

CHIEF MINISTRIES

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Just what is sin anyway? Everyone should have some nice, neat definition filed away somewhere. “Sin is a lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in act, disposition or state.”

Thank-you Mr. Theologian, I guess I knew it was something like that. But now I realize that what I really want to ask isn't What?, but why? Why do I think and act the way I do?

“Every man sins because he has a sin nature - Christian and non-Christian alike:” I see. And what is a sin nature?

“A sin nature is a governing power or principle within. It is that which excites sin from within.” It follows then, if my theologian friend is correct, that every human has within him some sort of sinister spiritual force or diabolic mental tumor that influences his behavior. It must be more than a capacity for sin because sin is much more prevailing in human beings than the word “capacity” would imply.

Perhaps the clearest passage describing this nature is Ephesians 2:3. Paul tells us “*We were by nature children of wrath.*” This nature, Paul says, was our very life. “*We to all formally lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind.*”

What we have is a paradox. This life, he says, was really non-life. A walking death. “*You were dead in your trespasses and sins.*”

You can't moderate it. So total is this state of being that God says elsewhere, “*There is no one righteous. Not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless, there is no one who does good, no not one.*”

But why? Why does man find himself in such a state? Since we are searching for the root of the problem, we must go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Somehow, under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, our 1st parents acquired this deathly nature. Actually, to be more accurate, the Bible focuses in on what they lost rather than on what they acquired.

God was extremely pointed in telling them..... And us. What would happen if they disobeyed their Creator? “*You will surely die.*” (Genesis 2:17)

Of course, He meant physical death, as is so vividly demonstrated in the following chapters of Genesis. But did God mean something more than physical death? I am sure that He did. Ephesians 2:1 should settle the question for everyone. “*You were dead in your trespasses and sins.*”

What then really happened to those two-tragic people? Though still “living” they had lost life. Eventually, they would lose physical life. But right at the moment of disobedience they lost true life.

But couldn't Adam and Eve still walk and talk and eat and love and laugh and weep and dream? What they lost is what we hear every day through advertising media: “you haven't really lived.” We're told, “until you've tried _____, seen _____, heard _____, felt _____, tasted _____.”

By the definition of some, many aren't really alive at all. You see each of us determines the degree to which we or anyone else is alive by what we consider to be true fulfillment in life. If we or they have "that", we or they are truly living! If we or they do not have "that", then forget it. Life has not been discovered at all.

The contradictory voices sing across the airwaves, shout from seductive billboards, passionately plead from the corners of a thousand paperbacks. Who is right? Is anybody right?

We will never know for sure what it is to truly live unless we hear from the only one who could truly know. And that One, of course, is the One who made us. He is the one who told Adam and Eve that they had lost it! If only we could hear from our Creator an extended description of someone who "had it," then we would know.

And has He done that? Most perfectly! There was only One - just One - who "had it" from His birth all the way through life. That One, of course, is Jesus. He certainly was the most alive human who ever walked this earth. (Of course, He was and still is God, but that's not the point right now) He indeed was a man. A perfect man.

And what was the essence of His life? Was it simply that He did everything right? He did. Yet it was something deeper than that. The essence of His life was that all that He did - His words, His works, His entire life - came from His Father. He was a totally dependent life. For a human to be truly alive - by our Creator's definition - is to live as an extension of God's own life.

Listen to what Jesus said: *"The words that I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing His work." "I live because of the Father." "I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work You gave me to do....Now they know that everything You have given me comes from You." "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:10; 6:57a; 17:4,7; 14:9b)*

In every respect He was the perfect man. In fact, the Holy Spirit through Paul in Ephesians 4:13 tells us that the perfect man would attain to *"the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* (See also 1John 2:6, 1 Corinthians 11:1)

Keeping in mind that the ultimate purpose of God in all things is to display His own glory (Ephesians 1:12), let's see if we can put together in one sentence what God has in mind for a fully operational human being. How does this sound? God's purpose in creating us is so that we, through a dependent relationship with our God, could receive and display the very life of God - the glory of God.

