

The Ubiquity of Sin

By Dennis Cornish

Burk Parsons¹ once wrote: “to confess that we are sinners who are trusting in Christ alone for our salvation is fundamental to being a Christian.”

At some level, all mankind is aware of the sin in their lives, and the more we become Christlike through the process of sanctification, the more we recognize the extent of our sin and the need for its mortification (Colossians 3:5). That being said, we are faced with how we can come to a better understanding of our sin nature, the magnitude of the sin that permeates our very being and that which ultimately manifests itself throughout all of our lives.

Sinful thoughts and actions are the outworking of the greater internal corruption that marks who we really are as sons of Adam. Sin is generated from within; and without Christ it is what we are at the very core of our being. Every wickedness, whether it be thought, word, or deed has come from the well spring of evil that lies within each of our own hearts and Jeremiah 17:9a informs us that: *“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”* Our hearts, being steeped in sin, have a natural predilection towards sin and this fosters an irresistible craving to fulfill our sinful desires. Sin comes directly from our yearning to experience the temporary pleasure that comes from carnal and overwhelming longings, and they consequently further weaken our faltered and vacillating desire to please God. At the moment of our choosing the allurements of sin, it results in a catastrophic failure to remain obedient to God’s will. Man, on his own, can never overcome sin and our only hope is in the finished work of Christ.

On the question of choice, people do make free choices but since the fall, we have been unable to choose to please the Lord apart from His sovereign intervention, and in our being separated from the work of the Spirit, we only desire evil.

¹ from *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., July 2023, page 2). Burk Parsons is the editor of Ligonier Ministries Table Talk Magazine and the Senior Pastor at St. Andrews Church in Sanford, FL.

Unless God changes our hearts, we lack the moral capacity to follow Him (Ephesians 2:1–7). We need to recognize the radically devastating extent of our sin and turn to God, as it is He who has *“created all things, and by His will they were created and have their being (Revelation 4:11).”* We must turn to Christ for our salvation *“For in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28),”* and if we abide in Him and with the Holy Spirit who lives within us as Christians, we can begin to understand the seriousness of our sin and through the process of sanctification we can become more Christlike. In order for this to occur we must own our sin, recognize that it is we who have committed transgressions before God, and it is we who must truly repent of our wickedness so that we might receive God’s abounding mercy and grace. The beauty and the truth of the gospel message is that although we have at times given ourselves over to sin, we can repent and rejoice in God’s mercy because: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and His word is not in us, (1 John 1:9-10),* and so we will continue to stumble back into darkness while persistently refusing our complete obedience to Him even though He has *“called us [you] out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).”*

Perhaps a quick definition of what it means to repent would be helpful. The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines repentance as “the act of expressing contrition and penitence for sin. Its linguistic roots point to its theological meaning of a change of mind and life direction as a beginning step of expressing Christian faith (Acts 26:20).”

Although God’s Word is true, and we can be assured of our salvation if we turn to Christ in repentance of what we often view as external sin and begin to walk in His ways, there is also a sin which is regarded as internal. This internal sin, which is sometimes blatant but may not be readily perceived if it remains hidden in one’s heart, is the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and it is unpardonable. (Matthew 12:31-32). This unpardonable sin should not be confused with a person’s struggle to come to grips with the truth of Scripture or their battle with their ongoing sin nature, but rather it is associated with a settled spurning of the Holy Spirit along with an adamant refusal to any confession of their personal sin. Blasphemy is the denial of Christ out of a conscious, willful suppression of the Spirit’s work. In order to be saved, there

must be submission to Christ's authority, mercy, and grace and Scripture clearly tells us that there is no other means by which reconciliation to God may be found. Faith comes by hearing and if they hear the truth and the Holy Spirit validates the truth to them and they still harden their heart, refusing to repent, there can be no forgiveness. We are to pay particular heed to Isaiah 55:6 where we read: "*Seek the Lord while He may be found*". It should be noted, and we should all be relieved, that theologians agree that Christians who worry if they have committed the sin of blasphemy have likely not done so because those who willfully deny the truth of Scripture would have no concern for the well-being of their souls.

I paraphrase one author's² comment regarding ongoing sin in a believer's life.

"All believers struggle with sin generally, but most can identify a "besetting sin." I'm referring to a unique area of weakness in which we are particularly susceptible to backsliding into when tempted. It may be anger that feels uncontrollable or it could be the persistence of lust that seems unquenchable."

