

Defining Sin
Matthew 15:1–2, 10–20
Sunday, October 25, 2026

Let us pray: Speak your Word to us, Lord, and help us to follow where you are rightly leading, in Christ.
Amen.

There was this small Baptist church in the South where the pastor always gave long hellfire and brimstone sermons. Well, this one Sunday, he was going on longer than usual, and a man in the congregation fell asleep. He had been out too late partying the night before; it wasn't the first time. Worship ended, and the congregation all left, but the man was still asleep. The pastor came over to him and woke him up and said, "Brother Johnson, of all the people here, you especially do not need to be falling asleep during the sermon!" Brother Johnson said, "I wasn't asleep." The pastor said, "I *saw* you sitting there with your eyes closed!" Brother Johnson said, "I was praying!" The pastor said, "Oh, you were praying? Then you tell me – what was the sermon about?" Brother Johnson said, "Sin." The pastor was surprised and said, "Well, yeah, but what did I *say* about it?" And Brother Johnson said, "You're against it."

So if you happen to fall asleep today, the sermon is about sin, and yeah, I'm against it. But this sermon is not just about how "sin is bad." We've all heard that sermon before, and I think we know it pretty intuitively already.

At my previous church I did a summer sermon series once where I asked the congregation to submit anonymous questions that they had been struggling with or just wondering about, and I would preach a sermon on those questions. I got some really good questions like, "It seems like God is more 'vengeful' in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. How do we reconcile that? Did God change?" "What difference does baptism really make?" "How can we live with more of a servant heart?" "What happens

to our pets when they die? Do they go to heaven?” A six-year-old asked, “I know that God is always with us and we are never alone, but how can God be in all the places at once?”

As the series went on, I noticed that I started getting questions that were kind of similar. “Is suicide a sin?” “Is drinking a sin?” One question said, “The Old Testament says that we shouldn’t get tattoos, but the New Testament doesn’t say anything about it. Are tattoos a sin?” Another one asked, “The Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not consult a medium or wizard,’ but what about calling a radio psychic just for the fun of it? What about horoscopes or Ouija boards? Is that a sin?” I got all these questions about if *this* is a sin or if *that* is a sin. I jokingly asked them if they were just trying to figure out what they could get away with.

But it’s funny, I’ve started hearing those questions pop again. Not about drinking or tattoos or psychics, but I have had multiple conversations lately where people ask if *this* or *that* is a sin. And *not* because they’re just trying to figure out what they can get away with, but because they genuinely want to live a life of faith and there are complex things that they struggle with. An example of this came to me in an email, and it said, “God calls us to love our neighbors. If we fail to do so, have we committed a sin? I think we are all on a journey to try to love one another (sometimes even within your own family that is difficult!) so are we sinning because we are struggling with a relationship?” That’s a really great question. And I think it points us to an even deeper question, “What *is* sin?”

Let’s start with a definition. Merriam-Webster defines sin as “an offense against religious or moral law; a transgression of the law of God.” That’s probably how a lot of us understand sin; doing something that God tells us not to do. Back in the second century, a bishop and theologian named Irenaeus said that “sin is disobedience to God, through which humanity loses its original fellowship with its Creator.” St. Augustine around the year 400 said that sin is “any transgression in deed or word or desire of the eternal

law.” In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas said that sin is “a thought, desire, or action that goes against God’s eternal law.” John Knox said that sin is “our natural inclination to rebel against God and seek our own will rather than God’s.” The Westminster Shorter Catechism, one of our confessions of faith, says that “sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” Jonathan Edwards, who famously preached a sermon on “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” said that sin is “no other than disagreeableness, in a moral agent, to the law, or rule of his duty.” John Wesley, “Sin is a voluntary transgression of God’s known law” (something that you *know* is wrong, and you *willingly* do it anyway, so not an *accidental* transgression of God’s law). And Billy Graham, “A sin is any thought or action that falls short of God’s will.”

So a sin is *doing* or *thinking* something that goes against God’s law and God’s will (and they would say that we know what God’s *will* is through God’s *law*). But it’s not always that simple. Some people will say, “Yes, it *is* that simple. The Bible clearly says that *this* is a sin or *that* is a sin.” Well, okay, but how many of you like to eat shrimp, crab, or lobster, because Leviticus 11:9–12 says that *that* is an *abomination*. How many of us are wearing clothing made of different types of materials, like a cotton-polyester blend? Because Leviticus 19:19 says you *shall not* do that (just like you *shall not* kill, you *shall not* steal). Any of you ever worked on the sabbath? Because Exodus 31:14–15 and Exodus 35:2 say that you should be *killed* for doing that.

And some people say, “We’re not bound by the Old Testament law anymore because Jesus fulfilled it and set us free from it.” From *all* of it? What about, “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not steal,” “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” did Jesus set us free from *those* Old Testament laws, too? And they say, “Well, no, because Jesus *affirmed* those laws in the New Testament.” Okay, but what about taking the Lord’s name in vain? Jesus never specifically says that we shouldn’t do that. So did he set us free from *that* law, and

it's okay to use God's name in vain now? You see, this isn't as simple as we sometimes try to make it. So many people cherry pick which laws they're going to follow and enforce while ignoring others.

