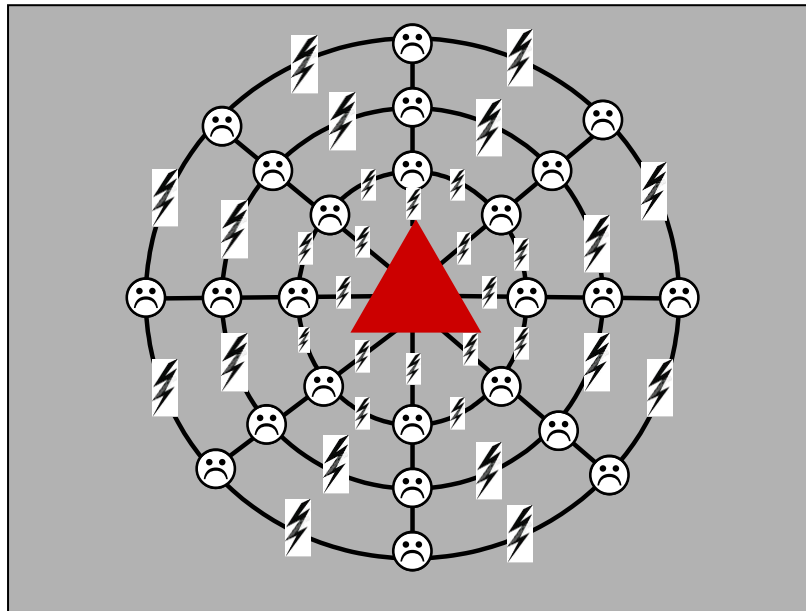


God is a Community

Part 3: Sin



Whereas love unites and by uniting transforms all that it unites, sin on the other hand separates and by separating destroys all it divides. In this sense sin is the polar opposite of love. But what exactly is sin? What precisely constitutes a sin? What makes sin sin? And why is sin so bad after all?

The Meta-Ethics of Sin

Let's begin with the following thought experiment: An 18-year-old receives a car from his parents on his birthday. Despite promising his parents not to drive until he passes his license test, he takes the car for a spin, crashes into a parked car and is arrested by the police. The question is: What in particular makes the young man's actions wrong?

- 1) Is it wrong because he disobeyed his parents, because he broke the law or because he broke his own promise?
- 2) Is it wrong because he damaged his own car or because he damaged someone else's property?
- 3) Is it wrong because he did it, or because he got caught doing it?

Of course in this case the matter is quite simple, because he is clearly wrong on every count. But I raise the question because it highlights just how many ethics are at play in a fairly simple wrong action. Moreover it can give you some idea of just how complex certain ethical dilemmas can become when different ethics act in opposition to one another¹.

It also helps us to see that there is more to the Biblical concept of sin than first meets the eye. For sin is not simply a matter of disobeying a written law. Neither are God's written laws in the Bible simply arbitrary. There is an ethic behind the ethical laws of

¹ Many dilemmas have been proposed to investigate people's attitudes towards different sets of ethics. A typical example is the man whose wife requires a certain medicine to avoid death, but which is not available to the man for whatever reason. Should he break into the hospital to steal the drug and save his wife? On the one hand he breaks the law, on the other hand he saves a life.

the Bible – a meta-ethic. The existence of this meta-ethic comes across very clearly in Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees. They had reduced all of God’s laws to a written legal system, which was relatively easy to apply, yet open to all forms of abuses, manipulations and absurdities – to the point where healing a sick man on the Sabbath was considered wrong.

Jesus makes it clear that the “heart” behind the “letter” of the law is love. Two of Jesus’ statements are pertinent in this regard. In Matt 5:17 he says, “I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfill them,” and in Matt 22:37-40 he sums up the whole of the Law and the Prophets in the two commandments: to love God and to love our neighbours. Looking back at the Old Testament laws (such as the 10 Commandments) then, we can see that in fact all of them are merely detailed examples of important ways in which we should show our love for God and for each other. Sin, in turn, is therefore by definition a decision against love, a refusal to love or to love as much as we should.

Sin as a Breaking of the Bonds of Love

Sin breaks the bonds of love, causing division and disharmony. We saw last week that our purpose is to be found in fourfold loving relationships. Sin destroys relationships on those same four levels.