Identifying our areas of weakness is an important step at combating sin. It should be obvious that if we know we have a drinking problem, we shouldn't frequent establishments that primarily serve alcohol. It seems patently easy when we clearly think about it, but the daunting power of sin can become unsurmountable during life's lowest moments when we are overcome by weakness. It is at this point that another important step must be taken, that of connecting with a brother or sister in Christ, one with whom we have developed a trusting relationship and who will come along side us in fellowship and pray with us as we struggle to conform to God's will for our lives. Through this, God will continue to minister to our hearts and minds, and this will be aided by believers' encouraging one another. Hebrews 3:12–13 calls us to do this daily, and thereby God will use our words of encouragement to preserve His elect as "*iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another (Proverbs 27:17)*".

² Garret Kell, The Sin That Clings So Closely, *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., May 2018).

Sin in our lives should be understood as a clarion call for repentance, and throughout Scripture God calls us to repent of our sin. One notable example of how this should be done is found in Psalm 51 when David comes before the Lord after his grievous sin against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. There is no doubt about his sin against them, but more importantly David sinned against God and His commandments. David prays for mercy and grace for sinning against God, asking for forgiveness and to be purified by blood and water, and then continues in his supplication that the presence of the Holy Spirit not be taken from him. We know that God called David a man after His own heart, but for David's sin there were consequences. The first was the death of his and Bathsheba's first child, but it did not stop there. God told David that He would "... *raise up evil against you out of your own house*", and in this David's son Absalom played a large part in fulfilling God's purpose. Obviously, God's forgiveness and the mercy that He bestows upon us does not always eliminate the consequential effects of our sinful wickedness. Our sin is corrupting, and it is poisonous, it can readily affect the lives of other people and our relationships with them.

Each day Christians are besieged by an onslaught of an ever-widening chasm of what society errantly sees as acceptable and they therefore claim that these things are normative behaviors and are thereby sinless in their nature. As Christians these aberrant behaviors are against our temperament as true children of God. The unfortunate result of societies influence is a spilling over into the visible church many of their pervasive attitudes regarding the lightness of sin, which in turn can be rightfully seen as an attempt to negate Jesus' teaching when He gave us this invitation: "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" If a person has become so desensitized to sin that they do not recognize the perversity of it and as a result they do not feel convicted by the weight of it, why would they confess to what they don't see, much less acquiesce to their need for a Savior? This deviant train of thought is subversive to God's plan for our lives and belies the fact that outside of the righteousness we have in Christ,

the damning consequence of an unrepentant and ongoing transgression of God's laws is the inevitability of an eternity in hell.

Christians are to take caution about what was just written and be vigilant of potentially falling into the snare of the blatant sin that is rampant in our society such as abortion, pornography, adultery, and the like. However, there are a host of other sins that seem to have fallen into an area deemed to be more acceptable by many, because they do not seem as repugnant as the few just mentioned. It is much easier to pray for forgiveness for the flagrant sins we have committed, but it is much more difficult to seek forgiveness for sins that we know we have committed but to which we have blithely pushed our guilt aside. These may include sins of omission, those sins that are comprised of a lack of conformity to any of God's laws, such as not being diligent in loving our neighbor as ourselves, and this would be as grievous of a sin as actively and willfully transgressing any of the Ten Commandments. To this end, James 4:17 us that: "...*whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin*" (James 4:17). We must always keep in mind that we serve a Holy God and He alone is the standard of what behavior is acceptable. With the assurance of God's pardoning grace, as Christians we must remember that all of His commands and laws have been given to us not with any threat of judgment but rather more like receiving the encouragement of a friend, guiding us in the ways that glorify Him.

Paul is adamant about the extent of our sinfulness and in Romans 3:10-11 states that: "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.*" Not only do we not possess any personal righteousness, but we also do not understand the infinite holiness of God and therefore no one seeks after Him with the hunger and thirst that Jesus spoke of during the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5:6). We are not to sooth our conscience by our condemnation of those outside of the church for their flagrant sins, all the while setting aside our own sins, those that are viewed as more tolerable, such as pride, gossip, envy, anger, being sinfully judgmental, and many other seemingly minor transgressions that we often turn a blind eye towards. We fail to admit to ourselves that sin, all sin no matter how we gloss over it, is unacceptable to God, deadly to our spiritual well-being, and will result in destroying us and our Christian witness. As

mentioned earlier, apart from divine grace, those who continue in their sin are destined to experience a second death because of it. The way to a proper understanding of the depravity and wickedness of our sin is to fully submit to Christ's authority in our lives, repent of our sin, and to allow the work of the Holy Spirit to effect the change of heart that we so desperately need. Recurring confession and immersing ourselves each day in God's Word are good ways to adhere to the admonishment we read in 1 Timothy 6:11 to fight the good fight of faith where Paul writes: *"But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness"*.

