

Notes on the New Testament Understanding of Sin

A. The essence of sin, evil, and unrighteousness

1. **Not defined by our behavior; it is defined by the inner orientation of our being: hence, at essence, it is not what we do, but who we are**
2. **At its essence, it is not our orientation toward others, nor toward ourselves, nor toward created reality; at its essence, it is our orientation toward OUR CREATOR**
 - a. **Sin (evil, unrighteousness) is a rejection of and hostility toward God: it can manifest itself in anything from an out-and-out hatred of God to a benign neglect of and indifference toward God**
 - b. **Sin is a hostility toward God that manifests itself in a hostility toward everything that is connected with God**
 - i. hostility to his values and priorities*
 - (A) hostility to goodness
 - (B) hostility to truth... etc.
 - ii. hostility to his sovereign rule*
 - (A) hostility to his purposes
 - (B) hostility to his promises
 - (C) hostility to his providence...etc.
3. **At essence, sin describes our orientation of hostility toward our creator; but it is reflected, as well, in our wrong orientation toward others, toward ourselves, toward truth, toward goodness, and toward created reality**
 - a. **Accordingly not every manifestation of sin “victimizes” another human being (to blaspheme God, to not love truth, to act self-destructively at no one else’s expense, etc.)**

i. Nonetheless “victimless” evils are just as evil as those that do have victims

(A) the fact that “no one gets hurt” never makes evil acceptable

(B) sin is a rejection of God and everything that he stands for; it is not merely or only a matter of doing bad to other people

(1) so it is evil whether or not it involves bad done to other human beings

4. In summary, sin, in its essence, is our proclivity to respond in opposition to God by opposing or rejecting everything he is, everything he stands for, everything he is doing, and everything he values

B. There are two importantly different ways in which sin, evil, or unrighteousness manifests itself

1. Willful rebellion > the willful, purposive decision to reject and oppose what is good and, rather, to do what is evil

2. Moral weakness > the inability to do what is good

a. This is no less hostility toward God and the things of God than is “willful rebellion.” However, it is less in the intensity of its hostility. It is evil manifesting itself as an unwillingness and “inability” to do good rather than an out-and-out attempt to oppose what is good.

b. From a biblical perspective (in contrast to a popular sentiment among human beings), moral weakness—the felt “inability” to do what is right or good—is not an exculpatory excuse for not doing what is right and good.

C. The various regions within which sin expresses itself: sin concretely and explicitly manifests itself in our broken and wrong relationship to —

1. God (by definition)

2. Other human beings

3. Our own selves, our own persons, our own existence

4. The rest of created reality in general

5. That which God values:

a. Truth

b. Goodness

D. An important false analysis of sin:

1. Sin is not fundamentally an inappropriate attachment to “me” [my ego]. Rather, it is fundamentally an inappropriate rejection of God, the creator.

a. There is a healthy AND INEVITABLE self-centeredness to human existence: I just AM the center of my life, existence, and experience.

i. The evil of selfishness is not a matter of seeking what is best for myself. Rather, the evil of selfishness is

(A) acting on the idea that what is best for myself is working to satisfy shallow, superficial, immediate desires at the expense of other people’s well-being

(B) acting on the self-deluded idea that I am the most important being in the cosmos; and not acknowledging the truth that other human beings are just as important as I am

(C) a rejection of the idea that what is best for me is to be like God in being committed to the well-being of others

ii. But, it is not evilly selfish to act and choose in that way that is of greatest benefit to me. That is, goodness is not a total disregard for my own best interests in favor of others [altruism]; rather, goodness is a commitment to what God values (which includes a commitment to work for the benefit and well-being of others) [=love].

2. True goodness does not fundamentally consist of ego-negation. The problem of sin is not my attachment to my

“self.” The problem of sin is the ignorance, foolishness, and perversity out of which I act to serve my self and bring benefit to myself.

a. In my unrighteous blindness, I do not even know what it would be like to truly and genuinely benefit myself.

i. I actually behave self-destructively, thinking that I am taking care of myself.

b. Deliberately “detaching” from my own ego (that is “denying” the very desires and longings that necessarily attach to my ego [self]) is a common human strategy for finding comfort in the midst of pain, grief, and chaos. [It is a universal human instinct that finds systematic expression in ancient Stoicism, modern Buddhism, and other religious-philosophical systems.]

i. The strategy is this: if I [my ego] does not want nor value anything, then I [my ego] will not feel pain and disappointment when I suffer loss, deprivation, or disappointment in life. It has therapeutic value. It is a coping mechanism. It is a way of living with chaos and grief without being crushed by the pain.