1) Sin separates us from God

All sin ultimately separates us from God. This is the point that David makes in Psalm 51:4 when he prays, “Against you, you only have I sinned.” He is not denying that he has sinned against others, but declaring that his sin against others *is* ultimately a sin against God. We experience separation from God in feelings of guilt and shame, in a fear of God’s power to punish, and in an inability to perceive God’s presence in the world.

2) Sin separates us from each other

Loneliness, fear, shame and mistrust are all symptoms of our broken relationships with those around us.

3) Sin divides us inwardly

Self-rejection, low self-esteem and lack of self-control are the result of a broken relationship with self. The result is an absence of the inner peace that characterizes a whole individual capable of loving and being loved.

4) Sin separates humanity and its environment

Both humanity’s appalling relationship with its natural environment, which is at the root of the current ecological crisis, as well as the unjust and oppressive social structures that are so much part of our world are evidence of the broken relationships between us and our world.

The Punishment of Sin

There are two ways in which sin is punished. Firstly, the Bible speaks about God becoming angry in response to sin and then acting to punish the sinner or sinners with floods (Gen 6:5-8), war (Ex 5:3), drought (Deut 28:22), etc. The Bible does make it clear however that God’s ultimate purpose in inflicting such punishment is discipline rather than vindictiveness.

But secondly, not all punishment of sin is divinely inflicted. For the world has been created in such a way that sin also punishes itself through the consequences that inevitably follow from it. Of course it is not only the sinner him- or herself who suffers, since the consequences of sin can be far-reaching. In fact the consequences of sin are universal in effect with many of its victims being innocent.

Original Sin

This brings us to the doctrine of original sin. Original sin is the doctrine that every human being is in some way tainted by the universal problem of sin from the first moment of their existence. To what degree they are tainted and who bears the guilt for the taint is a matter of much debate amongst theologians.

To begin with let's be clear about what the doctrine does *not* mean. It does not mean that every person, even a newborn infant, is personally guilty of a particular sin committed by him or her from the moment of birth. Rather it refers to the general situation of enmity between humanity and God into which everyone is born. Theologians express this situation by saying that each human being is born without the transforming presence of God in his or her life. Protestant theologians would add that the problem is deeper still, namely that our human nature is so corrupted that it will inevitably lead us to sin.

What lies at the root of the doctrine however is the assertion that the whole world, and every individual in it, is in need of Christ's salvation. As we will see in the next study, salvation is not only about being saved from sin itself, but also from its consequences. To put it differently, our participation in the loving, Divine-human community that is our purpose and our hope is not an automatic consequence of our birth, but is in fact a gift of God's love, God's forgiving, saving love made known to us through Jesus Christ.

Returning to our picture at the start of this study, perhaps we could express the situation of original sin as follows: Every individual is born into a world that is shot-through with sin (broken relationships). Participation in such a world will inevitably mean that we too will at some points be victims of the consequences of sin – others breaking relationships with us, or us suffering as the result of others' sins. Moreover, the universal experience is that everyone born into this situation does in fact end up falling and becoming guilty themselves of broken relationships. Some would say that such a fall is inevitable.

Christ's salvation is thus necessary to remove us from this situation of universal sin and set us in a new relationship with God and new relationships with others.

Theodicy – the Problem of Suffering

Personal sin and original sin together account for probably 90% of the world's suffering. From personal acts of violence, to corporate acts of oppression, to systematic injustices, to global negligence of the environment, we are largely to blame for most of what is wrong in the world. Nevertheless, there is also some suffering that is nobody's fault. The problem of theodicy asks why it is so. Moreover, theodicy also asks why suffering should exist at all. Why is it even possible that people could sin and thereby cause suffering? Could God not so have ordered the world that all of us are born, not into a situation of original sin, but into a situation of original grace where only perfect, loving relationships exist?

The classical formulation of the dilemma of theodicy is as follows:

If God is all loving, God would not want anyone to suffer.

If God is all powerful, God could prevent all suffering.

Yet there is suffering.

Therefore, either God is not all loving, or God is not all powerful.

