

James

What Sin Is

April 29, 2012

I. Introduction

- A. **James 4:17-5:** . . . Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.
- B. Prayer

II. What About Sin

- A. What is sin?
 - 1. The clearest and most concise definition of sin from the Bible comes from **I John 3:4** . . . Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and **sin is lawlessness**.
 - a. The word “lawlessness” simply means a refusal to be controlled by the law and therefore a refusal to live within the boundaries prescribed by the law.
 - b. When God says sin is lawlessness, He is saying that sin is self-rule in defiance of the authority over us. We can say the same thing in a few other ways, such as – sin is rebellion against God’s Law, or a refusal to be restrained by God’s Law, or rejection of God’s rule over us in order to go our own way and do as we please.
 - 2. Though this definition of sin as lawlessness is clear and concise, we find the scriptures speaking of sin in other ways that build on this definition. I want us to look at four other scriptures that help us clarify what sin is.
 - a. **I John 5:17a** . . . **All unrighteousness is sin** . . .
 - (1) The word “all” gives us a clear sense of just how comprehensive this definition is to be applied. **All** unrighteousness is sin.
 - (2) The word “unrighteousness” speaks of that which is not right (*wrong*) or that which is unjust. Therefore, unrighteousness is not doing what is right or just, or failing to do what is right or just – for whatever reason.
 - (3) Of course, God is the one who determines what is right and just, and what is wrong and unjust, and He makes this known to us through His Law – hence at any given moment, we are either living within the boundaries of God’s Law or we are living outside those boundaries, which is lawlessness.

- b. **Proverbs 14:21 . . . He who despises his neighbor sins**, but happy is he who is gracious to the poor.
 - (1) God is making it clear from this scripture that sin failing to love your neighbor – which can include actively disliking or even hating your neighbor so that you treat your neighbor in ways you do not want to be treated.
- c. **Proverbs 24:8-9 . . . One who plans to do evil, men will call a schemer. [9] The devising of folly is sin**, and the scoffer is an abomination to men.
 - (1) This scripture tells us that wanting, in the heart, to commit a particular sin so as to spend time considering how we might do it, is in God's sight equal to committing the sin and therefore sin itself.
 - (2) Jesus points to this same truth about sin when He says that looking and lusting means we have committed adultery already in our heart.
- d. **Romans 14:23 . . . But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.**
 - (1) The point here is that we sin when we willfully go outside the boundaries of what our faith in God says is right for us.
 - (2) In other words, if we have doubts about the rightness or acceptableness to God of what we are doing, to go ahead and do it is sin for us, because it puts us outside what our faith in God allows us to do with a good conscience.
- 3. To sum up, sin is lawlessness, it is self-rule in rebellion against God, it is doing what we know is wrong or unjust, it is failing to love others as ourselves, it is considering how to do or wishing we could do what we know is wrong – even if we do not do it, and it is going against our conscience and our faith in God in order to do something that we feel, deep inside, God disapproves of.

B. Where does the desire and/or temptation to sin come from?

1. The devil

- a. **I John 3:7-8 . . . Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; [8] the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.**

2. From Adam and Eve via our parents
 - a. **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.
 - b. **Psalms 51:5** . . . Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.
3. Our flesh and our heart
 - a. **James 1:14-15** . . . But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. [15] Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.
 - b. **Matthew 15:19-20** . . . For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. [20] These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.
4. The world
 - a. **1 John 2:15-17** . . . Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. [17] The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

C. When do we sin?

1. We sin when we willfully and deliberately do what we know is wrong.
 - a. A good example of this is breaking one or many of the Ten Commandments – **Exodus 20:2-17** . . . I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
 - b. [3] You shall have no other gods before Me.
 - c. [4] You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.
 - d. [7] You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain,
 - e. [8] Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
 - f. [12] Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.
 - g. [13] You shall not murder.

- h. [14] You shall not commit adultery.
 - i. [15] You shall not steal.
 - j. [16] You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
 - k. [17] You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.
2. Therefore, we sin when we knowingly and willfully do what is wrong. But we also sin when we fail or neglect to do what we know is right, even if we do not knowingly or deliberately do something wrong in our failure or neglect of what is right. Let me give you two examples:
3. Jesus told the parable about separating the sheep from the goats on the judgment day (**Matthew 25:31-46**).
- a. He identified the sheep as those who gave Him something to eat when He was hungry, something to drink when He was thirsty, took Him when He had no place to stay, clothed Him when He was naked, visited Him when He was sick, and came to Him when He was in prison. He went on to say that they did all this for Him when they did it for the neediest and least of their neighbors.
 - b. Then Jesus turned to the goats and said of them: [41] '**Depart from Me, accursed ones**, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; [42] for I was hungry, and **you gave Me nothing** to eat; I was thirsty, and **you gave Me nothing** to drink; [43] I was a stranger, and **you did not invite Me in**; naked, and **you did not clothe Me**; sick, and in prison, and **you did not visit Me**.' [44] Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' [45] Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' [46] These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.
4. Jesus also told a parable about a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave **five** talents, to another, **two**, and to another, **one**, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey (**Matthew 25:14-28**).
- a. The servant with five talents worked to turn them into ten talents. The servant with two talents worked to turn them into four talents. But the servant with one talent hid his in the ground

fearing he might not have even the one to give back to his master upon his master's return.

