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Sin

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from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Several months ago I got the assignment to write the lead piece for this issue on sin. The editor of *Forum*, namely, my colleague John Cooper, helpfully noted that I was “the obvious choice for this topic.”

It’s true that I’ve been thinking and writing about sin for many years. A main conclusion I’ve drawn is that, like an addiction, our sinfulness damages not only those we sin against, but also our own judgment and will.

A woman who has gotten into the habit of lying might eventually find it hard to tell the difference between a lie and the truth. Whatever’s convenient seems “true” to her. She now lies because she’s a liar. And she has no particular desire to change. Similarly, a man who thinks women are “broads” might feel insulted—and angry—when a woman refuses to be treated like a broad. The reason is that he feels entitled to his sexism, and he feels sure that she isn’t entitled to object to it. His sexism has corrupted his judgment.

When we sin we corrupt ourselves. Evil starts to look normal to us. In a racist culture, racism will look normal. In a secular culture, indifference toward God will look normal, as it does in much secular education. Human character forms culture, but culture also forms human character. And the formation runs not only across regions and peoples, but also along generations. A boy can “inherit” his father’s sexist idea that men ought to dominate women. A daughter can “inherit” her mother’s sexist idea that women ought to let men do it.

The result of all this corruption is devastating. Each of us has been born into a world in which, for centuries, sin has damaged the great interactive network of *shalom*—twisting the thousands of bonds that give particular beings integrity and that tie them to others. Sin is thus a *dynamic* motif in Christian thinking: it is not just a particular breach of conduct. It’s a multiplying power, a kind of spiritual AIDS that eventually breaks everything down and opens the way for hordes of opportunistic sins.

Sin is why our world needs its Savior. And self-deception about sin is a reason to speak candidly about sin and its miseries. That’s principally why good colleagues and I have devoted this issue of *Forum* to a topic we all would rather ignore.

Grace and peace,

Neal



REFLECTIONS ON SIN

Sin

The first thing to say about sin is that it spoils everything. Recall the Bible’s opening chapters: In the beginning, God delights in his creation. Like an artist stepping back from his day’s work, God keeps saying “Good!” And when the work is done, God exults in it. “Very good!” says God.

Creation is an overflowing of God’s love and hospitality. It was his idea to make room for others and his nature to do it with supreme exuberance and command. The result was a wonder, a world of deep orders and beauties superintended by its crowning species—human beings created to be God’s spit and image.

Only five chapters later (Gen. 6:5) these marvelous beings are already hopelessly corrupt. Human beings had become “wicked,” with their hearts full of “evil all the time.” In words of unimaginable consternation and sorrow, the narrator tells us of God’s response to human sin. The God who had been filled with an almost boyish enthusiasm at his work, now grieves over it: “The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled” (v. 6).

Next the flood, which is uncreation, the first stage of God’s anguished do-over of his original project.

For centuries, theologians have worried about an anguished and regretful God. I understand. But I don’t want to lose what the Bible is teaching me with stories of God’s creation and uncreation.

The stories say that sin spoils everything, even for God, and that the fitting response to it is grief.

A Definition and Some Distinctions

The reason sin is a spoiler is that it’s a species of evil. Evil is what’s wrong with the world, and it includes trouble in nature as well as in human nature. It includes disease as well as theft, birth defects as well as character defects. We might define evil as *any spoiling of shalom*, any deviation from the way God wants things to be. Thinking along these lines, we can see that sin is

by Cornelius
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President and Charles
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a subset of evil: it’s any evil for which somebody is to blame, whether as an individual or as a member of a group. All sin is evil, but not all evil is sin. A killing by a two-year-old who picks up a gun is a terrible evil, but not an actual sin, at least not by the two-year-old. But a premeditated killing by a drug dealer of a drug enforcement officer is both evil and sinful. We could say, in short, that sin is *culpable evil*.

