

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Humanity and Sin, Session 10, Sin's Contemporary Significance

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This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on the doctrines of humanity and sin. This is session 10, Sin's Contemporary Significance. Mahony, A Theology of Sin for Today: A Biblical Description of Sin.

We continue our lectures on the doctrine of sin. D. A. Carson's essay introduces us to this topic, Sin's Contemporary Significance, he calls it, and he hasn't quite gotten even to that point yet, but sin and the law.

He's talked about sin tied to the work of God and Satan, and then sin, he calls it, enmeshed to different theological constructions, sin and the doctrine of man, sin and the doctrine of salvation, anthropology, soteriology, sin and sanctification, fourth, sin and the law. John tells us that sin is lawlessness, 1 John 3:4. Although some have dismissed this pronouncement as a singularly shallow definition of sin, in fact, it's a painfully insightful one once we remember whose law is in view. Conceptually, this is not far removed from the dictum that whatever is not of faith is sin.

Once you recall who it is and who is to be the object of our faith, it is not far removed from Jesus' insistence that the most important command is to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. Once we perceive that this is invariably the one command that is broken whenever we break any other command of God, it shows us that the transgression of a law is a good definition of sin. Sin's odium lies in its defiance of God and his law.

Yet the relationship between sin and the law is complex. It runs along several axes. The first we have just articulated is that sin is breaking God's law and therefore defying God himself.

This includes failing to do what God commands and doing what God prohibits. In the words of the general confession, quote, we have left nothing, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there's no health in us, close quote. Conceived along another axis, however, the law actually provokes sin, prompting it to lash out.

In other words, sin is so rebellious of heart that commands and prohibitions, far from enabling sinners to overcome their sin, have the same effect as a rule does in the mind and heart of an immature teenager. Tweaked again, the law can be seen to operate not only on this psychological plane but along the axis of redemptive history. Sin leading to death is abundantly present long before the giving of law at Sinai,

Romans 5:13-14, such that when the law is thought of as a revelation given through Moses, the law is relatively late on the scene.

But another of its many functions is to establish complex structures of tabernacle, temple, priesthood, sacrificial system, and festivals, such as Passover and Day of Atonement, all designed to establish trajectories taking us to Jesus, who's the ultimate temple, the ultimate priest, the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate Passover, the ultimate bloody offering on the final day of atonement. Thus, the law brings in Jesus, who destroys sin. It brings us to the gospel, which alone is the power of God and brings salvation.

The law has many roles in relation to sin, but it does not have the power to free the sinner from its enslaving power and its consequences. It will be easy to demonstrate sin's links with every important theological construction grounded in Scripture. As important as they are, our probing a few of them will have to suffice.

Suffice. Reflection on sin is necessary to understand suffering and evil. Fifth, another way to demonstrate the ubiquity of sin in all serious theological discussions is to outline its place in theological analysis that is rather more synthetic and second-order than the kinds of theological constructions we have mentioned so far.

We'll provide only one example. On three or four occasions during the last eight or ten years, Carson says he's given a rather lengthy lecture on theodicy, the problem of evil vis-a-vis God. I never called it that; he says it was always titled something like *How Christians Should Think About Suffering and Evil*.

What I tried to do was to sink six major pillars into the ground. These six pillars, taken together, provided an adequate foundation to support a distinctively Christian way of reflecting on evil and suffering. The six had to be taken together.

One pillar by itself was totally inadequate, and even four or five were dangerously weak and left the structure poorly supported. The interesting thing is that all the pillars have to do with sin. The interesting thing is that all the pillars in Carson's building help us understand what suffering and evil have to do with sin.

The first pillar I labeled is *Lessons from the Beginning of the Bible*. This covers creation, in which God makes everything, including marriage, assigns human beings the responsibility to reign under God, surrounds them with an idyllic setting, and above all, his own presence, and pronounces everything good. The narrative proceeds to the fall, to the onset of idolatry, sin, and its short and long-term effects, including both death and alienation from God, and the curses pronounced on the various parties and what they mean.

