

# What Is Sin?

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The passages that I'm going to go through, I think, are very familiar to all of us. There're probably no passages that I'm going to bring up today that you're not already very familiar with. But I want us to think about them in a way that is designed to try to answer a question. I have a thought about what the answer to the question is, but I may be right or I may be wrong. You may agree or you may disagree, but that's okay. That's the purpose of why we're here today, to learn and to grow, and so I hope this message will make you think, and perhaps we might have some discussion about it afterwards.

I'm going to lay a foundation first, and then towards the end I'm going to ask the question. The title of my message is "What Is Sin?" Now in its most basic aspect, the answer to that question is pretty obvious. We're all familiar with 1 John 3:4, which says that sin is the transgression of the law. I think that's a given. I don't think there's anyone that would disagree with that. But what constitutes breaking the law? I think that there are actually a number of ideas out there, even within the various church of God groups.

Let's turn first to Matthew 23. The Pharisees took an approach to the law that was based strictly on the letter of the law. They understood, as we do, that sin is the breaking of the law. They came up with a lot of extra rules that were designed to make sure that they didn't break the law. For example, they know that the law says that you're not to work on the Sabbath day, and so they tried to determine what it was that constituted work. They tried to break it down, and they had rules like that you couldn't carry anything that weighed more than half of a fig. You couldn't walk further than a certain number of steps, which is where the concept of a Sabbath-day's journey comes from.

Matthew 23:23: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."

They got down to the very smallest, little aspects of trying to keep the law, even to the extent of making sure they tithed on little, tiny herbs that they grew.

According to Jesus, there are weightier matters of the law. There are things that are overriding principles that are far more important than the smaller aspects, those things that are less weighty. And yet he said that we are not to leave the other undone. We are not to think that we can abide by some overriding spiritual principles and yet at the same time break the smaller aspects of the law.

It seems to me that some of the splinter groups that have formed since the demise of the Worldwide Church of God are still operating like the Pharisees. Not all of them, but some of them are still all about having lots of rules and regulations... really focused on the letter of the law.

I grew up in the Worldwide Church of God, going to Imperial School back in the sixties, and then I experienced the seventies. There was a very marked contrast in the church between the sixties and the seventies. In the sixties, things were, in a lot of ways, very Pharisaical. There were a lot of rules about conduct, and I think a lot of people equated abiding by those rules with being righteous. At Imperial School, the girls were required to wear skirts that came down far enough to cover their knees, lest they be worldly and be wearing a miniskirt. So they would have the girls kneel down on the floor, and the skirt had to at least touch the floor. Guys were required to keep their hair short, because the Bible says that long hair on a man is a shame. But what's long? How do you define how long is long? They came up with a rule: the back of your hair could not touch the back of your collar. We had many rules like that. The approach then was very much "letter of the law" in many ways. It was very strict. If you violated any of these little rules that they had, at least in Imperial School, the consequences could be pretty severe.

But then, in the early seventies, there was a shift in the leadership of the church toward a much looser approach. I don't know what their motivation was. I don't know whether their motivation was that they thought this letter-of-the-law approach was not something that was good because people were not learning the spiritual intent of the law, and that's what they wanted to promote. Maybe they just wanted to live their life in a way that was not so constricted by God's law. There certainly were a lot of things going on that were contrary to God's law, even at some of the higher levels of the leadership of the church. The bottom-line result, with the relaxing of all these rules and regulations, was that guys that had been keeping their hair cut short because they were forced to, now suddenly began growing their hair long. Women started dressing in ways that imitated the women in the world around them. Whatever the motivation was in the leadership, the end result was that people went to the other ditch.

One of the things that I learned from this experience is that you cannot legislate righteousness.

In Romans 7:14, we read that the law is spiritual. There's an intent, or a spirit of the law, and no matter how many rules and regulations you have, you can't make somebody abide by the intent of the law.

