

On the Nature of Sin

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God creates us in love within his loving heart. His intention is that we should respond to him in love by aligning ourselves with his will and thus by all of us becoming one in him.

However, we choose to ignore the kingship of God in our lives and to follow our own wills. When we do this, we close ourselves off to God and separate ourselves from his love. God continues to love us, hold us in existence, and await our return to him. Our intentional separation from him, the Creator, and our decision to attend to a creature instead is sin. Sin is “missing the mark” (Grk. *hamartia*) by casting our attention elsewhere. The “mark” is the will of God.

When we recognize that we have departed from God’s will, we can:

- (a) Justify ourselves with reasons, and continue in our sinful way. When we do this, our sin soon becomes habitual sin and is termed “hard-heartedness” or “stubbornness.”
- (b) Feel pangs of guilt and enter a gloomy and morbid state of heart where we castigate ourselves for not being perfect.
- (c) Recognize our error and return our attention and our heart to God, seeking to re-unite with him. This is repentance.

We learn much sin when we are children, largely from our parents’ example of poor and unvirtuous behavior. Certain of these behaviors interact with the weaknesses in our own spirits. These are the foundations for our deep, life-long sins. This is as close as I can get to understanding “original sin”: evil and selfish behavior is learned from the previous generation.

We also learn virtuous behavior from others. Because of their scolding, imploring, advising, etc.—or because of our recognition of the suffering we are causing others by our careless behavior—we have motive to adjust or reform our behavior. This can lead to repentance.

Jesus taught us to “love God” and “love neighbor.” The life of union with God’s will is a state or condition of heart. We surrender our attention and our will to the consciousness and will of God. This results in kind, virtuous behavior which is considerate of others and which thus binds us together as brothers and sisters—one in the Lord.

Likewise, sin is a state or condition of heart, in which attention and desire are turned inward toward the self.

Since virtue and sin are conditions or states of the heart, what could it mean to say that Jesus by his death won the forgiveness of sins? In particular, if God loves everything he creates

and waits like the Prodigal Father for sinners to return to his will, what could forgiveness mean? In his loving heart, God always overlooks our sins and keeps his eye on our re-union with him.

There is hanging about this forgiveness issue an aroma of the accountant—that God adds up our sins or records them in his memory to throw them in our faces at some point and demand retribution. – But such a God would be more like the unrepentant steward, who strangled the debtor who couldn't repay him than like the merciful master who forgave the steward originally, perhaps even before the latter spoke.

How does Jesus by his death accomplish the forgiveness of our sins? Does God have to be coaxed into forgiveness by a splendid gift or paid a handsome price to release us from what he holds against us? Sin, after all, is a weakness in ourselves, a fault of selfishness, which perhaps developmentally has a good purpose in early life but distracts us from God later on, especially under the influence of a worldly environment which is as weak and morally immature as we are.

Would a father expect his child to throw the ball through the hoop every time, and punish him when he missed?

What is the source of the “debt” that we must repay and cannot—the debt that Jesus must repay for us by his death?

St. Paul tells us that Jesus set aside the Law because the Law was impossible to keep. It demanded a standard of behavior that was impossible to maintain. If the Father sets a standard which is admirable in itself but impossible to attain over the long run, there is no justice in demanding retribution for our failure to keep the law. Such a situation is a trap which we *must* become ensnared in.

That is not the God who loves everything he creates. That is not the God of mercy.

Sin is not some kind of stain that accumulates on us. It is a turning of attention to a thing rather than to God. How can this state of consciousness be “washed away” by God or by the death of Jesus?

What the death of Jesus *can* do is grab our attention with the message that God in Jesus is willing to go to any lengths to convince us to return to him, even to death. The death of Jesus is a demonstration of the infinite mercy of the loving God.

Does the cross take away our guilt due to sin? Not directly: there is no accountant here. But yes, it does. In the presence of endless mercy, what is the use to us of our guilt? We let it go and turn to God.

The usual notion of sin, then, is a myth. It is a theological extension of a practical reality: parents discipline their children for inappropriate behavior. The behavior may be truly offensive to the parent, such as the child's stealing from the parent. The parent, then, must not only correct the child's behavior but also forgive the child's offense.

It is easy to see that in the context of the Law of God, the concept of sin would be created on the analogy of the parent's duty. In this view, God makes a moral law which represents an ideal mode of behavior. Humans do not live up to that ideal. That is sin. God punishes sin in order to adjust our behavior. And since God is creator and master of the universe, any violation of the Law is considered an offense against God's desire and expectation of us and must be forgiven. Hence, the Cross. We cannot satisfy the offense against God. God himself must.

That is the myth. However, it is unjust and unfair to us. God knows that we are weak and unable to fulfill the law, as St. Paul says. Then, how can God hold our violations of the Law against us? And how can he expect retribution from us for sins we cannot help but commit in our weakness?

There is an absolute standard of responsibility—culpability—here which is not analogous to the parental discipline situation. There, the child disobeys because his desire is different from the parent's, and the parent in disciplining the child, is attempting to align the child's desire with his own. It is a developmental process. Correction of the child is for discipline, not punishment.

From this perspective, the presumption of free will, which underlies our understanding of sin, to which culpability accrues and for which forgiveness must be earned, must be examined. Is there actually such a thing as a freely chosen action? It appears that all actions—even those which we “decide” to do—arise from a matrix of desires which have their source deep within us. And when we try to identify this source, we cannot locate the origins of these desires in our hearts nor can we control them. When desires compete within us, we can only acquiesce to the one which is strongest.

If our behavior is simply a response to uncontrollable desires, then there is no free will, no culpability before God for our actions, and no need to satisfy the justice of God. If this is actually the case, the Cross of Jesus is about something else—about the offer of infinite love, as an appeal to our desire.

If this is the most satisfactory analysis of sin and of human will, then morally, we are simply observers of our own desires and consequent actions. The source of these is beyond us—in the hands of God. Our purpose in life, then, is simply to observe and accept what God over time is transforming us into.

“Forgiveness” is not about some action which the forgiver performs on other people. The “forgiveness of sins” or “of sin” is not about removal—such as removal of a stain or of an imperfection. The term “forgiveness” has its roots in the meaning “giving forth,” which connotes giving without external motivation or coercion, or else the term has its roots in “giving beforehand,” which connotes giving before being asked to give. In either case, forgiveness means to forego one's due—or one's emotional response—in regards to someone else's action—the sin—in order that all barriers on the part of the forgiver are removed, and the forgiver can purely and open-heartedly extend the offer that the perpetrator rejoin communion and harmony with the forgiver.

In other words, forgiveness is forgetting—putting behind oneself—the act which separates the perpetrator from the forgiver and, more importantly, forgiveness is opening the way to re-unification. Forgiveness is about re-establishing unity. So the “forgiveness of sins” means that God is interested in nothing other than the sinner’s return to unity with God. The Cross is the most forceful statement of this intention of God’s—that *everyone* might be reconciled and reunited with God, regardless of their previous behavior, their previous turnings-away from God.

The Book of Wisdom tells us that “God loves everything he creates,” and since this is true, God is willing to wait at least for all time for his creatures to re-join him in love.

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