The brutal fact is that human beings have forfeited their right to expect their creator God to love and care for them so that if he does so, it's because he is infinitely kinder than they deserve. Theological reflection on the way these themes are teased out across the scriptures reminds us that all the wars, hatred, lust, covetousness, and all the transgression, idolatry, sin, and human rebellion, even what we call natural disasters, are first and foremost an implicit call to repentance. According to Jesus, Luke 13:1 to 5, far from being something God created, sin is rebellion against the creator God.

There are many implications for theology, starting with the fact that God does not owe us blessing, prosperity, and health. What he owes us is justice, which in itself guarantees our ruin. My point for the purpose of this essay, however, is that this pillar, this fix in the biblical landscape, is tightly bound up with sin.

One cannot think long about the complexities of theodicy in a biblically faithful way without wrestling with what the Bible says about sin. And that's just the first pillar. The second is lessons from the end of the Bible, where we must think about hell, new heavens, new earth, resurrection, existence, new Jerusalem, a world where nothing impure will ever enter. One does not proceed very far before one recognizes the discussion is again circling around to the topic of sin.

The third pillar is the mystery of providence. Here, one wrestles not only with many texts that talk about God's sovereignty but also with texts that talk about God's sovereignty over a world highly charged with sin.

It'd be easy to work through all six pillars and summarize their contribution toward the support of a well-formed and biblically faithful theodicy, but the point in every case is that these pillars make no sense if one tries to abstract them from profound reflections on sin. In short, sin is ubiquitous in all serious theological discussions. That takes its cues from Scripture.

To summarize, if we are to think realistically about the relevance of a doctrine of sin in today's culture, we must begin with its intrinsic significance, the place sin holds within the matrix of biblically determined theological reflection. Whoo! The second part of this essay is much briefer. Sin's contemporary.

First of all, sin's intrinsic significance. Now, sin's contemporary significance. Under this heading, I shall focus on some of the ways in which a biblically faithful doctrine of sin addresses some of the characteristics of our own age and of our own historical location.

I'll mention three points. Number one, we live in a time of extraordinary violence and wickedness. First, only 13 years have passed as we closed out the bloodiest century.

Only 23 years have passed since we closed out the bloodiest century in human history. There is not just one Holocaust. Add to the Nazi slaughter of Jews, the Stalinist starvation of 20 million Ukrainians, the Maoist slaughter of perhaps, perhaps, we can't even measure it, 50 million Chinese, the massacre of between a quarter and a third of the population of Cambodia, the tribal slaughter of Tutsis and Hutus, and various ethnic cleansings.

How shall we calculate the damage, material and psychological, of terrorism in all its forms, of unrestrained consumerism, of all the damage done by drug abuse of various kinds, including alcoholism? The digital revolution that ushers in spectacular improvements in research, data handling, and communication also brings us access to instant porn, which with untold damage done to man-woman relationships in general and to marriages in particular. Shall we add the cruelty of racism, the exploitation of the weak, and greed and laziness in all their forms? And what of those massive and ubiquitous sins that are primarily the absence of particular virtues? Unholiness, impiety, prayerlessness, unloving hearts, ingratitude. I'm starting to see that these lectures can become rather depressing now.

Yikes! Despite the massive evidence that surrounds us on every side, many in our generation have come to think of themselves as essentially good people. Pollyannish outlooks abound. If there are bad things in the world, they're primarily what other people do.

Other religions, other races, other political parties, other generations, other economic sectors, and other subcultures. Doubtless every generation thinks of itself as better than it actually is, but in the Western world, this generation has multiplied such moral blindness to the highest degree. For example, one of the reasons the founding fathers of the United States constructed a constitution with the division of powers and a system of checks and balances was that they believed steps had to be taken to curtail pervasive sin, especially the lust for power.

By contrast, many in our society are not even aware of the dangers that lurk everywhere when one block or another of government or society gains too much sway. In short, the first and most obvious contemporary significance to preaching a robust doctrine of sin is that it confronts the almost universal absence of such teaching. In other words, the first contemporary significance of biblical teaching on sin is not that it meshes nicely with contemporary worldviews and, therefore, provides a pleasant way into thoughtful interaction, but precisely, it confronts the painfully perverse absence and awareness of sin.

