

Sin is Essentially Selfishness

Speak the Language: A Resource by Claudia Rosser

Why do I do what I do?

Do you ever feel like there is a battle going on in your mind? Do you know the difference between right and wrong, but fail to act, speak or think in obedience to Christ? Paul, a follower of Jesus who wrote much of the New Testament, writes in Romans 7:15: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” As Christians, we realize that we should be people of love, peace, and selflessness. Some of us may even do a pretty good job at that sometimes. Yet it is often difficult to consistently act in obedience if we fail to realize just how serious our disobedience is. Our theology of sin helps us understand how and why to obey God.

What is Sin?

According to Winkie Pratney,

Sin is not a state, a substance or a spirit. Sin is a violation of revealed moral light; a stupid, selfish and often stubborn refusal to conform to what we know and perceive as God’s truth. It brings guilt, shame, and blame. Scripture shows the active nature of sin in so many ways. No one can claim sin is a “mistake” or a “misunderstanding.” The Bible shows a sinner as a rebel against a loving God, not just some subject of pity who cannot help who they are. There is always the idea of voluntary activity in sin, not some static, genetic or demonic causation that makes us helplessly bad. Sin has deeply hurt God as well as mankind. Everyone is personally held accountable for their own wrong. You will never stand before God and be able to blame your genetic descent, your Dad or the Devil for what you did to hurt yourself, others or Him. No definition of sin that tends to remove responsibility from a sinning individual honors God.

In essence, sin is selfishness. At its very core, sin highjacks God’s right on our lives as our Lord and places us in His place. It is incredibly foolish and only brings destruction. But we still do it anyway! We justify it in our minds beforehand and minimize it afterward. This is a dangerous perspective.

God as Creator and Author of life has set His law before us for our good. Psalm 119:97 says, “Oh how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.” God is not keeping us from good by giving us boundaries; His laws are simply describing the way things truly are. They are set in place for our protection and His glory.

Here is an example. My one-year-old daughter is both highly curious and fearless. She feels the need to investigate everything she sees, and does not have the experience to know that something like a hot stovetop is dangerous to touch. As her parents, we will have to set a rule – a boundary set for her benefit – that she is not to touch the stove. She may rebel against this rule since she does not know that a hot stovetop is harmful. If she decides to break the rule and touch the hot stove anyway, what will happen? Her hand will be burned.

“Do not touch the stove” is not an arbitrary rule set in place to keep her from good, but it is intended to keep her from harm. In a similar way, God’s laws and commandments are given for our protection and our good.

When we sin, we not only face earthly consequences (like a burned hand), but we vandalize God’s law by disrespectfully placing ourselves above Him. God is infinitely wiser than we are

(Isaiah 55:9), yet when we sin we are saying we know better. We show that in our eyes, we are more important than God. This is a selfish affront to our Lord.

A High View of God and a Low View of Sin

Selfishness is at the very core of sin. As followers of God, we must be humble before Him and before others. In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” He then goes on to describe the ultimate model of humility found in Jesus Christ, who humbled Himself in life and death. This is to be our standard as we learn how to be humble before God and before others.

One way to combat selfishness is to adopt a high view of God and a low view of sin. We must continually be confronted with the majesty of God and the depravity of our own souls. This is true humility – understanding who we really are in light of a holy God.

Charles Simeon, a renowned preacher from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, put it this way: “There are but two objects that I have ever desired ... to behold; the one, is my own vileness; and the other is, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ: and I have always thought that they should be viewed together.” A high view of God and a low view of our sinfulness are key truths to consider as we fight against selfishness, the root of sin.

A High View of God

Having a high view of God means living in such a way that He is of ultimate importance in every aspect of our lives. He is our treasure, and everything we do and everything we are is for His glory. He is the source of our delight.

A.W. Tozer in *The Knowledge of the Holy* writes, “The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us... The decline of the knowledge of the holy has brought on our troubles. A rediscovery of the majesty of God will go a long way toward curing them.”

Let us endeavor to rediscover the majesty of God each day! Read His Word and find meaning in scripture. Examine the beautiful things He has made in nature. Enjoy deep fellowship with other people in community. Read good books by people who have walked closely with God. Live your life through the lens of Jesus, allowing Him to govern your perspective.

A Low View of Sin

In addition to adopting a high view of God, we must also cultivate a low view of sin. A low view of sin doesn't mean to believe that sin is not a big deal. On the contrary, it means being disgusted with sin in your life to the point of repentance (a change of mind, heart, and direction).

Jesus did not beat around the bush when He spoke about the destructive power of sin and how to fight against it. “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30). Jesus asks for total repentance, a turning from our sin and taking whatever action is needed to gouge it out of our lives.

It seems to be a popular stance among Christians to accept sin as an inevitable part of the human experience. There is a widespread apathy toward sin, and even the words we use to

describe it – “I made a few mistakes” or “I slipped up” – lead to the idea that sinning isn’t really a big deal.

Though “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and God is merciful and gracious toward us through the gift of eternal life Jesus won for us on the cross, He never looks the other way or makes it out to be no big deal when people sin against Him. On the contrary, Jesus told people repeatedly in the gospels to turn from their sin – to go and sin no more. Jesus does not ask us to believe in Him and stay the same. We are changed by His love and conform to His image. Our love for Him needs to become so great that it causes us to hate sin as He does.

1 Corinthians 7:10 says, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” Worldly sorrow comes from a fear of getting caught in consequences. Godly sorrow comes from knowing how big of a deal it is to sin against God, and it involves a turning from sin into holiness. John 14:15 is clear: “If you love me, you will obey my commandments.” We don’t obey God simply to avoid the consequences that will arise when we sin. We are to obey Him out of love and devotion.

A high view of God and a low view of sin, when held together, will help change our hearts from selfish to humble. We will come closer to understand just how amazing it is that we experience God’s mercy and forgiveness, though we are so undeserving. When we were found dead in our sins, God made us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5)! That is more than enough of a reason to move the focus from selfishness and sin to humility and righteousness before God.

Discussion Questions

1. How can you rediscover the majesty of God in order to cultivate a high view of Him? Will you commit to putting that into practice this week? How?
2. What do you need to do in order to develop a low view of sin in your life?
3. According to Winkie Pratney, “our understanding of God’s will is tied to how seriously we take sin.” What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree, and why?
4. What ways have you seen God conform you to His image and change you since you have placed your trust in Him? In what ways do you still need to grow?