

The Law Vs. Grace: Sin and Redemption

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Sin

One criticism of Christian worship services is that we seem to talk a lot about sin. While almost everyone has a slightly different view as to what the word sin means, most are a variation of evil or being a “bad person”. Most people, and by human standards they are probably correct, do not view themselves as evil or being a “bad person”. They can’t see how all this talk of sin pertains to them and therefore do not want to listen to worship services that keep telling them that they are a bad or evil person. Many Christians also think this is the complete meaning of Biblical sin, but this definition is incomplete.

If sin does not mean evil or being “bad” then what is sin? Most theologians agree that the best general definition of Biblical sin is “missing the mark”. Or, in other words, missing a target or falling short of a goal. The target, or goal, that we miss is living by God’s Law, which He revealed in the book of Exodus. In Exodus God is telling the Nation of Israel how they must live, but the purpose of the Law goes much further. God is revealing himself to his chosen people, telling them that He has chosen to have a relationship with them and He is telling them the conditions for that relationship. The Ten Commandments are not just what God expects from us - He is also revealing His nature. In a sense, God is telling us how He would behave, the nature of His character, if He were a human. The goal is obedience to the Law, and sin is falling short of that goal. As Paul wrote in Romans 7:7 “...I would not have known what sin was except through the Law.”

Evil is sin, but sin is not necessarily evil. The bad things that people normally think of as sin have consequences, both in our legal systems and in God’s Law, that vary with the severity of the offense. But each and every sin, regardless of severity, equally and fully separates us from God and, unless atoned for or redeemed, results in God forsaking us. The target is 100% obedience to the Law. Disobedience to 99% of the Law or just 1% of the Law results in equal and complete separation from God.

In the Law God defines for humans the ONLY path to being acceptable to God. This is the problem for humans, because this path requires us to be like God, to live like God would live if He were a human. And that is impossible for us, because only God can live by God’s Law. As Paul says in Romans 3:23 “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”

If only God can live by God’s Law and if not living by God’s Law is sin, then sin can be defined as “not being God”. Taking this argument further, original sin can be defined as “not being God from birth”. Also, sin is between me and God. I cannot sin against another human because it is God’s Law, not their Law. In Psalm 51:4 David says to God “Against you, and you only, have I sinned...so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

If we are only acceptable to God if we live by the Law and if we are incapable of living the Law, it would appear that we are doomed. In Romans 7:24 Paul summarized this despair when he said “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death”. While the futility of living by God’s Law can bring despair, understanding God’s ultimate solution to rescue us from judgment under the Law brings joy and thankfulness.

Redemption

Christians define redemption as the process by which humans are rescued from being forsaken by God because we cannot live by His Law. While there is only one path to God – by living the Law – God offers two options for following that path and being acceptable. The first option for being acceptable to God is to live the

Law without fail. But as Paul said in Romans 3:23 all of us have sinned and fallen short. Therefore, that option may only be taken by God Himself. The second option provided by God is our only hope.

The second option is for a redeemer to rescue us. In the Old Testament God promised to send a redeemer who would live a life acceptable to God and who would deliver us from God's judgment. In Isa 44:22 God says "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like a morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you." David tells us in Ps 103:4 that God "redeems your life from the pit, and crowns you with love and compassion". And in Hosea 13:14 God says "I will ransom them from the power of the grave, I will redeem them from death". Finally, in Rom 3:24 Paul says that we "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus".

Remember that one way of looking at the Law is that God is saying "If I were a human this is how I would live my life". This combined with Romans 3:23 leads to the conclusion that only God can be an acceptable redeemer. But while that part of God that chooses to be the redeemer must be fully God in order to live the Law and be acceptable to God the Father, he must also be fully human in order to be tempted to not follow the Law and in order to appropriate, or accept responsibility for, the sins of all humanity.

Jesus was fully God. John 1:1-2 states "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." And Jesus was fully human. In Heb 4:15 Paul states "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are..."

Jesus the Christ was and is our only hope, our only Redeemer. In John 14:6 Jesus said "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He lived and fulfilled the Law. In 2 Cor 5:21 Paul states "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" and in Heb 4:15 he wrote "we have <a high priest> who...was without sin.

At the end of His crucifixion Jesus cried out "My God, My God. Why have You forsaken me". It is most likely the human part of Jesus at that moment felt despair but it is also likely that He was quoting Psalm 22 which starts with those words and prophesied His crucifixion. It is important to note that in Psalm 22 what appeared to be death and failure in the end resulted in life and victory.

Jesus, being fully God the Son, had lived a life fully obeying the Law and was thus acceptable to God the Father. So why did God the Father forsake Jesus? The answer is that Jesus had appropriated - taken the guilt and judgment - for ALL of our sins and God the Father cannot abide sin. In Isa 59:2 we are told "your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." God the Father did in fact turn away from, and forsake, Jesus at that moment.

If God the Father did that to me I would die an eternal spiritual and physical death. If Jesus had not been fully God his spirit also would have died eternally. But just as only God can live and fulfill the Law, only God the Son could endure being forsaken by God the Father and live. Because He suffered the judgment for our sin and not only survived spiritually but was raised from the dead physically on the third day after His death, He has fulfilled the promise of being our Redeemer. But there is one requirement placed on humans – in Matt 10:32-33 Jesus tells us that "whosoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."

Jesus: Messiah and Redeemer

The central theme of the Bible is the promise of a Redeemer, prophecies about the Messiah and about the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus. One of the several sub-themes tied to this central theme is that we are totally dependent on God. His universe in which we live is held together by the force of His will and power of His

word. The air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat are ultimately provided by God. The Redeemer that God provides, consistent with this sub-theme, is the will and power of God and we have absolutely nothing to do with it. We cannot achieve this redemption through our own efforts and we cannot earn the redemption provided by God the Son. It is freely given by His Grace.

Worship

By human standards Christians are probably not bad people or evil, but by God's standard expressed in the Law we are flawed and our behaviors and thoughts are unacceptable. When we worship God we need to acknowledge who and what we are, to acknowledge who God the Father is, to acknowledge Jesus as God the Son - our Redeemer, and to give thanks for the gift He has provided through Jesus. Key to admitting who and what we are is that we are not and never will be God and that we have not and cannot live by God's Law. In other words, that we are sinful. This is why Christian worship services focus so much attention on sin.

Conclusion

The best way to conclude an essay on Sin and Redemption is to quote two specific scriptures:

Romans 3:23-24: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Ephesians 2:8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith –and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God– not by works, so that no one can boast."