Across the stream of redemptive history, this was one of the primary functions of the law: to bring conviction of sin. Although many preachers in the Reformed tradition have treated Galatians 3 as if it mandates that the way to preach the gospel to individuals is to begin with the law, assured that the law is our guardian, *Pidagogos*

Galatians 3:24, to bring us to see our need for Christ and grace. A careful examination of the context shows that the focus of the chapter is not on the role of the law in the conversion of the individual but on the role of the law in the drama of salvation history.

If Paul's understanding of the promise given to Abraham is correct, verses 1 to 4, one may well ask why the law is given at all. Verse 19, why not run very quickly from promise to fulfillment? In various places, Paul gives several complementary answers to that question, but part of the answer is that the law in Scripture, quote, locked up everything under the control of sin so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe Galatians 3:22. Yet the fact that the law covenant should reign for almost a millennium and a half shows how important it was to God to get across to persistence, repetition, heinousness, enslaving power, and odium of human sin, and the utter incapacity of human beings to break free from it. How else will human rebels cry to God for grace, except by faith what was promised? Not dissimilarly, a generation that is singularly unaware of its sin, while being awash in sin, desperately needs a robust doctrine of sin to begin to understand redemption.

Second, postmodernism's reluctance to identify evil. Second, today, there are fewer books published defining and defending postmodernism than there were 15 years ago. In Europe, almost no one reads Michael Foucault anymore, let alone Jacques Derrida.

Some American undergraduates are still prescribed toxic doses of postmodernism, but graduate students have increasingly turned away from the brew. As a sophisticated epistemological and cultural phenomenon, postmodernism in many parts of the Western world has passed its sell-by date. Yet, nevertheless, the detritus, the results of the destruction, and the garbage of postmodernism can be seen everywhere.

Among the most noticeable pieces are those that are reluctant to identify evil, largely on the assumption that right and wrong, good and evil, are nothing more than social constructs. Such an environment may not appear to be the ideal cultural context for talking about sin. The related ill of moral relativism does not seem very conducive to viral reflection on what the Bible says about sin.

Once again, however, it is the need for it that makes biblical reflection on sin so desperately relevant. The deep cultural animus against the category of sin means that many preachers prefer to talk about weaknesses, mistakes, tragedies, failures, inconsistencies, hurts, disappointment, blindness, and anything but sin. The result is that the biblical portrayal of God is distorted, as is his plan of redemption.

Getting across what the Bible says about sin in this culture is, of course, extremely difficult. Looked at another way, that very difficulty is a measure of the need and, therefore, of the contemporary significance of robust treatments of sin. Third, the supreme virtue of the new tolerance.

Third, an array of issues has surfaced that cannot easily be addressed without a well-shaped biblical doctrine of sin. One of these is the current focus on tolerance, but a tolerance newly defined and newly positioned. D. A. Carson wrote a book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 2012.

Oh my gosh. It is the new positioning that captures our attention at the moment. In the past, tolerance in any culture was discussed relative to some broadly agreed or imposed value system, religious or otherwise.

Once the value system was in place in the culture, questions inevitably arose about how far one might vary from it before facing legal, judicial, or other coercive sanctions. Within limits, many cultures have concluded that some degree of dissent may actually be a good thing. Only the most despotic of regimes allow almost no tolerance for those who disagree.

But that means that the value system itself is the important thing. The virtues of tolerance is parasitic on the value system itself. And any society, excuse me, no matter how tolerant, draws limits somewhere.

Footnote, for example, Western culture is extremely open to diverse sexual activity, but all Western countries draw the line at the practice of pedophilia. Thank God. In much of the Western world at the moment, however, there's very little cultural-wide consensus on right and wrong, good and evil, holiness and sin, while tolerance has been elevated to the highest spot in the moral echelon.