Through His unique creation of man, all that God wished to show of Himself - His perfections, His purity, His love - could be seen and most fully appreciated. For a person to fulfill this function is life and anything less than this is less than life.

What then happened in the garden of Eden? Adam and Eve lost life. At least part of what Satan told them would happen, happened. They became independent creatures, cut off from the life of God. Cut off from His mind, His perfections, His purity, life for them (if indeed it was life) had to be found within themselves. It was in that tragic sense that they became "like God".

God's life flows from no higher source than Himself. He draws on no moral law outside of Himself. So now Adam and Eve were severed from any higher, outside source, any moral law to sustain them. They were on their own.

Yes, they had acquired something. They were by nature children of wrath. But far more foundationally, they lost something. They lost dependent life from God. They were now *"dead in trespasses and sins."* If they were to find meaning in that existence, if they were to make any sense out of the few years allotted to them before their bodies withered and died, they had to do it on their own.

“Flesh”, that is, everything mortal about them, became very important. Of course, it was important - it was all they had. Brains, emotions, senses, creativity, imagination, bodies. Life was here, in the flesh. It was nowhere else. My, what a potential for these first humans! Man was like God. He was his own “strong one.” (For that is the meaning of “elohim,” god). The “grand adventure” had begun!

Think about life for a moment - at its best and at its worst. Try picturing a tiny baby in her mother’s arms. So soft, so lovable. Look a couple years later with the sun in her hair. Chubby little hands, sparkling eyes, tiny nose, delicate smile, spontaneous laugh, running across the lawn and yelling out, “Daddy’s home.” Or look at any shy little boy, four years old hanging upside down from his swing wondering why the world look so strange. Holes in his jeans, muddy hands, toy guns, baseball cards - so fully alive! 15 years later, so beautiful, so handsome, so expectant. And then...long years, stress, illness, ulcers, wrinkles, pain, sorrow, stooping, decay, dim eyes, the wheelchair, white sheets, jumbled words, a final gasp, death, a box.... a grave - that final offense against “the good adventure.”

And if that weren’t enough, all through these years there is the ugly side - the evil that haunts man’s highest moments - the destructive pride, abuses, cruelty, sex crimes, envy, murders, robbing, deceit. But why? Jesus said, “*you in me and I in you.*” Man was never made for “life in the flesh.”

If we could grasp the absolute, unutterable horror of that tragic day in Eden. It was a twofold tragedy, both God’s and man’s.

Imagine for a moment that you are a judge who is also a master woodcraftsman. With supreme care you carve a gavel, uniquely shaped to be held in your hand as an extension and expression of yourself. Imagine further that somehow that choice gavel is removed from your hand, the one for whom it was made. Imagine it being picked up and used for hammering nails or pounding in stakes or scraping the insides of moldy garbage cans. No matter how productive that gavel might be, no matter how destructive (if used as a club), every use, every act would be a most ugly offense to you, the gavel-maker.

So also must the human race have become an offense to God. The very creatures who were to express God’s glory - His will, His purity, His love - were aborting and perverting that display. To put it mildly, God was grieved. But the tragedy was not God’s alone. The tragedy was also man’s.

Every man unless he is able to practice some form of total deception, is aware of a strange abiding emptiness. Even in his most productive moments - his greatest hours of achievement - he senses a shallowness, a vague loneliness, a foreboding doubt that perhaps what he had assumed to be life was not really life at all.

This, then, is the essence of sin. It is more than some carefully worded, theological definition. That locked in statement quoted earlier simply will not do. Sin is the expression of man’s struggle with the meaning of his existence while missing life from God. It is all the varieties of ways man deals with and expresses his alienation from his Creator as he encounters the inescapable issue of meaning.

