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THE SIN PROBLEM

“Come now, and let us reason together.”

—Isaiah 1:18

At this point, we'll be addressing the subject head on and will be experiencing some turbulence, so to speak. Please follow along. Do not be discouraged, and trust that it will bear good fruit. But it is first necessary to remove the stumbling blocks in the path before we can move on. Many wrong assumptions, which rely on faulty premises, have been made, and they get in the way of clear thinking. Most importantly, as you read please remember that this is not about condemnation—although it may seem so at times. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:1).

The Master taught us that truth sets us free (John 8:32). I believe that our path will produce more freedom than we ever knew we could have. So buckle up and let's face the storm.

CAN WE SIN WITHOUT THE LAW?

What is sin? Is sin real? These seem like simple and straightforward questions that demand simple and straightforward answers, don't they? Actually, the answers can be quite complex—or at least we have made them out to be. They all depend on where one stands in regard to the commandments and the Law of God.

We know what sin is because the Law of God reveals it to us. We know this partly because it is self-evident but also because the apostle Paul made it clear: “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, *I would not have known sin except through the law*” (Romans 7:7). Therefore, we can agree based on the Word of God that sin exists, and that it is the Law of God that makes sin known to us.

We also know that unbelievers sin—some less than others, but they sin nonetheless. And since no one is born a believer, we can include ourselves in that category, at least until the moment of conversion. What then? When we become believers and pass from death to life—can a believer sin? This is where we have muddied the waters.

We have been taught that the Law of God was “done away with,” and that we are “not under the law,” in which case it is impossible to sin, since sin is the breaking of the Law of God. On the other hand, if we say that we *can* sin, we are then asserting that the Law of God—at least in some shape or form—is not *done away with*, for without the law it is impossible to sin.

Imagine for a moment a stop sign at an intersection. If we drive through the intersection without stopping, then we commit an infraction. But if the stop sign is removed, then it is lawful to cross that same

intersection without stopping and without breaking the law. Likewise, if we attest that the Law of God was done away with, then we are saying that it is impossible for a believer to sin, for “where there is no law there is no transgression” (Romans 4:15).

However, this seems preposterous since it flies in the face of the clear message of the Scriptures through which God pleads with the believer not to commit sin. James, in writing to fellow believers in the epistle that bears his name, says, “But if you show partiality, *you commit sin*” (James 2:9). The book of Hebrews tells us, “For *if we sin willingly after we have received the knowledge of the truth*, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:26). The apostle John also writes, “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (1 John 3:6). Finally, the Master himself: “If your right hand *causes you to sin*, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:30).

As we can see, the verses quoted above—which were directed at fellow believers—make it clear that a believer *can* commit a sin. It is fair, then, to conclude that there are three views we can have regarding sin:

Option A: Believe that it is still possible to commit a sin and thereby remain alert and maintain purity, repenting immediately if and when one sins. “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And *if* anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). This view, however, implies that the Law of God must—at least in some shape

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or form—still be in effect, since it is not possible to sin without law (more on this later).

Option B: Believe that since the Law of God was done away with, it is impossible to assert that a believer can commit a sin. Again, this is clearly not the case, for God pleads with us through the Scriptures not to commit sin.

Option C: Believe that sin exists and that believers are not bound to the law since it was done away with, but that we are called to act “morally.” If we commit a sin, we are really not committing a sin but rather acting immorally since the law has been crucified with Christ.

This last option, being a hybrid of options A, and B, contains partial truths. However, it forces the mind to twist into a theological pretzel and sets up a paradigm that makes it extremely hard (if not downright impossible) to reconcile the Holy Scriptures.

In addition, this interpretation walks itself into a corner and becomes forced to do away with large portions of the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as some critical passages of the New Testament. Yet many Christians find themselves in this camp. It is *this* view that we’ll be addressing, trying to untie this knot in favor of a more harmonious view of the Scriptures like that of option A.

In the process of reconciling Old and New Testaments, we’ll be paving the path for a more coherent and consistent view of the Scriptures, one that makes allowance for the law in its proper place, without infringing on grace and or the atoning work of Christ.

It should be clarified, before we move on, that we are *not* approaching the subject of the law from the perspective of salvation—or as a means unto salvation—for the Scriptures clearly teach that we are saved by grace, through faith that is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8), and that a properly understood law does not preclude such paradigm. Our goal, rather, is to develop a more consistent view of the Scriptures in a manner that is more in line with that of the Master's.

BE HOLY

As we have seen, it is undeniably clear—based on the Scriptures—that sin is real. It is also clear that, presented with the occasion to sin, a believer has a choice: to sin or to obey. It is possible to be a believer and *to sin*, and to be a believer and *to not sin*. I do not mean such an absolute absence of sin that opens wide the door of heaven making obsolete or even unnecessary the work of Christ on the cross, but rather the expectation of a life that does not relish the acts of the old self nor “[makes] provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lust” (Romans 13:14).

Are there Scriptures that support this view where we are called *to not sin* you may ask? The answer is yes.

“Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may *become blameless* and harmless, children of God *without fault*.” (Philippians 2:14–15)

“Therefore you shall *be perfect*, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)

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“He who is righteous, let him *be righteous* still; he who is holy, let him *be holy* still.” (Revelation 22:11)

“For I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore *be holy*, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45)

“For I say to you, that unless your *righteousness* exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

“Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well. *Sin no more*, lest a worse thing come upon you.’” (John 5:14)

By now you may be wondering about the strictness of these Scriptures. Some may even say with a little cynicism, “Why should I care about this? Isn’t all this just a game of semantics with no real life application?”