It's not that we have self-consciously taken that step. Rather, for reasons I've tried to outline elsewhere, tolerance has become more important than truth, morality, or any widely held value system. Tolerance becomes a supreme good, the supreme God in the culture's pantheon, in a sphere of existence that often argues by merest clichés that have very few other widely agreed desirable goals. The complicated irony is that those who hold tenaciously to the supreme virtue of this new tolerance are, by and large, extremely intolerant of those who do not agree with them.

My purpose in indulging in this excursus is to point out that the overthrow of this new intolerant tolerance depends hugely on finding a value system that cherishes something more than the new tolerance. It's difficult to hold a mature and sustained debate on, say, the wisdom or otherwise of providing for homosexual marriage in law when one side, instead of wrestling with issues of substance, dismisses the other

side as intolerant and is cheered on in the culture for doing so. Unchecked, this new tolerance will sooner or later put many people in chains.

For it to be challenged, there must be a cultural value system deemed more precious, a higher good, than the new tolerance itself. And one of the necessary ingredients for achieving this end is the reconstitution of a robust view of sin and, therefore, of good and evil in the culture. To sum up, the contemporary significance of biblical teaching on sin is best grasped, first, when the place of sin within the Bible itself is understood, and second, when we perceive how desperately our culture needs to be shaped again by what the Bible says about sin.

D. A. Carson's essay. I hope you found it as instructive, illuminating, and even warning, providing warning as I did. In that same book entitled *Fallen*, which I co-edited with Morgan, his former mentor John W. Mahoney wrote *A Theology of Sin for Today*.

If we take a post-fall perspective on sin, in another context, I have argued that, with appreciation for Richard Gaffin of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, of his wise writings, that the most important distinction in the scriptures is not that summarized in Hebrews 1:1, and 2, that is Old Testament, New Testament, but the most important is pre-fall, post-fall, because the fall and resultant sin and its consequences change everything. Within that, of course, the two Testaments are its very significant division. In regard to the post-fall perspective, sin possesses many different facets and expressions.

The scripture also uses an array of terms for sin and describes it in many different ways. The following is a summary of the biblical usage and serves as an exposition of the post-fall reality. So, we're really dealing now with a biblical description of sin.

Sin is both a failure to glorify the Lord and an act of rebellion against his established standards. This twofold reality reflects both the absence of God's righteousness and the presence of human revolt. Every sin, thought, word, or action possesses these dual components.

Lexical analysis of biblical terms clearly demonstrates this duality. Scripture uses many different words for sin, an indication of the richness and significance of the concept. The diversity of meaning among the Greek and Hebrew terms, however, can be narrowed to two.

The first are those expressions that view sin as a failure, a falling short. In this sense, sin is a failure to keep God's law. Lawlessness, 1st John 3:4. A lack of God's righteousness, Romans 1:18. An absence of reverence for God, Romans 1:18, Jude 15.

A refusal to know, Ephesians 4:18. And, most notably, a coming short of the glory of God, missing the mark, Romans 3:23. Thus, sin is the missing quality in any human action that causes it to fail to glorify the Lord fully. For example, can any of us affirm that we have wholly loved God as he requires? It would be foolishness to claim that. When the element of complete love for God, others, and ourselves, even ourselves, is missing from all of our actions, motives, excuse me, from all of our attitudes, motives, words, or actions, it makes them hideous before the Lord.

Augustine called this negative aspect of sin a privation, an absence of the good quality that is inherent in creation. He also identified this privation as the essence of all sin. *City of God*, Augustine's *City of God*, 9.13, chapter 9, section 13.

Another set of terms features the positive or active aspect of sin. Words such as trespass or deviation from a prescribed path, transgression, and hearing that results in disobedience emphasize dynamic resistance or disobedience in the light of the commands of God. Adam's act in the garden is characterized by each of these terms.

Romans 5:14, trespass. Disobedience, Romans 5:15-18, transgression, disobedience, 5:19, transgression, 5:15-18. In each case, a broken law is the focus. Post-fall sin is both a failure to reflect God's perfect standard as well as an act of rebellion against his standards.