Paul tells us that we are to flee from sin, and by the grace of God we can pursue the holiness He has called us to, but at the same time we must remain acutely aware that we retain a sinful nature because the remnants of our fallenness has not yet been completely purged from us and it is for this reason that we must continually repent as we work with the Holy Spirit through the process of our sanctification as our hearts and minds are being renewed each day. Christians live in a state of tension, we are in Christ, we have been saved and we are citizens of heaven, and yet we live in a sinful world and are subject to sin because we are imperfect, with any righteousness that we do possess being outside or apart from ourselves. This is what theologians refer to by the Latin phrase *simul iustus et peccator*, at the same time justified and sinner, and this will be our condition until we receive our glorified bodies in heaven. Our true identity is in Christ, and through Him the power of sin has been broken, but our final freedom from its presence is not yet a reality.

We have been cloaked in the righteousness of Christ but let us not allow the freedoms we have in Him cheapen the grace that God so freely gives. In Romans 6:1 Paul rhetorically asks, *"Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"* We must never depend upon ourselves or begin to believe that our works alone, those that are devoid of the Holy Spirit's guidance, are sufficient enough to merit any favor of God. *"All of our striving, all of our works no matter how humanly righteous they may appear are like filthy rags or polluted garments in God's eyes. It is only through His mercy and grace*

that we are forgiven of all transgression and kept from being swept away towards destruction.”³ We have been redeemed, set free by the finished work of Christ and although we will continue to sin this side of heaven, we are no longer slaves to sin, its yoke has been broken, (Galatians 5:1). Our freedom from sin’s bondage does not mean that we will be perfectly free from sin and sadly Christians remain prone to slipping back into it until God glorifies us and removes the presence of sin from us entirely. Our glorification as Christians is the future fulfillment of His promises and is based upon the solid rock of God’s covenant faithfulness throughout eternity. In Romans 8:29-30 Paul gives us a clear indication of that promise where we read: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

We have come to the point of recognizing our sin, confessing it, repenting for it, and now we somehow hope or believe that not only is all forgiven, but that there will be no consequence for it. At yet, although we sometimes can't bear the idea, we know that God the Father disciplines His children. This can bring with it all sorts of ill-conceived ideas about God’s love for us, and this is the result of our lack of acceptance for the consequence of our sin and the forth coming discipline that we can learn from, and those lessons will mold us into more Christ likeness. This is nothing new, the prophet Habakkuk argued with God because he thought that God’s plan for dealing with His people’s sin of rebellion was too harsh in that God chose to use the Chaldean’s, a people more wicked than the Israelites, to punish them by the means of their being torn from their lands and becoming captives. In his confusion about God’s means of discipline and his lack of knowing the mind of God, he prayed to God and in extolling His holiness, rightfully said: “*You are of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wickedness (Habakkuk 1:13a).*” Habakkuk’s finite mind could not grasp God’s sovereign plan, nor the perfection that is in all that God wills for His people.

³ Paraphrased from Isaiah 64:6

God spoke to Habakkuk, and he trembled as he pled that God in His wrath would also remember mercy. In all of this we see that in the end Habakkuk rejoiced in the sovereignty of the LORD declaring that no matter the outcome that he would *“rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation (Habakkuk 3:18).”* Although we too are deserving of God’s harshest discipline, we live mostly unscathed in our day to day lives, but we must be mindful of Hebrews 9:27 where we read: *“...just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,”* and when judgement comes, pray that we are not counted among to goats. Flee from sin and run into His righteous arms and as He gathers us to Himself let us pray anew: Oh God, *“Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings (Psalms 61:4)!”*

And finally, we take a look at how our sins are justified before God, and the following reply was succinctly spelled out in the Reformed response found in the Heidelberg Catechism, published in 1563 where the following answer was given to this very question.

“Only by true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and that I am still prone always to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me, if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.”

May God the Father continue to richly bless each of us as He draws us closer to Himself through the finished work of His Son Jesus Christ as He continues to purify us through the sanctification wrought by His Holy Spirit.