(A) But it is a violation of my humanity if and when I attempt to altogether “detach” from my ego (my identity as a self) or even to deny the reality of my ego.

(1) It is contrary to what is true and real: the truth is that I AM a distinct, individual SELF.

(B) It becomes counterproductive to the divinely intended effects of suffering if I do not allow myself to experience suffering as suffering.

(1) Suffering is intended by God to lead to my resolving my sorrow and disappointment into wisdom and true perspective. I am not so likely to resolve sorrow and disappointment into wisdom and true perspective if and when I do not allow myself to feel it.

E. Two levels at which sin is operative in human beings

1. LEVEL ONE—the fabric of my being.

a. Sin at the level of the moral orientation and the moral proclivities of one’s very being; that is, at the level of one’s foundational moral nature

i. I will use the phrase the “fabric of our being” to describe this level of who we are

(A) The N.T. teaching is that THE FABRIC OF MY BEING IS fundamentally evil

ii. The only time the New Testament refers to this aspect of a human being directly and distinctively is when it refers to one’s “flesh.”

(A) By “flesh,” the N.T. means the evil proclivities of one’s foundational moral nature.

(1) “Flesh” is the evil that resides in the very fabric of my being.

iii. It is one’s moral condition at this level that determines one’s moral worthiness in the eyes of God

(A) What one deserves is determined by what sort of person one is at this level—whether righteous or unrighteous

(1) If one is evil at the level of the fabric of his being (his foundational moral nature), then he is inherently damnable—even if he is righteous at the other level that we will discuss below, at the level of his inner, existential commitments.

(2) My status as condemned is due to the fact that, at the very fabric of my being, I am evil.

2. LEVEL TWO—my heart commitments.

a. Sin at the level of one’s inner, existential commitments

i. Definition of “commitment”:

(A) a commitment is that orientation of a person’s being wherein he resolves to value, embrace, and uncompromisingly pursue something that he has deemed to be valuable.

ii. Definition of “existential commitment”:

(A) a commitment is an existential commitment when it is of such a nature and has such a meaning to a person that it shapes and defines WHO ONE IS—that is, it is definitive of one’s EXISTENCE as a human being.

(1) The commitment to eat oatmeal for breakfast every morning is, in all likelihood, not an existential commitment.

(2) The commitment to make obedience to Jesus the defining feature of my life IS an existential commitment.

iii. Definition of “inner”:

(A) an “inner” commitment is one that arises from and is resolved deep within the core of who one is

(B) inwardness is something so deep within the core of one’s person and being that it is reflective of and determined by the fabric of one’s being

(1) if the fabric of one’s being is evil, one’s inner commitments will typically be evil

(2) if the fabric of one’s being were righteous, one’s inner existential commitments would necessarily be righteous

(C) Because inwardness is derived from and reflective of the fabric of one’s being, it is not easily changeable, nor readily manipulable

(1) Emotions and emotionality are NOT “inward” in the requisite sense.

iv. The New Testament describes the locus of these existential commitments in a number of different ways: “spirit,” “mind,” “heart,” and “inner man”—to name some of the more important ones.

(A) One who is good at the level of his heart is called “righteous” in the New Testament

(B) One who is evil at the level of his heart is called a “sinner” in the New Testament

v. I will typically use the phrase “heart commitments” (or just “the heart”) to describe this level of who we are

vi. It is one’s moral condition at this level (the heart) that determines whether one will be granted mercy and eternal Life by God

(A) If one’s heart is righteous (if one is righteous at the level of his inner, existential commitments), then he will receive mercy. If his heart is not righteous, he stands condemned.