Paul also reinforced the twofold aspect of sin in Ephesians 2:1, in which he described spiritual death as expressed in trespasses and sins. Sin is both personal and social. Sin, by definition, is a willful act.

It began in the Garden of Eden with an individual transgression. The different biblical words apply primarily to personal sin. Even Paul's teaching on the universality of sin in Romans 1:3 has reference to the actions or words of individuals.

Sin, however, is more than simply personal transgression. The post-fall reality also features societal wrongs. Specifically, societal sin has two dimensions.

First, each individual act of sin disturbs the entire human network. Individual words and actions set in motion social consequences. All human choices are interrelated.

Frederick Buechner compared the human context to a spiderweb in which every disturbance, quote, set the whole thing a-tremble, close quote. The sin of one man, Achan, resulted in the defeat of Israel at a little place called Ai, Joshua 7. In the contemporary setting, it is not difficult to trace the repercussions of domestic violence, hate crimes, pornography, and divorce on families and the larger cultural context. Social sin is also reflected in the societal structures that propagate the evils of prejudice, hate, and bigotry.

What about the large publishing company that places undue pressure on editors and journalists to be the first with the story, no matter how unethical their methods might be? Many situations come to mind in which a culture of deception is created to protect the organization. What about the institutions that are dominated by a culture of distrust, pitting employees against one another in a vicious circle of gossip and innuendo? One major component of the prophetic ministry in Israel was the confrontation of societal sins, which violated the covenant and provoked the Lord's judgment. From the cycle of apostasy to judgment to repentance to restoration, the period of the judges reflects the continual societal drift toward idolatry.

A clarification, my study of benefiting from Old Testament scholars tells me there's maybe only one place in judges where there's real repentance, or rather, there's a crying out to God in desperation that he would relieve the punishment, that he would relieve the pain, not a true heart repentance toward God. Israel was brought under God's judgment through the transgressions of Jeroboam. Quote, he will give up Israel on account of the sins of Jeroboam, which he committed and with which he made Israel sin.

1st Kings 14:16. Again and again, you hear that kind of thing. He committed the sins of his father, Jeroboam, over and over.

In the later prophets, Amos preached against injustice. Amos 5:12. "for I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great. You who distress the righteous and accept bribes and turn aside the poor in the gate."

Isaiah exposed the apostasy of the nation from God. Isaiah 1:2 to 4. As well as the corruption in the legal system. Isaiah 10:1 to 4. Jeremiah indicted the nation for its treatment of the fatherless. Jeremiah 5:28-29.

The book of Jonah is an expose of the downside of Jewish nationalism, a sectarianism that produced national distrust and hate.

Third, sin is a willful act, as is the present state of human existence. The post-fall reality encompasses the entirety of our rebellious existence, what we do, as well as who we are.

Sin is a personal act. It arises from individual choice and is, therefore, a matter of responsibility. Ezekiel 18:4. The student who cheats on an exam violates the code of conduct for the school but also violates the moral standards of God.

The husband who betrays his marital vows by committing adultery is sinning willfully. In each case, a personal choice is made. Sin is a willful act.

Every act of sin, however, flows from a sinful condition or state of existence, which is also sin. Hardness of heart and unbelief are sin. Hebrews 3:12.

Speaks of an evil unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. Close quote. Personal sins are not simply isolated events.

All of our actions and words reflect who we are. Matthew 7:17. The bad tree bears bad fruit.

We are fully responsible for our acts of sin as well as the state of sin in which we exist, even though we cannot change who we are. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil, but you can't." Jeremiah 13:23.

The Bible also uses the terms sin and sins in a carefully nuanced way. For example, 1st John 1:8 to 10. One is the condition of sin, and the other refers to the separate acts of sin.

Robert Culver clarified this distinction. A careful reading of Scripture discovers a crucial distinction between sin and sins. This may be clearly perceived in connection with two similar-sounding but subtly different passages.