Not so! For we know from the Scriptures that a man’s thoughts govern his behavior from within: “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7 KJV). We can no longer afford to think that the way we understand Scriptures does not affect our daily walk and relationships. The purpose of going over these passages and re-examining our understanding is so we can develop the right perspective, for it is not possible to build a straight tower on a crooked foundation.

Everything we accept as truth in our mind shapes our worldview, and consequently the way we act. In the words of psychologist Jordan Peterson, “Every time you

tell yourself a lie, and every time you act out a falsehood you disturb the pristine integrity of your nervous system and the report it gives you about the nature of the world will be distorted as a consequence of that.”¹ This is why truth has such a liberating power (John 8:32), and why we ought to be mindful about unquestionably accepting beliefs—particularly those that have been grandfathered in.

For even if we never stopped to ponder about these things in the past, and especially if we have taken a backseat approach to their interpretation, what we believe about the law and sin *does* have an effect on how we think and can have catastrophic consequences for believers, for these beliefs set the basis of our behavior.

I understand that this view of the Scriptures where we are called to be righteous, holy, perfect, and blameless—as seen in the preceding verses—may cause some to think that it might be better for us to make a vow of silence, move into a monastery somewhere in the French Alps, and avoid all human contact. But this is not true. We have been sold an image of sainthood as unattainable, and worldliness as unavoidable, and this is a direct consequence of approaching the Scriptures as fractured and partly inconsequential.

You may say, “Okay now, aren’t you going too far with this? Are you saying that we *can* and *should* be sinless in this life?” I am saying that this should be our clear and present aim. We have listed a number of Scriptures in which we are called to be righteous, holy, and perfect. This is the Bible speaking, not me.

¹ Jordan B. Peterson, “Reality and the Sacred,” *YouTube*, May 17, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=2c3m0tt5KcE.

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We have accepted a worldview that has convinced us that it is impossible *not* to sin, and we have rearranged Scripture in order to fit this worldview. In the process, we have relegated two-thirds of the Scriptures to a mere collection of “moral” stories and Sunday-school tales. We have tacitly accepted and stored this paradigm in the farthest recesses of our minds where it lodges itself as it gains ground to take control and govern thoughts from within.

Think about the last five messages you have heard from a pulpit. Is the talk about holiness or grace? Allow me to illustrate this point. Imagine that your favorite sports team is in the market for a new coach. After a few interviews, management decides to hire one of the many candidates. This new coach, on his first day of work, gathers all of his players and says, “Look, I’m not expecting much from you. Please forget anything you’ve ever heard about greatness, fame, and fortune. These things put a great weight on your shoulders, and I would rather you be happy. And since there’s a great chance of losing in each game, I would hate for you to feel bad when you do. So let’s just enjoy the game while we can. Don’t worry about winning or losing. Let’s just be happy that you get to play the game at all.”

As a fan of the team, your jaw would drop and you would cry out for this coach to be replaced immediately—and rightfully so. You would want a coach who can lift the morale of the players—one who can help them believe that they can do the impossible and become legends, that they can reach further than anyone before them, break records, and inspire new generations of players.

Well, the Master is that coach. Did you pay attention to the verses quoted above? He is calling us to be

righteous, and perfect like the Father in heaven. He told the rich young ruler to obey the Ten Commandments, sell all of his possessions, and give the proceeds to the poor. Talk about a challenge!

Some teachers have suggested that when the Master made these sorts of remarks, he was merely employing a rhetorical device designed to show us how impossible it is to act righteously, a sort of sadistic cat-and-mouse game designed to bring us to our knees. But is this what we believe about God? Would this be a rhetorical device or a lie? Are we accusing the Master of setting false expectations? On the other hand, when it comes to more worldly desires, we are quick to point out that we “can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). So which is it?

Moreover, I do not imagine that Christianity would have made it past its early beginnings had Christ told us, “Let’s forget this commandments thing. In fact, I’ve come to put an end to the law, down to the jot and the tittle. When the Father in heaven looks at you, he won’t see you, he’ll see me. We’ll pull a Jacob on him! I’m going to crucify the law, since it has been making it so hard for you and distracting you from really, really enjoying life.”

Outrageous! But isn’t this what we have been in part preaching? Isn’t this the message of contemporary Christianity? No wonder we have become so timid and pusillanimous. Where are the challenge and the defiance that characterized the Master when he overturned the merchant’s tables at the temple? Where is the righteous anger of confronting the rulers of the day, or the defiance toward those who pervert the message in order to elevate their traditions?

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At this point you may ask yourself, “Well, if we can be perfect, holy, and righteous, then what was the whole point of the cross?” After all, three times Jesus pleaded with God, saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me” (Luke 22:42). Am I saying that it was all meaningless—perhaps a miscalculation on the part of Jesus? God forbid! For it would not be possible for anyone to be saved except for the atoning work of Christ on the cross, for we “*all have sinned* and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

However, the work of the cross is to allow us to be saved *unto* good works: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for *good works*, which God prepared *beforehand* that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Keep in mind that we are not born believers; at some point we all have to come face to face with the cross and either accept or reject the atoning work of Christ on our behalf. Yet once we are saved, we are called unto good works, holiness, and righteousness.

But Paul says that we are free from the law and dead to the law, does he not? Let us further examine these statements and continue to clear the path, that we may set that firm foundation.