(1) Though a person is unrighteous in the fabric of his being (that is, though he is damnable at the level of his foundational moral nature), if he is righteous of heart, God will not hold the evil in the fabric of his being against him; he will show mercy instead.

F. Understanding the difference between the two levels at which sin is operative in human beings

- 1. It is quite evident what it would mean to have an evil heart: an evil heart deliberately and willfully rejects what is good and pursues what is wrong.**
- 2. But even if I do NOT deliberately and willfully reject what is good and pursue what it wrong instead, nevertheless, all of the following can be true:**
 - a. The evil in the very fabric of my being virtually spills out of every pore of my body; I cannot stop it; I cannot be other than I am; but who I am is toxic to others.**
 - i. My very personality is intertwined with and distorted by the evil that is present in the very fabric of my being.*
 - b. I can be evil even when I do not “intend” to be evil: this is evil in the very fabric of my being showing itself.**
 - i. My purpose is love; the actual result of my attitudes and behaviors is the destructive effects of evil*
 - c. The fact that I can know the right thing to do and want to do it and yet not do it, that is evidence that my commitments and/or desires to do good are not the determinative, controlling force in my actions. Hence, something else determines and controls**

my actions and behavior: namely, the evil in the fabric of my being.

G. The relationship between the commitments of the heart and the foundational moral nature

- 1. The inner existential commitments of one’s heart will naturally and automatically reflect the foundational moral nature unless God directly and supernaturally intervenes to effect a change in the inner existential commitments [that is, to produce “repentance”].**
 - a. Left alone, a righteous and good foundational moral nature would result in righteous and good existential commitments in the heart.**
 - i. A righteousness in the fabric of my being would necessarily result in righteous heart commitments.*
 - b. Left alone, an unrighteous and evil foundational moral nature would result in unrighteous and evil existential commitments in the heart.**
 - i. Unrighteousness in the fabric of my being would necessarily result in unrighteous heart commitments.*
 - c. Although it is logically possible, there is no possible realistic scenario in human existence where a person with a righteous foundational moral nature would express evil existential commitments in his heart.**
 - i. God would never bring about a state where one is righteous in the fabric of his being but unrighteous in his heart commitments.*
 - (A) It would be possible for God to cause such a state of affairs; but it would never be within the boundaries of his purposes to do so.**

d. There is a realistic scenario in human existence where a person with an unrighteous foundational moral nature would express righteous existential commitments in his heart.

i. God would and does bring about a state where one remains unrighteous in the fabric of his being but has become righteous in his heart commitments.

(A) This is the person whom God is sanctifying to mark as his child, destined for eternal life. The Bible calls such a one “righteous,” “holy,” and a “new creature.”

2. Table of possible relationships between the commitments of the heart and the foundational moral nature

	At the level of one’s foundational moral nature, the person is morally righteous (good) = Righteous at the very fabric of one’s being > >	At the level of one’s foundational moral nature, the person is morally unrighteous (evil) = Unrighteous at the very fabric of one’s being > >
At the level of one’s inner, existential commitments, the person is morally righteous (good) = Righteous heart commitments > > > > >	<i>This will be the state of the person who has been “glorified” in the age to come. This will be the eternal state of those granted eternal Life.</i>	<i>This is the state of the person who is being “sanctified” in this present age. [The “righteous” person.]</i>
At the level of one’s inner, existential commitments, the person is morally unrighteous (evil) = Unrighteous heart commitments > > > > >	<i>This is a state in which no human being will or could ever find himself.</i>	<i>This is the initial, natural state of every human being. [The “sinner.”]</i>

H. Sanctification is the process wherein God produces a discontinuity between the believer’s moral state at the level of the fabric of his being and his moral state at the level of his heart commitments.