This means that sin isn’t quite the same thing as disease. True, sinful acts sometimes cause disease, as when promiscuous sex causes AIDS. But having AIDS isn’t by itself sinful, as we know from the millions of women and babies who contract it only because of a husband and father’s promiscuity. True, also, that disease is a favorite image of sin: “What he did,” we say, “was so sick.” Still, the two evils remain distinct because sin is a spiritual evil and disease is a physical one. We thus need saving grace for our sin and healing mercy for our diseases.

Sin isn’t quite the same thing as addiction, either. Just as in the case of disease, sinful acts can cause addictions, as when a man hooks himself on booze by freely consuming a lot of it for ten years. In general, the sins of appetite—greed, gluttony, lust—are especially likely to show some of the main dynamics of addiction: desire for pleasurable mood

*Sin becomes a power
of darkness when it
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a home in them.*

Sin ► change, obsession, compulsion, and, especially, tragic attempts to relieve distress by partaking of the same thing that caused it (think of curing a hangover with a morning binge). But these classic dynamics don't show up in all forms of sin. A person who simply "forgets God," as Jeremiah so often laments, isn't at all likely to be seeking a mood change, or to be obsessed with his sin. And this is true of other listless sins, too, such as mindless conformity to local bigotry. Not all sin is addictive. And not all addictions are sinful. After all, some addictions start in the womb. Some start from innocent use of prescribed medication. Addictions in these cases look a lot less like sin than like physical evils for which the addict needs not God's forgiveness, but his healing mercy.

Is all sin equally bad? Most Christians have said no. And they have had Jesus on their side. Speaking of those who reject the words and deeds of gospel grace, our Lord used the formula "more tolerable for Sodom than for you" (Matt. 10:15; 11:20-24). His followers do generally believe that all sin is equally *wrong* because all of it spoils shalom. But they've noticed that some sins spoil shalom a lot more than some others do. Given a choice, our neighbor would rather have us covet his Lexus than steal it. Most Christians have thought that covetousness is a bad sin because it corrupts the heart and may also lead to theft. But they have thought theft was worse than covetousness because it damages more than the heart of the thief. And they have thought envy worse than covetousness because envy (resentment of the good fortune of others) clusters in the heart with pride and malice, and may thus lead to murder. Think of Cain. Bad enough for Cain to resent his brother Abel: worse to act on his resentment.

But there are mysteries in this neighborhood. Most of us would say that adultery in one's heart damages others less than adultery at the Marriott. And yet, adultery in one's heart may corrupt us in subtle, progressive ways, rippling out unpredictably to affect others, so that the final tally in grievousness between adultery in one's heart and adultery in a hotel room may be closer than we think.

In the System

The power of sin to spoil things is compounded by its terrible tendency to get into systems and corrupt them. We will never understand sin until we face the fact that sin is not only personal, but also interpersonal and even suprapersonal. Sin is far more than the sum of what sinners do. Sin becomes a power of darkness when it gets into the bowels of institutions and traditions and makes a home in them.

So the Romans, for example, made a habit of crucifying their enemies. It became part of their mystique. Like all terrorists their goal was not only to cause pain, but also and especially to cause fear. So they turned the torture of troublemakers into a public spectacle. And the whole thing—the practice of public torture, the fear of it, the silencing of enemies, the use of informants to spy on enemies of the state—became a power of darkness, no matter what Satan's personal role in it was. A power can be a demon, but also a practice, a pattern of expectation, a structure of iniquity.

Genesis 4 shows us terrorism getting into the family system of the human race. In the land of Nod Cain starts a family and passes sin down the generations like a gene. At the sixth generation, the Genesis narrator pauses to snap a picture of a homicidal braggart by the name of Lamech.

"Lamech said to his wives: 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of

We're born sinners, the way Michael Jordan is a born athlete. Sin is what we do. It's not only that we're sinners because we sin; it's also that we sin because we're sinners.

Lamech, listen to what I say. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Gen. 4:23-24)

You hit me, I kill you. You kill one of mine, I kill seventy of yours. Don't mess with me. Pass the word on.

Notice one other little piece of terrorism in this text. Lamech wants his whole village to know that he's a thug so they'll fear him and favor him. But who's his first audience? Lamech said to *his wives*: "Listen to me. I kill guys who even think of raising their hand to me. Do you get the message? Adah? Zillah?"