- b. Upon His return, the master commended the first two servants who had increased the worth of the talents given them by the Master. However, when the Master came to the third servant, the one who hid his talent for fear of losing it, he said, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents'.
5. When we look at these two parables, we see that neither the goats nor the slave with one talent broke the law or deliberately and knowingly did something wrong. Their failure was the failure of doing nothing, so to speak, and in doing nothing, they failed or neglected to do what they knew was right.
6. So what is sin? It is both willfully doing what we know is wrong and failing or neglecting to do what we know is right.

D. What sins are we held accountable or responsible for?

1. **All sin** – Christ died for all sin, not just those sins we commit knowingly and willfully. He also died for those sins we commit carelessly, thoughtlessly, and unknowingly. Therefore, all sin has to be paid for because it is offensive to God and rebellion against God.
2. However, there is greater accountability and stricter judgment when we willfully disobey and neglectfully fail to do what we know is right. Listen to these words from Jesus:
 - a. **Luke 12:42-48** . . . And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? [43] "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. [44] "Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. [45] "But if that slave says in his heart, 'My master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; [46] the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers. [47] "And **that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes,**

[48] **but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few.** From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.

- b. We see in this parable a great truth. Sinning knowingly and willfully brings greater judgment. Sinning unknowingly still brings judgement, but a significantly lighter judgment.
- 3. Not all sin is committed deliberately – though I suspect that for too many of us, the first thought we have when others sin against us is that they did it deliberately. Some sin is committed unknowingly and unintentionally. God speaks to this kind of sin beginning way back in Leviticus. Lets look at some scriptures which make it clear that there is less accountability though equal responsibility for not knowing what is right or unintentionally doing what is wrong.
 - a. I encourage you to read **Leviticus 4:1-28** to see how God deals with unintentional sin. And as you read it, notice that God expects more from those in leadership and less from the general population – even in regard to unintentional sin. And you will see God’s descending expectations in the sacrifice required from each group for their unintentional sin.
 - b. One other point that I believe needs to be made here. If you are a born again Christian, ignorance of God’s Law or God’s expectations is no excuse when it comes to sin.
 - c. Let me explain it this way. If you have a Michigan driver’s license and get pulled over in Ohio, you cannot claim ignorance of Ohio’s driving laws. The very fact that you have a driver’s license puts you in the place of being expected to know the driving laws of each state in which you drive. In other words, the privilege and the responsibility are inseparable – for driving and for salvation in terms of knowing God’s expectations for your behavior.
- E. Now that we have looked at what sin is, where the desire for sin comes from, when we sin, and what sin we are held accountable for, you might be wondering, what about God’s grace and forgiveness?
 - 1. As long as we are alive, there is a place for repentance and forgiveness. But be careful with this, for repentance is not a gimmick to make it safe for us to continue in the same sin. Repentance is that which moves us away from the foolishness of choosing sin and ever more fully moving toward obedience to God and righteousness in thought, word and deed related to the sin repented of.

2. Therefore, beware of practicing sin, that is knowingly and willfully committing the same sin over and over again without sincere confession, genuine repentance, and a worthy effort to turn from that sin – an effort that perseveres until the sinful habit is conquered and removed from your life. The willful and even careless practice of sin indicates you have not yet been born again (**I John 3:4-10**).
3. I said that as long as we live there is room for repentance. However, there is one more caution about sin that we are wise to consider carefully. It is taught in the scriptures that there is one sin that will not be forgiven. This is the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is understood to mean defaming the Holy Spirit by claiming His activity or some specific activity of His is the work of another power, and specifically an evil power. Look at:
 - a. **Matthew 12:31-32** . . . Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. [32] Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.
 - b. **Mark 3:28-30** . . . Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; [29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin – [30] because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."
 - c. **Luke 12:10** . . . And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him.
4. Though there may not be a clear and easily understood explanation of these verses or agreement as to there being no opportunity for repentance in regard to blasphemy, we are wise to be aware of God's speaking to us about this topic.
5. Apart from the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the scriptures teach that if we confess our sin, repent, and turn from our sinful ways, we will be forgiven.

III. Conclusion