- 1. The word group: holy; sanctify (= to make one holy); sanctification (= the process wherein one is made holy); saint (=a holy one)**
 - a. Holy [meaning 1 (with regard to God)] = to be beyond the ordinary and therefore to be incomparable in a way that renders God awesome to a degree that strikes one with fear, respect, and reverence.**
 - b. Holy [meaning 2 (with regard to a created person, place, or thing)] = to be connected with God in such a way that the person, place, or thing becomes extraordinary such that one is motivated to show respect, reverence, and deference.**
 - i. If a person has been chosen for the merciful gift of eternal Life by God, that unique connection with God, the creator and judge, renders the chosen person “holy” in this sense.*
 - c. Holy [meaning 3 (with regard to a person)] = to have personal attributes that signal the fact that one is holy [in sense of meaning 2]; that is, to have personal attributes that signal the fact that one is destined for the blessing of Life in the age to come.**
 - i. The “holiness” that is produced by sanctification is holiness in this sense of meaning 3.*
- 2. The “holiness” of sanctification consists of certain inner, existential commitments of the heart that are distinctive with regard to their proper orientation toward God and the things of God:**
 - a. a commitment to truth**
 - i. hence, a commitment that leads to belief in the gospel (faith)*
 - ii. a commitment to accept and embrace the truth about oneself, namely, that I am damnable*
 - b. a commitment to love of God**

- c. a commitment to want to know God
 - d. a commitment to righteousness
 - i. *a commitment to loving others*
 - e. a commitment to submit to God’s will, purposes, and promises
 - f. and any other commitments that reflect a commitment to the things of God
- 3. IMPORTANT: Sanctification is a transformation at the level of one’s heart commitments; it is not a transformation at the level of the fabric of one’s being.**
- a. The sanctified person does not become more righteous and good in the fabric of his being; he becomes more clearly and deeply committed to the pursuit of goodness in the commitments of his heart.
 - i. *The sanctified person is not spontaneously and, therefore, successfully good; he strives and fights to be good, even though he often fails—sabotaged by the evil of his foundational moral nature, the “fabric of his being.”*
 - ii. *The sanctified person is not made WORTHY of the blessing of eternal Life by the fact of his sanctification; he is made DISTINCTIVE because of his sanctification.*
- I. Sin & personal identity, character, personality, or the self**
- 1. Some traditional views define “self” (personal identity) in such a way that the true “self” of the believer is isolated from and seen to be uninvolved in sin and evil.
 - a. The flesh is sinful; but the “true self” of the believer is good, perfect, sinless, etc.
 - b. This is not a true and helpful way to understand the relationship between me (as a believer) and sin.

- 2. A truer, more biblical view, is that the self (personal identity, character, and personality) spans the division between the righteous heart of a believer and the sinful being of the believer.**
- a. Hence, with regard to the self (personal identity, character, and personality), a believer has a fundamental ambiguity in his moral condition. His heart commitments are righteous. But the righteousness of his heart commitments exist in the context of a being (character, personality) that is broken, morally depraved, and sinful.**
- i. On the one hand, the believer’s self (personal identity, character, and personality) is affected by and, in part, defined by the evil in the fabric of his being.*
- (A) Elements of the believer’s identity, being shaped by the inherent depravity of his foundational moral nature, are outside the believer’s power and ability to change. And, furthermore, God has made no promise to change those elements this side of eternity.**
- (1) Some aspects of a our personalities (as believers) are so intertwined with and bound together with our foundational sinfulness, that we just are, in our very way of being, evil. Evil runs so deep in just such elements of our personality that there is nothing we could do to change it. To that extent, we are hopelessly evil (this side of eternity).*
- ii. On the other hand, the believer’s self (personal identity, character, and personality) is affected by and, in part, defined by the righteousness of his inner existential commitments.*
- (A) Elements of the believer’s identity, being shaped by the inner existential commitments of his heart, are very much subject to the believer’s power and ability to change. Through ongoing sanctification and the “repentance” that results from that sanctification, a believer will be transformed into someone more and more authentically committed to doing what is good and right. God is committed to changing these elements of a person’s character here and now, this side of eternity.**

J. The existential commitments of my heart as evidence of my moral condition (and my moral worthiness) is asymmetrical:

- 1. An evil heart necessarily entails that one is evil in the very fabric of his being**
 - a. Unrighteous existential commitments ARE indeed EVIDENCE of unrighteousness at the level of my foundational moral nature—for my existential commitments would not be and could not be unrighteous if I were fundamentally good in the very fabric of my being.**