From there, the history of sin and corruption moves on, down the ages, in a cast of billions. Each new generation, and each new person, reaps what others have sown, and then sows what others will reap. This is true not only of goodness, but also of evil, which each generation not only receives, but also ratifies by its own sin. Terrorists, for example, do not think of themselves as others think of them—irrational zealots consumed by nameless malice that has turned them into enemies of the peace established by decent people. Like Lamech, they think of their violence as retaliation. And because they have short fuses and long memories, terrorists may think of themselves as redressing grievances that are decades or even centuries old.

The powers that cause suffering are bigger than the individual acts of human beings. And so the confessions of the Christian church say one way or another that it's not just particular acts or thoughts that are now corrupt. It's our whole nature. We're born sinners, the way Michael Jordan is a born athlete. Sin is what we do. It's not only that we're sinners because we sin; it's also that we sin because we're sinners. And it's not just some of us. It's the whole race. We're on the same page with Adam, Eve, Cain, and Lamech. All of us are now bent toward sin. In the world we have not just sins, but sin; not just wrong acts, but also wrong motives, tendencies, habits, practices, and patterns that break down the integrity of persons, families, and whole cultures.

This drum roll of disaster has never been fixed by human hands. Who in heaven's name can save us?

The Calling of Matthew

*A Sermon by
Calvin Van Reken
Professor of Moral
Theology*



Matthew tells us he was sitting at the tax collector's booth when Jesus passed by and said to him, "Follow me," and so he got up and did just that. Together they went to Matthew's house and had dinner, the setting and meal provided by the excess taxes he was able to collect from his fellow Jews because he had Roman backing. Matthew invited his friends, other tax collectors and sinners—all persons ostracized from the Jewish religious community. The Pharisees found this setting and these diners objectionable. They correctly presumed that an orthodox rabbi (the sort they approved of and didn't consider Jesus), would not enter a tax collector's house or eat with such people.

Matthew could have put a better face on all this. He could have said that while he was a tax collector, he was one of the more honest ones. He could have said that his friends were really good people who were unfairly counted as sinners by the Pharisees. He could have described the generous table he set for Jesus and all the other guests. Matthew didn't have to take it on the chin; there are ways an author can weave words

to slip the punch. But he doesn't use any of them. He leaves us to believe that Jesus called him to follow for no apparent reason, and then tells us that Jesus referred to him and his buddies as sick sinners.

Jesus explained his hanging out with

Matthew by saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." So Matthew writes himself into the gospel, not only admitting that he was a tax collector who associated with sinners, but that Jesus himself described him and his dinner guests as sick, in need of a doctor. Paralleling this with Jesus calling them "sinners" (as opposed to righteous), it's clear that the sickness was spiritual. The Pharisees no doubt agreed with this assessment. They too called Matthew and his friends "sinners."

It's possible to read Jesus'

When most people speak publicly about themselves, there are two things you can usually count on. First, people tend to have a lot to say about themselves. Second, they have generally good things to say. You never hear politicians, for example, herald their mistakes or any misconduct. Doctors hang their diplomas or licenses on the wall, not malpractice lawsuits they may have lost. Some public speakers are self-deprecating, but usually as an attempt at humor in a self-serving way of feigning humility. The truth is that few of us want to publicly expose our failings and weaknesses. We want others to think well of us, and we usually judge that putting ourselves in the best possible light contributes to that end. Sometimes we may even stretch the truth a bit to make ourselves look better.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew, the author writes himself into his gospel. Bucking the natural tendencies, he doesn't waste very much ink on himself, and also doesn't present himself in a very flattering light. He isn't even neutral; he makes himself look bad. Yet he does so without any hint of the kind of self-deprecation that is often used to make one seem humble. He simply states the truth about his calling. Apparently Matthew didn't receive the kind of popular parenting that promotes self-esteem. When his father watched him strike out three times in Little League, he probably didn't criticize the umpire.

Today we are in danger of losing our joy because we don't see ourselves as great sinners.



"The Calling of St. Matthew" by Caravaggio