In the United States, we have a system where we have a legislative arm of the government, and we have two bodies, the House and the Senate. They pass laws all the time. Every time they pass a law that's intended to make people do the right thing, people find a way around it, and so then they have to make another law. They're attempting to legislate right behavior, but it can't be done. There are so many laws on the books now in the United States that nobody can even know them all.

It's the same thing with God's law and with righteousness. No matter how many little rules and regulations you come up with for people in order to try to legislate right behavior, you can't do it. Right behavior has to come from the heart. It has to be something that comes from the heart and is motivated toward wanting to keep the intent and the spirit of the law.

Jesus expounded on this principle in Matthew chapter 5. He talked about the spirit of the law. This was not really anything new. In the Old Testament, there are scriptures that talk about the spirit of the law. But it was new in the sense that the disciples and the people that were hearing this didn't understand it.

Matthew 5:21-22: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire."

Jesus was expounding the principle that if you have wrong thoughts in your heart toward your brother, it's a very dangerous thing. In 1 John 3:15, the apostle John makes a statement that is very similar to what Jesus said, and in fact sheds a little bit more light on it.

1 John 3:15: "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him."

The principle being that it's not enough just to refrain from actually taking your neighbor's life, or your brother's life. You're not even to be angry at him without a cause, or to hate him.

Continuing on in Matthew 5...

Matthew 5:27-28: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

Jesus is again expounding a spiritual principle about the law, that it is not enough just to refrain from having carnal relations with your neighbor's wife, or any woman that you know that isn't your wife. You're not even to harbor the thought of desire for that woman, because that's the same thing as if you did actually commit adultery with her. Because you've violated the spiritual intent of the law. The law is spiritual. There is a spirit, or intent, of it.

The law itself cannot make you righteous. As I said, you cannot legislate righteousness. As Paul said, the law is holy and just and good. In other places, it says that it is a perfect law. But as good as God's law is, it cannot of itself make anyone righteous, because you cannot legislate righteousness.

Romans 8:3: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh —"

So the law of itself cannot do what is a spiritual matter.

2 Corinthians 3:5: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves- “

So Paul, and those that he was talking about, probably making reference to Timothy and other ministers that he worked with, didn't think they were anything of themselves. He says “but our sufficiency is of God”. So whatever they were, it was God in them and not them of themselves.

2 Corinthians 3:5-7: “...but our sufficiency is of God; Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious –“

So he's making an analogy here between the letter of the law, which was written on two tables of stone, and even though that law was physically written on two tables of stone, it was a spiritual law. The physical law could not of itself make those people righteous. Therefore they all came under the death penalty, because they all violated that law.

2 Corinthians 3:7-9: “But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.”

So now God is, with us, not writing his law on tables of stone – he is writing his law on the tables of our heart, through his spirit. It is through that process that we are able then to come to understand what is the spirit and intent of the law, and that we are then able to be and live in harmony with and obedience to the spirit and intent of the law.

It's interesting to me that many people, in a knee-jerk reaction to the sixties in the Worldwide Church of God, went from one ditch into another. They saw that the approach of the church in the sixties was Pharisaical, and that it did not address the heart, the spirit. And they said “well, you know, the Pharisees were too strict. They had all these rules and regulations about the Sabbath.” And so they went from having rules about how they kept the Sabbath, to having no rules. Thinking that it's okay to go play golf on the Sabbath, go to a ball game, stuff like that. Because according to them, this business of trying to be righteous through a bunch of rules and regulations doesn't work.

But the truth of the matter is, the Pharisees were not too strict. It is in fact impossible to be too strict with God's law. I pose that as a theory, anyway. As I said in the beginning, you may disagree with me, but that's okay, and that's what we're here for: to learn and to grow, and if you have another point of view, or other passages to bring up, then I hope that you will. But I believe that it's not possible to be too strict with God's law, because once you begin to understand the spirit and intent of the law, you recognize that the spiritual intent of the law is far stricter than the letter of the law. If all I have to do is refrain from committing homicide, that's actually fairly easy to do. It's much more difficult to love my brother, even when my brother does not treat me well. That's much more difficult.