- 2. A good heart does not necessarily entail that one is good in the very fabric of his being.**
 - a. Righteous existential commitments ARE NOT in fact EVIDENCE of righteousness at the level of my foundational moral nature—for I can remain evil in the very fabric of my being, even when my existential commitments are righteous.**

- 3. So, one can be sanctified [holy] without being fundamentally good; but one cannot be a sinful rebel without being fundamentally evil.**
 - a. Therefore, sinful rebellion is evidence that I am morally unworthy and undeserving of God’s blessing; but sanctification is NOT evidence that I am fundamentally good and, therefore, morally worthy and deserving of God’s blessing.**
 - i. Romans 1 describes the rebelliousness of mankind; man’s heart commitment to evil. Paul’s purpose is to indicate man’s unworthiness of divine approval. Paul’s approach is valid, given the above observation: sinful rebellion is indicative of and evidence for fundamental evil.*
 - ii. Throughout Romans, Paul argues that “keeping the Law” does not render one worthy of or deserving of the divine blessing. Even if we assume that a life of Law-keeping is*

valid and genuine such that it is an expression of righteousness of heart, Paul is perfectly right to make such a claim, given the above observation: sanctification (righteousness of heart) is NOT evidence that I am fundamentally good and, therefore, morally deserving of God’s blessing.

K. The scope and extent of human evil

- 1. Every human being who has ever existed in all of human history (with the one notable exception of Jesus) has been unrighteous (evil) at the level of his foundational moral nature; at the very fabric of his being, he is wicked.**
 - a. Every human being who has ever existed in all of human history (with the one notable exception of Jesus) has been unrighteous (evil) at the level of his inner, existential commitments unless and until such time as God begins to make that person his child by beginning the process of sanctifying him.**
- 2. The moral depravity of every human being does not mean that every deed he performs is somehow tainted or corrupted with evil.**
 - a. With regard to what God created a human being to be—a creature made in the image of God—doing good comes “naturally” to him, insofar as the created purpose of his humanity is concerned.**
 - b. Hence, it is no evidence against human moral depravity of a human being actually does some deeds that, evaluated as deeds, are truly good.*
 - b. At the very least, a man’s depravity consists of how ready, willing, and able a human being is to NOT do what is good.**
 - c. Man is depraved insofar as he will gladly forsake doing what is good in order to do what is convenient, desirable,*

pleasurable, or in any other respect advantageous to him from his personal, self-centered perspective.

- c. Furthermore, while a morally depraved human being may very well do a deed that, considered as a deed, is good, it does not follow that the human being doing such a good deed is a good person.
 - i. *It is easy enough to see how a human being could perform a deed that is good and at the same time be a person who is a seething cauldron of evil (opposition to God and the things of God).*
 - (A) His performing a good act does not alter the fact that his very being is wrongly oriented toward God and the things of God.
 - (1) *His very being could be wrongly oriented toward goodness at the very same time that he is performing a good deed.*

3. It is a moot point whether the moral depravity of every human being means that his depravity is somehow evident in the nature of every deed he performs.

- a. It could very well be true that, while a deed performed by a human being could be truly a good deed, insofar as it is considered as a deed, the fact that a morally depraved person is performing that good deed might very well effect and taint the nature of that deed such that the underlying evil of the person is evident within the deed.
- b. But nothing the Bible teaches hinges on whether this is, in fact, the case. The Bible’s concern is that we understand that every human being is evil and, therefore, damnable; not that every deed is evil and, therefore, damnable.

L. The origin of human evil

- 1. The human beings that God originally created (Adam and Eve) were inherently flawed morally.
 - a. They did not become sinners because they sinned; rather, they sinned because they were sinners.

i. The eating of the forbidden fruit was not the cause and origin of evil; the eating of the forbidden fruit was a test that they failed, making evident that they were already evil.

(A) Tree of knowledge of good and evil (as intended by God) = tree that is forbidden of the first couple in order to test their goodness and obedience; the tree would reveal whether mankind was good or evil.

(B) Tree of knowledge of good and evil (as deceitfully interpreted to Eve by the tempter) = tree that, if partaken of, will make mankind like God with respect to the nature of his knowledge of good and evil; the tree presented an opportunity for mankind to achieve a kind of god-likeness.