Namely, he will save his people from their sins. Matthew 1:21. And quote, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John 1:29. The former sins are obviously a reference to the many evil deeds of people. The latter reference, the sin of the world, speaks of the world's guilt before God in which all people share.

Robert Culver, Systematic Theology. The theological explanation for this is called original sin. This doctrine includes the historic act of treason committed by Adam in the Genesis 3:1 and following.

The fact that all people enter human existence alienated from God. Psalm 51:5. Ephesians 2:1. And are declared guilty because of Adam's sin and the continuing state of rebellion against God in which we live and from which all sinful acts arise. We are, quote, by nature, children of wrath.

Ephesians 2:3. Quote, original sin is not a sin which one commits. It resides in the very nature and being of man so that even if not a single evil thought ever passed a person's mind, no idle word ever crossed his lips, and no evil deed issued from his hands, man's nature would still be corrupt because of this sin. It is born in us and is the source of all actual sins, whether they consist of evil thoughts, words, or deeds.

Close quote. Walter Nagel, Sin as the Cause of God's Wrath. CTM, October 1st, 1952.

Philip Hughes explains, quote, the doctrine of original sin postulates that the first sin of the first man, Adam, which was the occasion of the fall, is in a certain sense the sin of all humankind and that accordingly, human nature is infected by the corruption of that sin and the human race as a whole bears its guilt. Sin reflects the next category, which is the deep corruption of the human heart. The Bible uses a number of graphic metaphors to describe the human condition in sin, theologically called depravity.

Physical maladies such as blindness, absence of sight, deafness, absence of hearing, muteness, and absence of the ability to speak highlight a vital missing component in each case. These physical conditions are not sinful in themselves, Jesus clearly indicates this in John 9, but serve as depictions of the spiritual condition of sinners. Metaphors for sin abound and serve as a great source for understanding human depravity.

Gary Anderson documents the shift in metaphors from the Old Testament emphasis upon sin as a burden to the New Testament emphasis upon debt. Matthew 6:12, in the Lord's Prayer, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Among these descriptions of the human condition, few are more graphic than the biblical analysis of the human heart.

Jesus pictures the heart as a fountain pouring out all forms of sin, Matthew 15:19 to 20, Mark 7:21 and 22. I should at least read one of those. Whether you wash your hands or not doesn't defile you spiritually, Jesus says, but what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone. In Jeremiah 17:9, the heart is described as deceitfully, desperately sick, and completely opaque.

Quote, who can understand it? The next verse says, I, the Lord, searched the heart. The great wickedness that preceded the flood came from corruptness of the heart, Genesis 6:5 and 8:21. Proverbs 21:4 declares, "haughty eyes and a proud heart. The lamp of the wicked is sin." Evil practices begin in the heart, Ezekiel 11:21.

"But as for those whose hearts go after their detestable things and abominations, I will bring their conduct down on their heads, declares the Lord God." In Hosea 10:2 people are counted guilty because their hearts are faithless.

Jesus taught that the one who wrongfully desires a woman in his heart commits the act of adultery with her from the heart, Matthew 5:28. Paul claimed that because of your stubbornness, I'm quoting, an unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for

yourself in the day of wrath and rebellion and in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, Romans 2:5. The writer of Hebrews called the heart unbelieving, Hebrews 3:12. Interpreted holistically, the heart is not a separate mechanism in humans but is the entire person viewed from the deepest aspect of his or her being.

Thus, the sinful activities of an individual's life mirror, an individual's life mirror the condition of the individual's heart before God. In our next lecture, I will continue on along this course and deal with topics such as these. Sin simultaneously involves commission, omission, and imperfection.

Sin includes our disposition and our acts of disobedience. Sin includes guilt, a very important concept. Sin is a personal affront to the God of the Bible and his righteous character.

Sin is a rogue element in God's creation, and it will not always be present. Sin is a failure to image the Creator to the world. Sin invites the wrath of God.

I'm going to add from my own notes that sin is deceitful. And lastly, sin had a definite beginning in human history and will finally be defeated. Thank you for your good attention and interest in these things.

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