

UNDERSTANDING SIN

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER]

In Luke 11, Jesus is instructing his followers on the subject of prayer, and in the midst of it he says, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children...” (Luke 11:13).

This off-handed reference to his own disciples as “evil” reveals an astounding (to modern readers) assumption by Jesus; namely, that even the best human beings are so radically corrupt that they can be referred to as evil persons. Nevertheless, in spite of calling them evil, Jesus obviously loves his disciples with the utmost tenderness and even delight, and he is willing to pay the ultimate price for them (John 13; 17:20–26).

This view differs totally from the view of sin and evil prevalent in the world today. No one, apart from those who hold Jesus’ view of sin, can look at friends and family, take genuine delight in them, and say, “I love them—but they have lots of evil in them! And so do I!”

What then is the biblical view of sin? Sin is a distortion and dislocation of the heart from its true center in God (Romans 1:21–25). This distortion is expressed as a basic motive for all human life—the heart desire of every person to be his or her own savior and lord (the serpent’s original temptation in Genesis 3:5 was “you will be like God”).

Søren Kierkegaard used very modern terms when he defined sin as building your identity on anything besides God.¹ That definition is just another way to convey the old biblical themes of idolatry, self-justification, and self-glorification.

Sin, therefore, is something that everyone is doing all the time (see Romans 1:18–3:20, with the summary in 3:20). People who flout God’s moral law are doing this overtly, of course, but even moral, religious people are trying to be their own saviors by earning salvation

and being good. It is just as possible to avoid Jesus as Savior (to be your own savior) by *keeping* God’s law as by *breaking* it. Everyone is separated from God equally—regardless of the external form of behavior.

The fundamental motives of self-justification and self-glorification are what distort our lives and alienate us from God. Unless a person is converted, these motives operate as the main driver for *everything* we do. This situation is true of every culture and class of people. In the ultimate sense, then, everyone is equally a sinner in need of Jesus’ salvation by grace alone.

Once this radical view of sin is grasped, it revolutionizes the believer’s attitude toward others who do not share his or her beliefs. Here are two ways it changes you in this regard.

First, it means you sense more than ever a common humanity with others. The biblical view significantly changes in Christians the natural and traditional human attitudes toward those who behave in ways that they do not approve. It is normal for human beings (whose hearts are always seeking to justify themselves and who are always trying to make the case that they are one of the “good guys”) to divide the world into the good and the bad. If, however, everyone is naturally alienated from God and therefore “evil,” then that goes for everyone from murderers to ministers.

The biblical teaching on sin shows us the complete pervasiveness of sin and the ultimate impossibility of dividing the world neatly into sinful people and good people. It eliminates our attitudes of superiority toward others and our practices of shunning or excluding those with whom we differ.

Second, it means you *expect* to be constantly misunderstood—especially about sin! The gospel message is that we are saved by Christ’s work, not by

1. See Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849).

our work. But everyone else (even most people in church) believes that Christianity is just another form of religion, which operates on the principle that you are saved if you live a good life and avoid sin. Therefore, when others hear a Christian call something “sin,” they believe you are saying, “These are bad people (and I am good). These are people who should be shunned, excluded (and I should be welcomed). These are people whom God condemns because of this behavior (but I am accepted by God because I don’t do that).”

You may not mean that by the term “sin” at all, but you must realize and expect that others will hear what you are saying that way. They have to. Until they grasp the profound difference between religion and the Christian faith, they will probably understand your invoking of the word “sin” as self-righteous condemnation—no matter what your disclaimers.

For example, if most people hear you saying, “People who have sex outside of marriage are sinning,” they will immediately believe you look down on them, that you think they are lost because of that behavior, that you are one of the “good people” who don’t do things like that, and so on. If people hear a Christian say, “Well, these people are sinning, but I don’t think of myself as any better than they are—we are all sinners needing grace,” they will think you have spoken nonsense. They have a completely different

grid or paradigm in their minds about how anyone can approach and relate to God, and they are hearing the word “sin” through that grid.

This reality is why wise Christians will in general try to avoid public pronouncements on particular behaviors as sinful. Rather, they will try to help people hear the radical message of the Bible about the true inward nature of sin, its universality, and salvation by grace. They will try to explain that people are ultimately lost only if they are too proud to see they are lost and in need of a Savior who saves by sheer grace, just as a drowning person offered a life preserver will only die if he won’t admit he needs it.

Christians must talk to their friends about sin to explain our need for Jesus and for God’s grace, but we must do so in a way that quickly puts the term in context—the context of the full message of Jesus’ salvation.

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