Adam and Eve voluntarily placed themselves in this position of independence from God for the determination of significance in life. They would decide what was to be good and what was to be bad; where values were to be found. Thus, “*sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin*” (Romans 5:12)

Sin is a transgression of the law of God. And to reject life, to determine a will different from the will of God (which is the law of God) is the most heinous crime a person can commit. The essence of sin, then, cannot be separated from the issue of meaning.

How can I describe it so casually as a struggle with “meaning”? Doesn’t the Bible say, “*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked*”?

Yes, but Isaiah 53:5 most literally says, *“He was pierced for our rebellion...He was crushed for our perversions.”* In rebelling against God’s perfect intention and perverting the qualities of being human and running away from God, we have committed the ultimate offense. For the wrath of God to be aroused - for the lake of fire to be man’s ultimate end - is justice in view of the terrible crime committed.

Because of that crime a curse settled over the whole earth. It settled most pointedly upon man who was now mortal. It settled on all creation so that it to was subjected to frustration (aimlessness) (Romans 8:20). It was heard in the form of a shout from the crowds as they erected the Tower of Babel. *“Let us make a name for ourselves”* (Genesis 11:4). It was repeatedly echoed in the words, *“everyone did as he saw fit”* (Judges 17:6, 21:25). Perhaps Solomon gave it a more eloquent expression when he cried: *“meaningless! Meaningless!, Says the teacher. Utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless”* (Ecclesiastes 1:2) (also see 1 Samuel 12:20-21, 2 Kings 17:15) Futile or vain here is the same word.

And so, it has remained. Through all the centuries. As a representative child of Adam I have rejected all of God’s efforts to communicate with me. I stoned His prophets, I mocked His Scriptures. And then 2000 years ago - I killed His son. The One who came to bring me the only hope, His very life. Since that day my journey through the darkness has only accelerated. I have become adept at inventing counterfeit lights.

(Speaking like the majority of the world thinks today:)

More recently I discovered that God is dead anyway. I am a product of organic evolution. A cosmic accident. A unique moment in a mysterious 30 - billion year process. It is an adventure filled with suspense - and cruelty and meaninglessness. And though I do not know what is ahead, never fear. I am on my way! Even today after reading the USA Today and the latest issue of Time magazine, and even though I acknowledge countless gallons of human tears, the endless cycle of agonizing tragedy, I, along with the world’s majority, maintain that Adam made the right decision. Even as I go to the pill window, rush to the psych department, try and buy a K-2 stick, drink that birthday wine, go through a divorce, come back to prison for the 2nd 3rd or 4th time, watch my children reject all the ideals I have tried to pass on, I still say there is hope!

“You were wearied by all your ways, but you would not say, ‘it is hopeless’! You found renewal of your strength and so you did not faint.” (Isaiah 57:10) read all about futile idolatry in that whole chapter!

I wonder if you could imagine for a moment the entire human race as though it were an art gallery full of picture frames. Long, long halls. Billions of picture frames - without any pictures! Empty. Can you visualize it?

Some of the frames are very intricately carved. Some with delicate gold leaf. Some rather gaudily painted. Others dirty, chipped. But every frame wrapped around – nothing - emptiness.

Is it possible this is how God sees the human race? An art gallery with no paintings.

Each human being was intended to frame an inimitable, individual masterpiece of God’s own reflected glory. But where God should be there is only emptiness - a bare patch of wall. Since the frames are conscious, however, the fact of emptiness is simply too devastating - to self-destructive to acknowledge. And so, humankind becomes obsessed with the only thing left to it - its own flesh. The frame. “Life”, if it is to be found at all, must be found in one’s own frame and the frames around him.

So, ingeniously and carefully, man lights his gallery, carpets and air conditions the halls, creates all sorts of special displays, and leads community crusades to clean up the dirty and broken frames. For special sessions of the leadership and its “frozen chosen” they formulate long-range plans to keep their chapels and classrooms full of frames. The old school antique section of the gallery presents a special challenge. A relaxing of tensions must be made between frames demanding individualistic displays and frames committed to a group identity.