I say that the spirit of the law is far stricter than the letter of the law. The problem with the Pharisees was not that they were too strict. The problem was that they did not really understand the spirit and intent of the law. And because they didn't have God's spirit, they weren't able to understand it or be in harmony with it. As Paul writes later in Romans 8, "the carnal mind is enmity against God. It is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." The carnal mind cannot be subject to God's law. It is only through God changing our heart – which I believe is the whole intent and purpose and message of the New Covenant, about which he says "I will write my law in your heart". He's writing it on the fleshy tables of our heart, not in tables of stone. He says "I will take away that stony heart out of you, and I will give you a heart of flesh. He's writing his law in our heart. It's only through the operation of God's spirit doing that that we're able to understand and be in harmony with the spiritual intent of the law.

Here again is a place where I think a lot of people get off track. A lot of people know that it's all about the heart. It's about the intent of the heart, and that the law is a spiritual thing. So they quote a principle that's found in 1 Samuel, when Samuel was sent to anoint a king. Samuel looked at six of Jesse's sons, and kept thinking "this is the one". He was looking on the outside. But then it says "the Lord looks on the heart". God sees inside us. He sees what our heart is like. People know that principle, that God looks on the heart, and a lot of people excuse bad behavior by saying "well, yeah, I still sin sometimes, but that's okay because God knows my heart. God looks on the heart." As if good intentions are enough. Well, they're not. It's better to have good intentions than bad intentions, but good intentions are only the beginning. We must move from a place of just good intentions to actually being good. That requires God purifying our heart, and us submitting ourselves to this process of being made righteous through the purification of our heart, and the writing of God's law in our heart.

God does know our heart. He knows our thoughts. Keeping God's law – being righteous – really does involve the thoughts that go through our mind.

2 Corinthians 10:5: "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;"

Now that's a tall order. Bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. I think this is where a lot of people give up. They look at that and they think well, who can do that? People are often quoting Jeremiah 17:9, where it says that "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?" Of course, that is a true statement. The problem is that a lot of people think that this still applies to a Christian after Christ has finished the job of cleansing that person.

It is true that every human being starts off, when God begins to work with them, in that condition that is spoken of in Jeremiah 17. The heart deceitful and desperately wicked. But God is in the business of changing our hearts.

Another one that people like to quote is Romans chapter 3.

Romans 3:10: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:"

And they say well, you see there? Nobody's righteous. Can't be done. But continue reading. Even just the very next verse, the context of it makes it clear that Paul is not saying that this is a state that a Christian ought to be in after God has begun to work with them, and in fact will not be the state of a Christian once God has completed his work in us.

Romans 3:11: "There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God."

Now, even the people in the various church of God groups who say "see, it says right there, there are none righteous" wouldn't agree that they are not seeking after God. They would all profess that they are seeking after God. But it says that there is none that seeks after God.

The context of this, and indeed, the context of the whole Bible, I think makes it pretty clear that what Paul is saying here is that before God began to work with us, none of us were righteous. None of us were seeking him. The disciples didn't go out and seek out Jesus. Jesus says "you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you". Before God began to work with us, we were all unrighteous. None of us were seeking God. The only reason that anybody begins to seek God is because God begins to work with that person. In the beginning of our relationship with God, we are completely unrighteous, but God begins to cleanse us of our unrighteousness. As it says in 1 John, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, not just to forgive us, but also to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Of course, that's a process. At least, I believe it is a process that takes a long time – our lifetime.

God can cleanse our heart. God can make us righteous, through his spirit in us. Through writing his law in our heart and putting it in our mind. I believe that this is the symbolism that is depicted when Jesus cleansed the lepers. I believe that this is the symbolism that is depicted when Jesus cleansed the temple. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit of God. We all are in need of cleansing.

