefore, are not to engage in sin. Yet the sad reality is that Christians do. We sin. We continue to fall short of the glory of God, even after being washed clean of our sins. Why? And, what can we do to prevent it? I hope to answer these questions in this study.

Chapter 2

“WE ARE ONLY HUMAN”

Not a Reason. Just an Excuse.

Sin is a universal problem. Right before telling the Romans that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), Paul uses several Old Testament passages to remind his readers of the universal nature of sin.

“What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greek are all under sin; as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.

“Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:9-18).

The Jews could not say that sin was only a Gentile problem. Neither could the Gentiles say that only the Jews were lost in sin. All people of every race, time, and location, had sinned.

In the Bible we find a consistent pattern of sinfulness in man. Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, transgressed God's simple command in the Garden (Genesis 2:17; 3:6). This is when sin was introduced into the world. A few generations later, man had progressed to the point in which “every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Consequently, God destroyed all of mankind, with the exception of Noah and his family.

However, this did not eradicate the problem. Sin continued. Even the righteous were not immune. David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), had his infamous affair with Bathsheba which eventually led to David arranging to have her husband killed (2 Samuel 11:1-17). Peter, one of the Lord's chosen apostles, denied the Lord three times, even after adamantly stating that he was willing to die with Christ (Matthew 26:33-35, 69-75).

Man has repeatedly shown a *preference* to sin – some on occasion, some perpetually. But everyone has done it. When considering this fact, many get discouraged, thinking that there must be no way to overcome sin. “*We're only human*” is the excuse that is given (as if this somehow justifies one's actions).

One of the fundamental tenets of Calvinism is the inherent sinfulness of man. Calvin's doctrine of total depravity is the belief that we are born in such a state that we are totally corrupt, inclined toward sin, and unable to do what is right on our own. The doctrine states that one cannot even come to God without a direct operation of the Holy Spirit upon his heart.

Yet the Bible teaches something very different than Calvin. “God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices” (Ecclesiastes 7:29). When we sin, it is because we choose to sin. It is not because we are unable to help ourselves since God failed to do something that would keep us from sinning. Calvin's doctrine takes the blame for sin away from the one who commits it and places it upon God for not regenerating the sinner.

It is true that we are human. But this is not an excuse for sin. Granted, as long as we live, we will have the potential to sin. But that does not excuse or justify it. We still must make the choice: to do good or do evil.

Is a Sinless Life an Impossible Goal?

Being human does not necessarily mean being sinful. The religious world has conditioned us to think this way, but sinfulness is not inherent in life on the Earth. We sin when we choose to sin. So how do we begin our work of rooting out sin from our lives? We must start by recognizing that being “only human” is not an excuse for sin.

Even though we are “only human,” God expects certain things from us. We are to crucify the old man, becoming dead to sin, and put on the new man (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:9; Romans 6:3-6). We are called to holiness, as Peter said, “like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (1 Peter 1:15). Jesus tells us, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Is perfection really possible? Obviously, we are unable to change the past and undo the sins we have previously committed. That is where God's forgiveness comes in. But how realistic is it to think that from this point forward, we can live without sin? Many will say that this is impossible. I would say that while it may not necessarily be likely, it is possible.

Consider the assurance Paul gives to the brethren in Corinth:

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

We will never encounter a situation in which we cannot help but sin. Never. What this means is that every time you are tempted to sin, you can resist that temptation and do what is right. Every temptation that is presented to us can be resisted. How can we be sure of this? God made the promise. He provides a way of escape every time. We know it will be there because He is faithful. It is up to us to find that way of escape He has promised.

Despite the divine assurance that we can overcome each temptation, man continues to sin. Of those who recognize that their humanity is not an excuse and who understand what God requires of us, even they still sin. We must do more to root out sin from our lives. As we continue in this

study, we will examine reasons why we sin and see what we can do to overcome it.