Calm must be restored to those remote wings of the gallery which have been so neglected and now demand equal quality with the more privileged galleries.

But since one must naturally protect the welfare of one's own frame, and since growth now appears beyond control, it seems that the gallery rules must be changed. Forget that dark hall, those jumbled halls. Dismantle those old frames. Abort the delivery of new frames... no... wait...it wasn't supposed to work out this way. We thought all our new inventions and progress would solve the difficulties and....if only we had more time...but the air is getting foul...lights are beginning to flicker...sounds of confusion are coming from every corner. And - anyway, -There Are No Pictures. We all know that - Emptiness. Everywhere emptiness. What difference does it all make anyway?

In the Bible, the concept of sin is inseparable from the issues of meaning. Certainly, this is the thrust of the book of Ecclesiastes. In chapter 2 of that book, Solomon carefully listed for us the variety of ways he attempted to find meaning in life. *"I thought in my heart, 'come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.' But that also proved to be meaningless. 'Laughter', I said, is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?' I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly - my mind was still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all of my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun....So I hated life, because the work that was done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."* (Ecclesiastes 2:1-4,10-11,17)

Two things made Solomon's quote quite different from most people. Because of these two things, his book becomes especially helpful to us. first, he had the position and the finances to try all of the options that he imagined might give some sense of meaning to life. Second, David's son had the brains to see through to the emptiness of everything he tried. I'm no Solomon. Neither are you. But the core issue is still just the same for every man, every woman: "Where do I find life?"

Although we do not possess Solomon's gold we have our own ambitions and fragile fantasies. For these we struggle and sacrifice, envy and steal. Unfortunately; we do not possess Solomon's wisdom either. Thinking we've "made it", we cling tenaciously to our idols and pride, unwilling to admit to ourselves or anyone else *"Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"* (Isaiah 44:20) Read all of chapter 44 regarding the folly of idolatry.

By nature, (because of Adam) man is committed to this sometimes colorful, oftentimes suspenseful, but always "dead-end street" existence. Sin, then, is not simply some capacity or sinister inner force. It is rather the fundamental necessity for every person who does not possess life from God. He has no alternative but to struggle with the "futility" of his mind (Ephesians 4:17,18), *forced by birth to live in a world environment subjected to futility* (Romans 8:20).

We humans have no choice but to deal with the issue of meaning - to search for it, fight for it, envy it in others, react against those who might take it from us, grieve because it has been lost, or perhaps (most deceptively and pitifully) be deluded into thinking we have found it. To give up is suicide. But to continue existing in meaninglessness - is that so much better?

This is sin. It is not merely something a non-Christian "has," it is his most basic nature.

It would appear that through much of history it was the rare person who ever stopped and asked why. Perhaps for most, the job of survival was so demanding there simply wasn't time to ask questions. For others, their unquestioned commitment to family or King or religious system appeared to fill the vacuum. Yet the question Why?, ever lurking in the shadows has never left. The conscious or unconscious issue of meaning has driven every man who has ever lived.

For the non-Christian, the combined will to live and the will to discover meaning find expression in what Paul calls “*the deeds of the flesh*.” “*Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these....*” (Galatians 5:19-21)

The first three “deeds,” immorality, impurity, and sensuality, obviously relate to man’s attempt to get at meaning through his body - his glands and senses, his fantasies. Idolatry is very broad. And idolater is one who has made up his mind on where and how he will find life. And whatever it is, he will work feverishly to get it, guard it, sacrifice to it and worship it. To lose it is to lose life.

Sorcery focuses on the search for meaning in the occult. Enmities, strife, jealousy, and outbursts of anger reflect the standard reaction of one who is frustrated with a given set of circumstances. Either some supposedly meaning in life has been taken from him, or threatened, or kept just beyond his reach.

Disputes, dissensions, and factions point to conflicting ideologies as to where life really is - where values are. Envy is clear enough. Someone else has “made it”, and I want it.