Let's go to Matthew chapter 15. Jesus talks about the heart, and the need for it to be cleansed.

Matthew 15:11: "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man."

The disciples didn't really understand this, and they asked him about it.

Matthew 15:17-19: "Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts –"

So we're back again to this concept of how our thoughts are really the key.

Matthew 15:19-20: "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man."

So if we are truly going to be righteous, it gets even down to the level of our thoughts. As I said before, the Pharisees weren't that strict. But that wasn't the problem. It's the thoughts that are the problem. That's where sin begins, as we read in James.

James 1:13-15: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."

Having laid this foundation, I want to ask the question that is sort of the crux of this message, and perhaps there may be some discussion of it, because I think it's an important thing to try to understand. The question is: did Jesus ever have a wrong thought? We know that Jesus never sinned. That's a given. But did he ever have a wrong thought?

In Matthew chapter 4, we find that Jesus was tempted by Satan, and we read of three temptations that Satan put in front of Jesus at the end of those forty days. We know from the book of Luke that Jesus was tempted the entire forty days by Satan, but we only have just the record of these last three temptations. We know from Hebrews 4 that Jesus was tempted in every way like we are, but without sin.

The dilemma that I see is that, if Jesus did not have a wrong thought cross his mind, how could he have been tempted? When Jesus was tempted by Satan - and we know that he was tempted - Satan presented a thought to him. "Well, what about this? Why don't you just turn those stones into bread?" Now, Jesus rejected these thoughts. Each wrong thought that Satan presented to him, he rejected it by quoting scripture. But I submit to you that Jesus could not have rejected the idea without considering the idea, however briefly.

It would seem to me that, when you look at the last hours of Jesus' life before he was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, that he was wrestling with his own thoughts. That the thought came into his mind, "maybe I can get out of this, maybe there's a way to not have to do this". But immediately he rejected that thought by saying "nevertheless Father, not my will, but your will be done".

The concept that I want to propose, and I would like to hear other people's thoughts on this, is this. It would seem to me that there's a difference in a thought that comes out of your own heart, because your own heart still has areas in it that have not been purified yet. The process of cleansing is not yet complete, and so parts of our hearts still have remnants of that initial state of being deceitful and desperately wicked, and there are times when thoughts come out of our own heart that defile us. But I think there are also thoughts that are placed in front of us - perhaps not directly by Satan, but indirectly, because we live in his world. You can be driving down the road, minding your own business, and not having any evil thoughts coming out of your own heart, and you can be presented with something. You can be presented with a thought, or something put in front of you, that you then need to reject.

This example may be a little bit crass, but I think every man listening here can identify with this, in the society we live in, and especially where I live in southern California. You can be driving down the road, or walking down the street, minding your own business, and you can be confronted with a woman who is dressed in an entirely inappropriate manner. Then you have to deal with that thought, that idea that is now in your head, that you have been confronted with.

The reason I think this is important is because I think a lot of people read the passage where it talks about bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ, and I think that's discouraging to a lot of people. They think it's impossible - and of course with man it is impossible. As the disciples said to Jesus, "who then can be saved?" And he replied that "with men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible". You cannot control your own thoughts. If you try not to think about something, the more you'll think about it.

I think people take it too far, in the sense that if they think they have a wrong thought come into their mind – not from their own heart, but presented externally, by the spirit of the god of this world that pervades the atmosphere – they're convinced they've committed an awful sin.

I think Herbert Armstrong was correct when he said that it's like radio waves, and those thoughts and moods and ideas are out there - Satan broadcasts those things. And when a thought comes into your mind that you know is a wrong thought, if you reject that thought as Jesus did, I don't believe that is sin. Because as James said, the wrong thought first has to conceive and bring forth sin.

In conclusion, as I stated at the beginning, I hope that this will give you food for thought and maybe make you think.