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MINISTRIES

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What Is Sin?

The Bible is clear that Christians—followers of Messiah—are not to practice sin. That’s not to say that we’ll be completely sinless in this life—we certainly won’t—but we must strive to live a life that is characterized by obedience to God. Here is how the apostle Paul puts it:

Romans 6:1-2

[What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?](#)

We’ve all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. Yet the Bible teaches that we can be forgiven our sins because of the Messiah’s work on the cross. God gives us grace when we receive the Messiah Yeshua—Jesus Christ—as our Savior and Lord. However, Paul is quick to remind us that God’s grace is not a license to continue living in sin.

This biblical imperative for Christians to not continue in sin raises an important question: what *is* sin? Well, the Bible gives several definitions. The biblical teaching on what constitutes sin is somewhat multifaceted.

For instance, in Romans 14:23, Paul says, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” He says this in the context of one’s personal convictions regarding disputable matters among believers (Romans 14:1).

So according to Paul, to behave contrary to one’s personal conscience constitutes sin. However, this definition is pretty vague, and by definition doesn’t apply to everyone in the same way.

James gives us another definition: he tells us that failing to do the right thing is sin (James 5:17). He says this in the context of arrogant boasting (James 4:16)—specifically, acting as though God is not in control of your destiny and living your life for yourself rather than for Him. But again, this definition is still somewhat vague.

The Bible does give a concrete definition of sin, which we’ll see a little later. But first, let’s look at the word itself.

A popular definition of sin that you'll often hear is, "to miss the mark." And this definition is actually pretty accurate in the most basic sense of the word. What do we mean?

Well, sin is most often translated from the Hebrew verb *chatah*. We see this word used in Judges 20, which speaks about the Benjaminite army recruiting 700 men who "could sling a stone at a hair and not miss" (Judges 20:16). The Hebrew word for "miss" in that verse is *chatah*.

In Proverbs 19:2, the author says, "whoever makes haste with his feet *misses* his way." Again, the word for "misses" in this verse is *chatah*.

So when you sin—*chatah*—you miss the mark, you miss the goal. And it's from this basic sense of the word that we get the word's chief usage, which indicates moral failure toward God and each other. This is the definition of sin we're most familiar with—moral failure. When we sin, we fail to meet a goal; we miss the mark in a moral sense.

Now, this raises more questions: what is the mark that we should do our best to hit? What is the goal that we are to meet? And *how* do we not miss the mark or goal?

What's most interesting about the basic sense of the word "sin" is how it relates to another Hebrew word. The Hebrew word for God's Law is *Torah*, which means "instruction" or "direction." This word is derived from the verb *yarah*, which means to point, throw, or shoot.

For instance, we see the verb *yarah* being used to describe the shooting of arrows:

1 Samuel 20:20

And I will shoot [yarah] three arrows to the side of it, as though I shot at a mark.

So the verb to sin—*chatah*—in its basic sense means to miss the mark. And the verb *yarah*, the root of *Torah*, means to point or shoot, in order to hit a mark.

Against the background of the verb *yarah*, we can say that the *Torah*, therefore, is the actual means by which one hits the mark or reaches the goal.

So what is the goal? The goal is God. The goal is relationship with Him, knowledge of Him. Here is how professor Ariel Berkowitz puts it:

The Hebrew word, *torah* (תורה), is derived from a root that was used in the realm of archery, *yareh* (ירה). *Yareh* means to shoot an arrow in order to hit a mark. The mark or target, of course, was the object at which the archer was aiming. Consequently, *torah*, one of the nouns derived from this root, is, therefore, the arrow aimed at the mark. The target is the truth about God and how one relates to Him. The *torah* is, therefore, in the strict sense instruction designed to teach us the truth about God.

-Ariel Berkowitz, What Do We Mean by the Term Torah?

This makes sense seeing as how sin is what separated us from relationship with God to begin with. Sin, again, is a failure to meet the goal, and that goal is to know God and draw near to him.

We've all failed to meet the goal. We've all missed the mark. Because of our sin, we've broken

fellowship with God. But the good news is that a way has been made for us to be restored. Through Messiah Yeshua, we are reconciled to God and our sins are forgiven. And now that we've been given grace, as Paul says, we are no longer to continue living in sin.

So with that in mind, it's clear that the Torah—God's Law—is directly involved in our following the Bible's imperative in Romans 6 to refrain from sin. The Torah directs us toward the goal. Sin misses the goal.

The implication of this understanding is that breaking certain commandments in God's Law, such as the command to rest on the Sabbath, is considered sin. It misses the goal. If God's Law is the means by which we hit the mark, sin goes against the Law's direction.