I grew up in Pensacola, FL, which for a while back in the 80s and 90s was the national focal point of the debate over abortion. I routinely saw pro-life protestors outside of clinics holding signs that said, "Thou shalt not kill," and I vividly remember at least three instances of those same pro-life protestors *killing* the doctors who worked at those clinics. And many of those same pro-life protestors were publicly supportive of the death penalty for criminals. "Thou shalt not kill...*except for this?*" (And this was on the Gulf Coast, so I *guarantee* you that those same people saying, "Thou shalt not kill" were also eating shrimp.)

It's not as simple as sin being something that is against the law of God. Other theologians have defined sin not just as external actions but as an internal "turning away from God." In the third century, Origen said, "Sin is the soul's turning away from God and allowing itself to be ruled by lesser desires." Athanasius called sin "turning away from God, the source of life, toward corruption and death." In the 1500s, Huldrych Zwingli said that sin is "the corruption of human nature that causes us to turn away from God and pursue our own desires." And Martin Bucer said that "sin is the corruption of our hearts that turns us away from loving God and serving our neighbors." So for them, sin is not just an *action* that goes against God's law. It is a corruption that exists inside of us that *causes* us to turn away from God. It's not just the *act* or *thought*, it's the *cause* of the act and the thought. It's not just that we sin, it's that we *are sinful*.

We see Jesus talking about this very thing in our scripture reading. The scribes and Pharisees come to him and say, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." *Your disciples are acting in a way that is against our understanding of God's law.* And

Jesus says, “It is not what *goes in* to a person that defiles them, but what *comes out* of a person. If you eat with unclean hands, that does not make you unclean. What makes you unclean is the evil intentions that come from your heart. Actions like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander are *driven* by anger and lust and jealousy.” The external stuff is driven by the internal stuff.

It’s like Jesus says earlier in Matthew’s gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, “God’s law says, ‘You shall not kill.’ But I say to you that if you are *angry* with someone, that is just as bad. God’s law says, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that if you look at someone with lust in your heart, it is just as bad.” So sin is not just about our *external actions*, it is also about our *internal condition*.

If you put these two understandings of sin together – the external actions and the internal condition – then we can understand sin as the condition in which we live that causes us to do the things that God does not want us to do. And when we look at it that way, it can feel pretty defeating, like *is there any hope for us not to sin?* Paul struggles with this very thing in his letter to the Romans. He says, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I *want*, but I do the very thing I *do not* want. I *know* what is right, and I *want* to do what is right, but I just can’t always *do it*.” He goes through this for almost *seven chapters*, until he finally throws up his hands and says, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” *What hope is there?*

And the very next thing he says is, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” On our own, we cannot overcome the internal *or* the external stuff of sin. But we are not on our own. In Christ’s death on a cross, *we are forgiven*. With his dying breaths, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” He wasn’t just talking about the people who crucified him. He was also talking about us. In that moment he forgave all the sin of the world for all time. *You are forgiven*. Not just for the things you have *done*, but for the things you *will do*.

I think that one of the things behind our questions of, “Is *this* a sin? Is *that* a sin?” is our fear of the *consequences* of sin. We don’t want to do something that separates us from God or causes God not to love us or – God forbid – causes God to *punish* us. But what Paul invites us to do is to trust in the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. He says, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor *anything else in all creation – nothing* – will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!” All the sin and mistakes in the world cannot separate us from God’s love, because in his death on a cross, Jesus has conquered and forgiven sin.

The *reality* about us – the *good news* about us – is *not* that we are sinners. It is that we are *forgiven* sinners. And even when we mess up, even when we make mistakes, even when we miss the mark that God has set for us and stray from the path that God calls us to follow, there is *grace*. There is *forgiveness*. There are second chances. All you have to do is *trust* in that and *keep trying*. Keep moving forward toward the God who loves you.

There is one last way that I want to try to answer this question of, “What is sin?” We have said that sin is the internal condition that causes us to act in ways that go against God’s law. And we’ve seen how tricky that issue of God’s law is. But what does *Jesus* say God’s law is? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” So sin is our failure to love God and our neighbor. Julian of Norwich said that sin is “what wounds us and separates us from the fullness of God’s love, but cannot overcome that love.” William Tyndale said that sin is “the unbelief of the heart that prevents us from trusting God and loving our neighbors.” Philip Melanchthon said that sin is “our failure to fear, love, and trust God as we should.”

And Frederick Buechner compares sin to a person who, instead of looking out a window at the world, spends life staring into a mirror. Sin is that which tries to *keep us* from loving God and our neighbor.

And we will *all* fail at that from time to time. We will all stumble in our efforts to love God and our neighbor. We will all mess up, make mistakes, miss the mark, and wander from the path. We will all hurt others and act in our own self-interest. That's just reality. We are imperfect human beings. So when you *do* fall short of loving God and your neighbor, have grace with yourself, because God does. When this other person falls short of loving God and their neighbor, have grace with *them*, because God does. Don't judge or condemn someone else for their sin, because we've all got our own, and the only one in the position to judge us is Jesus Christ, and he *forgave* us. Billy Graham said, "It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict (to make us think, "I might have gotten that wrong."). It is God's job to judge (to say, "Yeah, you *did* get that wrong."). It is *my* job to *love*."

If you only remember one thing from this sermon, I want you to remember this. *Do the best you can* to love God and love your neighbor. No one expects you to be perfect. Don't expect anyone else to be. And when you fall short, ask for forgiveness, trust that there is grace, and then try again. Amen.