Most commonly the problem of theodicy is expressed in the question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Some theorists suggest that this is the basic question that lies at the root of all religion. Perhaps this is after all the ultimate question about life, the universe and everything!

Approaching a Solution

Over the years numerous attempts have been made to solve the riddle of theodicy. The subject is extremely complex and it would be impossible to do it justice in such a short study. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that a number of the simplistic answers that have been proposed are thoroughly unsatisfying and should be avoided. Firstly, to simply assert (as Christianity is often accused of doing) that the suffering in this life will be compensated for in the next life, can have devastating social consequences. This is what Karl Marx was referring to when he accused religion of being the “opiate of the masses”. To delay justice to another life in another world is to acquiesce to the injustices of this world.

Equally dangerous is the claim that it is “all part of God’s plan”. This is a fatalistic approach often attributed (incorrectly?) to Calvinism. It implies that whatever appears to be suffering now, will turn out in the end to have all been worth it for the ultimate good. In particular, it is often suggested that God is only inflicting a mild form of suffering as a trial to prepare us for some greater act of courage later in life. This may be so in a small way in certain isolated circumstances, but it is difficult to universalize such a theodicy in the face of massive suffering such as Hiroshima or Auschwitz where the sufferers are annihilated and therefore stand no chance of ever benefiting from the experience. Moreover, how could one ever justify the suffering of innocents as part of God’s plan?

Thirdly, to blame all evil on the Devil is no solution at all since it merely shifts the question back one step. We may attribute all suffering to the forces of Satan, but then the question remains: “Why does God allow the Devil to exist?”

Deeper attempts have been made at answering these thorny questions by relating evil to the purpose of God in “soul-making”, in which our encounter with evil is seen as a prerequisite for spiritual growth and development; or by seeing evil as offering humanity a genuine alternative to good, thus making the choice between good and evil more real; or, more recently, by focusing on how God meets us in our suffering.

Theodicy and the Broken Bonds of Love

There may never be any satisfying answers to the questions raised by theodicy but, returning to our main theme of God and Humanity as linked communities, perhaps we can at least offer the following thoughts.

- 1) God created humanity for loving relationships. One prerequisite of such loving relationships is that they must be freely chosen. (If God created you in such a way that you were forced to love God, would that love be real?) But by creating us to choose love freely, God also created us with the possibility to reject love, and as we have seen, to reject love is by definition to sin.
- 2) But why is bad *so* bad? Would it not have been sufficient for God to allow us to say “No” to love and leave it at that? Why murder, apartheid, holocaust, weapons of mass destruction, etc.?

The other dimension of our creation in the image of God, we said, was that we are also creative. God made us so that we could love freely and creatively. Unfortunately, the combination of these two traits, freedom and creativity, can work together to invent all sorts of “creative”² ways to reject love, to instill fear and to cause suffering.

² Perhaps “creative” is not the right word, since sin is destructive rather than creative. “Ingenious”, perhaps.

- 3) But why is the world a dangerous place? It's one thing to say that *we* are free to reject love, instill fear and cause suffering, but why should the natural world be so full of dangers such as natural disasters or predatory animals?

The world seems dangerous because we are limited, mortal beings. Perhaps the most basic dimension of the scariness of the world is that we will all eventually die. Now it may be that without sin in the world it would have been possible that we would have experienced death, not as a frightening reality, but as a natural progression from one way of being in God's presence to another way of being in God's presence. Nevertheless, we are mortal, and perhaps it was God's intention all along that we should receive eternal life as a gift of our unity with Christ, rather than as a given consequence of our creation.

Sin vs sins

I hope that from all we have considered above it is clear that when thinking about sin we should not think simply about a long list of naughty things we might do on a sunny afternoon. Sin is much more serious than the sins we happen to commit. If love is God's essential nature and the highest purpose for which we have been created, then sin is whatever denies God's nature and diverts us from our purpose. The horror of sin is that it directly contradicts love and tries to defeat it. It is the polar opposite of love.

Love unites and, by uniting, transforms all it unites.

Sin divides (or separates) and, by dividing, destroys all it divides.

Just as we participate in the work of God when we love, so we also participate in the divisive work of sin whenever we act without love. And since on our own we seem unable (or unwilling) to escape from either the guilt of sin or the consequences of sin, we need help.