Summary

If you are going to remove sin from your life, stop making excuses. Though the history of man shows a preference for sin, this is a matter of *choice*, not inherent depravity. Remember the divine promise: every sin can be overcome.

Chapter 3

WE FAIL TO SEE SIN FOR WHAT IT IS

The world in which we live has a distorted perception of sin. In our society, sin is mocked, disregarded, ignored, and even glorified. But the word of God presents a very different perspective. Sin is likened to darkness (John 3:19-20) and cancer (2 Timothy 2:17). Sin enslaves us (Romans 6:17,20). We are told very plainly that God hates sin (Proverbs 6:16-19).

If we do not appreciate what the Scriptures teach about sin, then it is not likely that we will want to give it up. One of the first steps to overcoming sin is realizing just how bad sin really is. To begin, we need to know what the Bible means when it talks about sin.

“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

Sin is a transgression of God's law. The commandments given to us by God do not come from a malicious tyrant. God is full of mercy, grace, and love toward us. Notice what else John says about the God whose law we violate when we sin.

“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God...” (1 John 3:1).

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:7-10).

“We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16).

The law of God is an extension of His love for us. He knows what is best for us and He is the source of every good thing (cf. James 1:17). Because He loves us, He tells us what sin is so we can avoid it.

The Consequences of Sin

God wants us to put away sin from our lives. But why? What is it about sin that makes it so terrible?

First, sin separates us from God. “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear” (Isaiah 59:2). When sin was first introduced into the world in the Garden, part of the punishment was for Adam and Eve to be cast out of the place where they previously had direct fellowship with God (Genesis 3:8,24). To this

day, sin continues to sever the relationship between man and God.

Second, sin enslaves us. Paul warns the brethren in Rome, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts” (Romans 6:12). He then asks, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” (Romans 6:16). If we continue in sin, we become entangled in it, making it more difficult to overcome temptations and to remove sin from our lives. The more we sin, the easier it is to remain in sin.

Third, sin will cause us to be lost eternally. Paul went on to tell the Romans, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). If we do not become a slave of righteousness (Romans 6:18), we cannot hope to receive the free gift of eternal life that God offers us through His grace. Instead, we will get what we deserve for our sin – eternal punishment.

Why does God tell us to avoid sin? It is not because He is a power-crazed ruler who derives satisfaction from being able to tell people what to do. He tells us to avoid sin because He loves us. He wants us to have fellowship with Him, but sin prohibits that fellowship. He wants us to be free from sin, but sin enslaves us. He wants us to be with Him in heaven for eternity, but sin will cause us to lose our souls. Because He loves us, He warns us about the destructive nature of sin.

Why Was Jesus Allowed to Go to the Cross?

His love has also been shown in His willingness to take the necessary actions to remedy the problem of sin. What had to be done? His Son had to die on the cross. Jesus told Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14).

The blood of Christ that was to be shed in His death was the essential element in God's plan to atone for sins. The Hebrew writer noted that “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). “The blood of Christ” is able to “cleanse your conscience” (Hebrews 9:14). By His blood we have been redeemed (1 Peter 1:18-19).

In order to secure this atonement, Jesus came to the Earth and lived as a man. He endured anguish, rejection, torture, and ultimately death. This had to be done for our redemption. The horrible events of the crucifixion, the pain and agony that Christ suffered, remind us just how bad sin is to God.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14-16).

The consequences and punishment for sin are too great for God to simply allow us to suffer this fate without any

hope of escape. As horrible as Jesus' death on the cross was, we stand to face something far worse than crucifixion – an eternal separation from God in a place filled with agony and pain. This is what we are due for our sin.

Sin is not to be taken lightly. God knows how terrible the wages of sin are, so He was willing to watch His only begotten Son suffer. Jesus clearly understood the severity of sin in that He was willing to lay down His life for us. We must recognize what sin is and remove it from our lives.