As J.K. McKee puts it:

Within God's Torah is found His definitive standard regarding what He considers acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

-J.K. McKee, the New Testament Validates Torah: Does the New Testament Really Do Away With the Law? (p. 38)

This concrete definition of sin, as breaking God's Law, is expressed in several passages. Consider what Paul says in Romans 7:7.

Romans 7:7

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it **had not been for the law, I would not have known sin**. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

Here Paul is clearly referring to the Law as given through Moses. Paul then references a particular commandment that he read from the Law of Moses, "You shall not covet." Paul recognizes that he came to know what sin is as a result of reading the commandment in the law, the Torah. That is to say, Paul recognized that coveting is a sin because the Law says to not covet.

Romans 3:20 is another verse that defines sin in relation to God's Law:

Romans 3:20

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

We aren't justified by the Law, but by faith in Messiah. But that does not mean that we neglect the Law now that we've been justified.

And again, the Torah reveals the sinfulness of man. It defines God's moral standard of right and wrong, and so we come to a knowledge of sin through God's Law.

James teaches the same thing:

James 2:9-10

But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as

transgressors.

Here, James defines sin as transgressing God's Law. If you show partiality, which goes against the Torah's commandments against showing partiality, you commit sin.

Let's look at one more verse, which makes this even clearer:

1 John 3:4

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; **sin is lawlessness.**

When John says that sin is lawlessness, he's referring to God's Law—the Torah. According to John, Sin is transgression of God's Law.

We're actually going to spend some time unpacking this verse a little bit since the plain reading of the text here is being challenged in recent days. Some people claim that this verse isn't defining sin as transgression of the Torah. Rather, this verse needs to be read in light of other verses throughout the rest of the chapter, which leads to a different interpretation—or so it is said.

For instance, John contrasts sinning with practicing righteousness (1 John 3:7-10). Thus, lawlessness, it is argued, is just a general unrighteousness and not necessarily related God's Law given through Moses.

Also, John singles out the commands to believe in the name of Yeshua and to love one another (1 John 3:23). Thus, it is further argued that the particular lawlessness John is speaking of is a general failure to love each other.

This approach to 1 John 3:4 seems to be an attempt to avoid the obvious conclusion of the text. It also doesn't really give us any clear definition of lawlessness. If we say that "lawlessness" is just a general unrighteousness, what is unrighteousness? Furthermore, if we say that lawlessness is a failure to love each other, what does it mean to love each other?

What's interesting is that if we seek a concrete answer to those questions, we're brought right back to God's Law. In the Bible, righteousness connects back to whatever conforms to the revealed will of God. Paul says that *all* Scripture, which would include God's Law, is profitable for "training in righteousness." That would entail that God's Law helps us learn the difference between what's righteous and unrighteous:

2 Timothy 3:16

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Yeshua even said that members of the kingdom of heaven are identified by their righteousness, which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. He made this statement in the context of affirming the ongoing authority of God's Law and admonishing His followers to do and teach even the least of the commandments of the Law (Matthew 5:17-20). Again, righteousness here is directly tied to the Torah.

What about John's comments about love? Well, once again, we're brought right back to God's Law. We're commanded, in the Torah, to love our neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). A couple of chapters later, John himself defines love as keeping God's commandments:

1 John 5:2-3

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and **obey his commandments**. For this is the love of God, **that we keep his commandments**. And his commandments are not burdensome.

If we love our neighbor, we will obey God's Laws against mistreating them. We won't steal from them, lie to them, and so forth. God's Law defines *what it means* to love our neighbor.

So even if we say that the "lawlessness" John refers to 1 John 3:4 is unrighteousness and a failure to love, in a roundabout way, we're still saying the same thing. God's Law gives us revelation of what constitutes righteousness and love. Of course we should live righteously and love one another lest we sin against God, and it's true that John emphasizes those things. But God's Law gives us the standard of what that looks like. So again, sin is lawlessness.

This is the obvious meaning of the text, and many Christian commentators seem to agree. Consider what Christian scholar, Dr. John Stott, says in his commentary on this verse:

The statement 'sin is lawlessness' (that is, a defiant violation of God's moral law) so identifies the two as to render them interchangeable terms. Wherever one of them is read, it is possible to substitute the other. It is not just that sin manifests itself in disregard for God's law, but that sin is in its very nature lawlessness. Lawlessness is the essence, not the result, of sin.