(C) Actual result of mankind’s eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (as interpreted by God) = mankind became like God in knowing good and evil [a bad thing], in that mankind took it upon himself to judge from his own standpoint whether something is good or evil {a strictly divine prerogative}.

(1) *Hence, mankind did not “became like God in knowing good and evil” because the magic juice of the fruit of the tree enlightened them. Rather, they “became like God in knowing good and evil” because, in their evil rebellion, they presumed to assume for themselves a divine prerogative.*

(a) So, the eating did not cause them to become evil; the eating was an act of evil that showed them up to be inherently corrupt in the very fabric of their being.

2. The “Fall of mankind” is not a biblical concept; it is a concept invented by Christian tradition and made particularly popular by Milton.

a. Creation was subjected to futility by the creator who created it; not by Adam who sinned.

i. Romans 8:20–21 [note: it was subjected “with the confident expectation” that it would also be set free from corruption]

b. No hint or suggestion of a “fall” of the whole created order in Genesis. (No mention of even a quiet swoosh—let alone a big bang—to indicate the restructuring of the whole created cosmos from an anti-entropic physical universe to an entropic physical universe.)

M. Toward a taxonomy of evil > some of the more important manifestations of sin:

1. GODLESSNESS

a. IMPIETY > Overt expressions or manifestations of hostility toward and/or rejection of God himself

i. idolatry / polytheism

ii. blasphemy

iii. failure to acknowledge God: atheism (naturalism, materialism)

iv. ingratitude toward God

v. hatred of God

2. UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

a. Moral depravity stemming from our rebellion against God and his values in the way we treat others >

i. Various manifestations of a rejection of God’s values, purposes, and priorities with regard to how we act toward other human beings

(A) An unwillingness to LOVE others

(1) Both Jesus and Paul assert that the requirements of the Covenant with respect to how we should behave toward others can be summed up by the commandment that we love our neighbor as ourselves

(a) murder, adultery, theft, assault, slander, lying to harm others, and any unkindness / violation of the Golden Rule

(b) “Factionousness”—the insistence that others be loyal to us (our side) by rejecting others (them)

b. Moral depravity stemming from our rebellion against God and his values in the way we treat the created order of things >

i. Various manifestations of a rejection of what God has designed and purposed within the created order

(A) An unwillingness to embrace the order and purpose of God’s creation with respect to sexuality: “sexual impurity”

(1) sexual immorality: adultery, fornication, homosexuality, and any sexual perversion or impurity

(B) An unwillingness to embrace the order and purpose of God’s creation with respect to our biological existence

(1) any sort of unchecked pursuit of pleasure

(a) materialism, greed, gluttony

(2) any behavior that degrades man to a beast and fails to honor the dignity of another human being as a physical being made in the image of God (DEGRADATION)

c. Moral depravity stemming from our rebellion against God and his values in the way we treat ourselves >

i. Various manifestations of a rejection of God’s values, purposes, and priorities with regard to how we act in relation to ourselves

(A) An unwillingness to accept and live in the light of the truth about our own being

(1) self-hatred

(2) self-importance

(3) any refusal to accept and live within the created boundaries placed on our lives and existences

(a) envy, jealousy

(b) anger toward God due to frustration at life’s circumstances

(B) Any tendency to embrace and engage in foolish, self-destructive behavior

d. Moral depravity stemming from our rebellion against God and his values in the way we treat God’s creation and providence >

i. “Vandalism” in relation to everyone and everything in history and created reality; that is, a desire to “destroy” any thing that God has created or to thwart anything that God has purposed or promised

(A) Satan is the arch-vandalizer; he destroys just in order to destroy

(B) Anti-Semitism

(C) Any disregard for the dignity of God’s creation

(1) cruelty to animals

(2) disrespect for the rest of God’s creation

e. Moral depravity stemming from our rebellion against God and his values in our response to what is true >

i. UNBELIEF—a rejection of the truth about what God has said, done, or created

(A) An unwillingness to embrace the “narrative” of what God is doing in the cosmos.

(1) A refusal to believe the TRUTH.

(a) a hardened resistance to the truth about Jesus, the gospel

(B) An insistence on believing various lies and myths rather than the truth.