What is Sin? **[1]**

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Sin is a word with which most people in the West are familiar, even if only intuitively so. In fact, I am confident that most cultures in the world has a similar concept. Informally, "sin" refers to things (usually actions) which are "bad" or are "misdeeds". It also usually has a connotation to religion. As such, in this article I shall explore what the word means in the Christian context. Having a correct and accurate understanding of what sin is, is important, as it plays a fundamental role in the Christian worldview. Additionally, when speaking to a Christian it is good to understand what they mean (or ought to mean) when they use the word.

Definitions

A cursory look [2] at English definitions [3] of the word "sin" reveal two things: firstly, it refers to a misdeed or transgression, and secondly, it has a religious or moral connotation. It therefore refers to offences which are not subjective, but measured against some objective standard. The word "sin" developed independently from the words used in the Bible.

To best understand the Judeo-Christian concept of sin, I believe it is helpful to look at how the word was used originally in the Bible. Several words in the Bible can be conceptually thought of as "sin", although in this article I am going to focus on two pairs (two in Hebrew and two in Greek). Both of these words are used figuratively and have literal meanings. The first word1 means literally "to miss the mark"2. Literally it can be used in sports such as archery or darts, when one completely misses the target (never mind the bull's eye). Figurative, a modern equivalent would be the idiom "to miss the point". In Christianity, the use of the word implies that there is *a point, meaning or goal* for our lives which we miss (or are missing) when we sin. The Bible always uses this word in a moral sense.

The second word3 literally means "to wander" or "to overstep". It can be thought of as crossing a line which should not be crossed. For example, we can think of an offence such as overstepping a line in tennis. This word implies that there are figurative boundaries within which we are meant to live our lives, and that stepping over those boundaries have dire consequence.

Not Mere Actions

Throughout the ages, and even today, the concept of sin has been understood as something which is *done*. Murdering someone is a sin. Embezzling from your company (stealing) is a sin. Cheating on

your spouse is a sin. With this view one can easily conclude that those who do "bad" things can be called sinners. Conversely, if you do not *do* anything bad, then you are "good" and not a sinner. In common usage it has become common to refer to "sinners vs saints"; either you are very bad, in which case you are a sinner, or you are good, in which case you are a "saint".

Christianity goes further. Jesus taught[4] that people are sinful *by their very nature*. It is not merely what we *do*, but who we *are*. We are so completely absorbed in our selfishness, pride and rebellion that it defines us. Our individual sins are merely manifestations of our sinful nature. Even if we were able to committing sinful deeds, we would still need to be held accountable for our past sins, like a criminal who cannot escape from the felonies for which he is sought by the police.

The Impact of Sin

The seriousness of sin is compounded by the fact that a single sinful act can be reckoned in multiple ways. In each of the following examples, a sin can be reckoned in at least one more way than the previous one:

1. Because of His position as Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of the world, a sin committed "directly" against God (such as blasphemy) is, in and of itself, grievous and deserving of death[5]. God is merciful in not punishing every single sin as we commit them (otherwise humanity would have gone extinct a long time ago!).
2. We typically think that an offence committed against someone else is bad. And it is. But if we take the view that people (like everything else) were created by God, then not only is the offender guilty of harming the other person, but also towards God because they did not treat a creature created in His image[6] with the dignity and respect which she deserves.
3. Now think of a parent who lashes out in anger at and beats his child. The same two charges from the previous example can be brought against the parent, as well as a new charge that the parent failed in his divine mandate to be a loving parent whose very relationship is supposed to mimic the one between God and mankind.

And so it continues: having an understanding of the biblical relationship between God and people, of God's covenants and God's mandates, institutions and purposes for individuals in their various spheres of lives, one realises the grand scale and seriousness of sin. Martin Luther had such an acute sense of his own sinfulness and was riddled with guilt that, during his monastic years, he plunged himself into asceticism [4] in order to try and escape his own sinfulness[7].

Another aspect of the impact of sin is that we are all *affected* by it. Whether it is losing a game because someone else cheated, going hungry because a father was mugged and robbed of his wage, being born HIV positive because of a mother's indiscriminate promiscuity, or hurting from a loved one's rejection or unfaithfulness, we *suffer* pain, frustration, humiliation, and many more. This may seem to be an obvious thing to say, but I think it is worth mentioning explicitly and for some people to stop and reflect on it. Sin effects *everyone*. Our personal sufferings are but a small glimpse into the compounded effect which it has on God as our Father (see Hosea 1 and 3). I am not going to delve deeper into this aspect in this article. Just be aware that the problem of sin (collectively) is huge, and it has real effects on God, other people and yourself.

God's solution to sin

In most religions, there is some path, sacrifice, duties, enlightenment or self-actualisation which allows an individual to "set things straight". In Christianity, this is not possible, because our inherent sinful nature prevents us from doing so (also, as mentioned earlier, doing so would not just involve stopping to sin, but also to atoning for innumerable past sins). That is why God took it upon Himself to become a human being, live a life in the manner that we should have, and yet take the punishment which we rightly deserve on Himself. This is called The Great Exchange [5]. Jesus's death on the cross and His resurrection were not merely to wipe our slates clean from our sinful actions. It removes our sinful nature from us[8]. It also gave us a new nature, one which seeks to be right with

God and, once we have that, can truly interact with His creation in the way He originally intended it.

Conclusion

All human beings are sinful people. Think about yourself: if you have ever told a lie or been angry with someone, you have committed sin. Through your actions—daily—you act or react to people, and God, in a harmful or, at least, non-constructive and unkind way. This breaks down relationships and order. Sin is part of our nature. It does not benefit a person to correct or prevent them from committing a single sin (apart from sparing them and others from the effects of it) if nothing is done to address the fundamental need, which is to turn of Jesus the loving Messiah, sent by God to redress the problem of sin. Forgiveness is available to anyone who accepts the offer made by God to repent.

- 1. Greek: ἁμαρτία (hamartia). Hebrew: חַטָּאָה (chatta'ah).
- 2. In classic Greek, hamartia was used as a literary term which referred to an action (error or mistake) which led to a character's undoing.
- 3. Greek: παράβασις (parabasis). Hebrew: תַּעֲת (taah).
- 4. Most dramatically so in His *Sermon on the Mount*, Matthew 5–7.
- 5. This is what happened to Adam and Eve: they disobeyed God, for which God promised them that they would die. They did not die physically immediately, but they became mortal and "died" to the privileges which they enjoyed in Eden.
- 6. See Genesis 1:26–31.
- 7. Luther, once asked if he loved God, replied "Love God? Sometimes I hate Him! I see Christ, as a furious judge, with the sword of judgement in His hand, coming after me!". This was while he was still in the Roman Catholic church and before he began the Reformation.
- 8. We still have the capacity to commit—and do do so—individual sins. This is because we do still suffer from the effects of the Curse in Genesis 3. However, with our new nature, our sin is abhorrent to us: we do not relish in it and we desire to not commit sins.
- . Photo credit: Deror avi [6]. Retouched.

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