-John R. W. Stott, The Letters of John (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)

Messianic theologian, Tim Hegg, also has some noteworthy comments on this verse:

John makes it clear to us that "sin" (*hamartia*) is defined as "lawlessness" (*anomia*). This Greek word, *anomia*, is the word regularly used to translate the Hebrew word *torah* in the LXX [The Septuagint], with a prefixed *alpha* (*alpha privative*), which is equivalent to our English prefix "un" in a word like "unlawful." Thus, *anomia* could just as accurately be translated into English as "no Torah" in the sense of "against Torah" or "negating Torah." The attempts of some to interpret *anomia* as, in a general sense, unwillingness to submit to law, disregards the obvious use of the term throughout the LXX [The Septuagint], a use which must be taken into consideration when seeking to know how the word is used in the Apostolic Scriptures.

-Tim Hegg, "A Commentary on The Johannine Epistles," p. 149

The attempt of some Christians to redefine lawlessness in 1 John 3:4 as something other than transgressing God's will as expressed in His Law, seems to be a recent phenomenon in reaction to the Torah movement. Christians around the world are becoming more and more interested in things like the Sabbath, feast days, and dietary instructions found in God's Law. Of course, the definition of sin has some big implications when it comes to the question of how those parts of the Torah might apply to us today.

While Christians have always debated the application of certain parts of God's Law, for the most part we have agreed on the basic meaning of 1 John 3:4. Sin is the transgression of God's Law. The thing is, Christians throughout history and today have imposed their own understanding of God's Law onto the text, and that understanding has often excluded things like the Sabbath, feast days, and dietary instructions.

For example, many Christians have made distinctions within God's Law. The commands they believe should be kept today are designated as part of the "moral law," and the ones they don't think should be kept are designated as part of the "ceremonial law," or whatever. But Scripture doesn't make such a distinction. Breaking the Sabbath is a transgression of God's Law just the same as stealing is a transgression of God's Law. Both would be considered a sin according to the Bible's definition.

For more on this, we might recommend our short teaching, [The Immoral Moral Law](#).

In light of 1 John 3:4 and other passages, Christians who have embraced commands like the Sabbath are now saying, "Let's take another look at these verses and what they imply." How does the Bible's definition of sin impact how we are to live as Christians? This is something we ought to prayerfully and thoughtfully consider. If we find our theology and practice to be out of alignment with apostolic teaching, we should be willing to make some adjustments.

And by the way, according to the apostles, this isn't a light matter. For instance, scholars have pointed out another connection to lawlessness, *anomia*, in Greek. 2 Thessalonians 2:3 labels the antichrist "the man of lawlessness." Here is what New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall says of this connection:

It has been suggested that the Greek word used here has a different connotation. It is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 7 to describe "the man of lawlessness" who will be opposed to Christ at his second coming. This and other references suggest that the word was associated with the final outbreak of evil against Christ and that it signifies **rebellion against the will of God**. To commit sin is thus to place oneself on the side of the devil and the antichrist and to stand in opposition to Christ. If this view is correct...the stress falls more on the idea of **opposition to God which is inherent in disregarding his law**.

-I. Howard Marshall, New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 176-177

Now, to be clear, we certainly aren't saying that sincere Christians who desire to live a life pleasing to God are on the side of the devil and antichrist. We understand that the majority of faithful Christians have been convinced either by church tradition or their understanding of Scripture that some commandments, like the Sabbath and dietary instructions, don't apply to them. Also, if these Christians were shown their error in a spirit of love and gentleness (Galatians 6:1), they would be quick to repent. Nobody's theology is perfect, and we're all doing the best we can with what we know.

Having said that, again, this is not a light matter. Sin is serious and God takes it seriously. We need to be sure that we take it seriously, too.

We need to at least ask the question, "Does God consider something I'm doing or not doing a sin? Is my behavior in some area offending His holiness?" And if we come to understand that we are failing to live according to God's will in some area of our life, we need to make some adjustments to our theology and practice. That's simply what it means to be a Christian—we repent and submit to God's will.

Christian preacher Charles Spurgeon captures this sentiment well:

Sin has been pardoned at such a price that we cannot henceforth trifle with it.

-Charles Spurgeon, The Complete Words of C.H. Spurgeon, Vol. 32: Sermons 1877-1937

(Delmarva Publications, Inc.), p. 684

We all sin and fall short. And until Messiah returns and ushers in His Kingdom in fullness, there will always be room to grow. Thank God that when we do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Yeshua the Messiah (1 John 2:1). We have forgiveness in Him. But we must strive to live a life of holiness by His grace and with the help of the Holy Spirit.

In closing, as we read earlier, Dr. John Stott said that sin and lawlessness are interchangeable terms. With that in mind, we'll end by quoting the verse we started this teaching with:

Romans 6:1-2

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in [lawlessness] that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to [lawlessness] still live in it?

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

TWITTER: www.twitter.com/119Ministries#