Summary

Before you will be able to overcome sin, you must see it for what it is. Remember what the Bible says about sin:

- Sin is a transgression of God's law.
- God has given His commands because of the terrible consequences of sin: separation from God, enslavement to sin, and eternal condemnation.
- The terrible death that Jesus died on the cross is not nearly as terrible as the punishment which you stand to face for sin.

Chapter 4

IGNORANCE

Laws are often violated by those who do not know that they are breaking a law. In these cases, a transgression is made, regardless of the offender's knowledge of the statute. It is not uncommon for one to claim that he was unaware of the law he was breaking. Even if this is true, he still stands to be punished for his violation.

This concept is not hard to understand in our society's legal system. Yet when it comes to God's law, people often choose to look at it very differently. As long as they do not know that what they are doing is wrong, they are perfectly content to assume that they are doing right. They refuse to consider the fact that our sins will still condemn us. Ignorance is no more of an excuse to be used before God than it is for human authorities.

Is Ignorance Bliss?

We have heard the phrase: ignorance is bliss. The idea presumes that we are often better off not knowing about problems that might come upon us. If one is ignorant, he does not have to spend his time worrying about the problem. He does not have to work to fix or prevent it either. When it comes to violating the law (either the law of God or of man), ignorance is appealing because it prohibits guilt and does not require any act of repentance or restitution.

When it comes to God's word, the “ignorance is bliss” idea is completely false. Notice the words of God through the prophet Hosea:

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of God, I also will forget your children” (Hosea 4:6).

Destruction was coming because these people did not know the law of God. If one does not know the law, he cannot keep the law. Furthermore, he is unable to know how to keep from violating God's law. Therefore, ignorance makes punishment by God for sin become inevitable. Paul makes a similar point in the New Testament:

“The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

Paul says there are two groups of people who will face the wrath of God when the Lord returns. One group is made up of those who do not obey the gospel. This should be understandable. One who disobeys will be punished. But what of the other group? Those who do not know God will be punished. Surely they can claim ignorance, right?

Even if one can truthfully claim it, ignorance does not justify one before God. Those who wish to be saved must know God and obey Him.

This seems unfair to many people. Why will God destroy people for ignorance? This is not the right question to ask. God is not going to destroy anyone *for* ignorance, but He will destroy people *in* ignorance. Ignorance is a problem because it prevents one from obeying God and avoiding sin.

We have already noted in this study that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). But God has provided the remedy for sin in His word. If we are to be saved from sin, it must be through the gospel.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16).

“So Jesus said to the twelve, 'You do not want to go away also, do you?' Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life'" (John 6:68).

All who remain *in* sin will be punished *for* sin. Whether one is ignorant or not will not change the end result. Though one may have a treatable form of cancer, if he does not know he is sick or is unaware of the treatment, he will eventually die of his condition.

Replacing Ignorance with Knowledge

If we hope to overcome this stumbling block, we must first realize that ignorance is not an excuse. Instead of finding contentment in ignorance, understand that it leads to sin. Peter warns us against being “conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance” (1 Peter 1:14).

The remedy for ignorance is knowledge – not just any knowledge, but knowledge of God's word. As Hosea said, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge... Since you have forgotten the law of your God...” (Hosea 4:6). Paul tells us how to replace our ignorance with knowledge.

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Some translations of this verse use the word “study,” while some do not. Regardless, it is implied in this verse. We are to be diligent in our efforts to learn how to accurately handle the word of God. This is accomplished through study.

“So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:17).

Though many people will say that we cannot understand the Bible, Paul says we can and must understand it (cf. Ephesians 3:4). Ignorance is a threat to our souls. We

should never be content with not knowing what God expects of us.

Sin will cause us to be lost. God has shown us the remedy for sin in His word. If we are to overcome sin and put it behind us, we must replace our ignorance with the knowledge of the word.

Summary

Ignorance leads to sin. You must recognize that transgressions are punished with or without knowledge of the law. Therefore, replace ignorance with knowledge of God's word.

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