The final two “deeds”, drunkenness and carousing evidence the fact that I have now given up. I have no will to seek meaning anymore. I’ve tried to make some sense out of life. I’m through trying. I want out.

Of the various expressions of the “deeds of the flesh”, idolatry seems so uniquely captivating. Especially the socially acceptable types of idolatry. I grasp so tightly to my fulfillments. And from a purely human welfare point of view, it is better for others that I do. I find meaning in my work, my artistic creations. My idealistic humanism, instead of attacking others, or escaping reality or responsibility, I’m actually contributing to the well-being of others. But let someone threaten my idol and ...watch out! You’d be surprised at how quickly I can react.

Perhaps my particular idol is that of being a popular much admired teacher. And then some better teacher comes along. I begin to hear that students are flocking to sign up for his section to the exclusion of mine. Stand back! My protective reflexes are as quick as a laser. I say to myself, “That new teacher seems smooth enough....probably covering his own insecurity! Just give him a few weeks and the veneer will wear off. Anyways, students are poor judges of what makes a good teacher!”

Those “wholesome” idols are so terribly subtle because I can say to myself, “But isn’t being a teacher every student would love to have a worthy goal?” And, of course, the answer is “yes!” But a goal can easily become the goal and as much as it becomes the measurement as to where life or meaning for me is to be found. It’s then an idol and a very fragile idol at that. As an idol, I cannot help but cast a shadow on the priority of God - His joy, His sufficiency, His glory - and my relation to that priority. It is so difficult to separate one’s identity from the particular channel through which God might desire that identity to flow.

There are so many potential idols. Maybe yours has been to be very attractive to the opposite sex. And at last your efforts appear rewarded. Someone has found you attractive. Ah! It’s a great feeling! And then comes the faint coolness and reserve followed by tactful rejections and finally that blunt, cold breakup. That would be devastating enough to your idol, but then you find out that she has not only rejected you, but has found someone else. Someone wittier, more attractive than you. Shattering. Out of this terrible hurt you either slip into depression as you feel life ebbing through your fingers, or you fight to protect your idol.

“She wasn’t good enough for me anyway. Didn’t appreciate my fine, inner qualities. Knew all along she couldn’t be trusted. They deserve each other. She’ll get burned by him for sure.”

With that, your idol your sense of meaning and fulfillment in life, is once again safe and secure.

Some idols are especially wholesome, but they are still idols.

An individual's life may be entirely submerged in his family. He has carefully constructed his priorities and his family is number one. Ever see the guys who write a letter every single day to their wife or call them 5 times every day? Then one day some drunk careens across the center line and his entire reason for being is wiped out in one instant. He's not lost his family, he has lost life, - meaning - What's left? Now, unless he soon discovers some other goal, some worthy idol, he will turn to embrace any one or more of the other works of the flesh we've discussed in Galatians 5.

It is both surprising and discouraging to discover how many sins we Christians commit which are really nothing more than flesh level efforts to protect some idol.

Remember how you felt when someone said, "Say, you're putting on weight!" Or "I didn't know you were losing your hair." Maybe you controlled it, but it was there nevertheless - you were angry, offended, just a little bit hateful. This was especially true if you were criticized in some area in which you had taken pride in yourself such as in speaking, music or sports, or in being a good cook or a loving generous person. Inwardly at least, the sparks fly and you, flush with emotion, might even tell just a little lie to keep your idol intact.

Oh the tragedy of Eden! Rejecting dependence upon the will and character of God, Adam and Eve rejected life! Looking for fullness they found a fathomless despair. Their one bridge to meaning - their fundamental reason for existing - lay in charred and hopeless ruin before them. Man's essential nature was now "in the flesh." And the Bible says that "*Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*"

So by his very nature, man is a sinner....Cut off from his Creator, cut off from any hope of meaning. That's what sin is all about.

What are you doing about it?

Don't just hang around the cross.....get on it.

Chief

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Christ's

Heart

In

Every

Felon