

Getting the Essentials of SIN: What has become of Right and Wrong. Dt 30:15-19,
Matthew 5:13-19

Portions adapted from : "Whatever Became of Sin?" (Bill Muehlenberg's commentary on issues of the day...)
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In 1973 American psychiatrist Karl Menninger prophetically penned a book with the intriguing title, **Whatever Became of Sin?**

Good question. Now we know at least part of what has happened to sin. It has actually been pulled. That is, one dictionary has taken the term out all together.

A recent story coming out of the London news media, noted that the 2010 edition of the **Oxford Junior Dictionary** has removed the word. And it seems it is not just the word 'sin', but a number of other Christian and biblical terms have also been deleted, including "abbey, altar, bishop, chapel, christen, disciple, monk, nun, pew, saint."

Vineeta Gupta, the head of children's dictionaries at Oxford University Press, stated that with the Dictionary, intended for children ages 7 and up, kept to a strict limit of 10,000 words (to meet size limits) that they are constantly surveying children's books and the school curriculum to see what words were no longer in use. And because "People don't go to Church as often as before many "Christian" words had to be dropped for the sake of adding religious terms from a larger multicultural [framework].

So what should we make of all this? Sure, as Western societies become increasingly secular such terms will therefore continue to fall out of use. But the fact that a word may not be used a lot may not be a good reason for pulling it from our dictionaries.

Certain terms are simply a part of the Western heritage and are too vital to be left out. Christianity played an enormous role in the establishment and continuance of Western civilization, so it should not so readily be dismissed from our collective memories.

But, as Menninger earlier pointed out in his book, losing the word for sin has been long preceded by losing our cultural concept of sin. Now, in place of "sin," we speak of crime and symptoms. This is his analysis of that shift:

Whenever you look at sin as either crime or symptom, you are missing the essence of human right and wrong behavior. Whenever you take sin and turn it into crime, what you've done is taken God out of the picture because sin is committed between a person and God. Crime is malfeasance between two human beings. So if you call it crime, you've really defined it downward.

Or if you take sin and turn it into symptom, you've gone even lower because there you're talking about things with outward indications, you're talking about heredity, you're talking about environment, you're talking about early life choices and factors that infringe from the outside.

As Dr. Menninger points out, when you discard the concept of "sin" and replace it with the concept of "symptom" you've defined it as something that's outside of us – it is no longer ours but some other's failure.

But the gradual disappearance of the notion of sin also has far-wider implications. For this notion is fundamental to the Judeo-Christian worldview. Take away our understanding of sin, and these two major religious traditions no longer make any sense.

Indeed, biblical Christianity is incoherent without the notion of sin. There can be no good news of the Gospel without first understanding the bad news of sin and the fall.

Nor does the mission of Jesus make any sense if we remove such concepts from our thinking.

Jesus made it clear that the reason he came to earth was to save sinners. For example, as he said in all three Synoptic Gospels: "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners*". Take away the doctrine of sin and we take away the doctrine of the Incarnation. Indeed, we take away the entire message of the New Testament.

But of course liberalized versions of Christianity have long wanted to dispense with the notion of sin altogether. They think it has no place in the believer's vocabulary or theology.

Take for example is Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral fame. He of course does not like to talk about sin. He is more concerned about people's self-esteem. He wants us all to think positively, and he is quite unhappy with the biblical notion of sin. As he once stated (1985): "*I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition.*"

Such anti-sin thinking has been a hallmark of liberal theology for several centuries now, but only in the previous 30 years, with the last vestiges of Christian thinking leaving the subconscious of the general populace have the consequences of our moral amnesia begun to appear.

As theologian H. Richard Niebuhr. Warned (1953): "***The liberal gospel consists of a God without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross.***"

Such a Gospel is of course no Gospel at all. Without sin, the whole biblical understanding of why Christ came collapses.

Without sin, we are simply left with nebulous and anemic understandings of humanity's predicament and condition, which we now label "poor self-esteem," a bad upbringing, and so on.

So sin is no longer a living theological concept in American life today – even among many Christians. Oh, we will confess that we are sinners, and even at times beg for forgiveness from authorities human and divine, but we really don't take the issue too seriously. Taking a few words Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes, we generally believe that we are "**pretty good people.**"

Take for example the annual Presidential call for a **National Day of Prayer**. The first one to do so was the newly elected President Abraham Lincoln. Here is a part of his proclamation.

"It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon."

Then 100 years went by, before in 1950, Congress passed a law that the president should henceforth and every year after that designate a certain day in May as a National Day of Prayer and should issue a proclamation so designating that day.

President Eisenhower's first proclamation for a Day of Prayer went back to Abraham Lincoln's original declaration, borrowing much of the language and even using the word "sin". But no president since then has used the word "sin" in his proclamation. Not President Carter, or Ford, or Reagan, or Bush, or Clinton, or Obama.

So, whatever became of sin?
We just stopped talking about it. We haven't stopped doing it.

So, let us refresh our memories as to exactly what sin is
Here is a standard definition:

1. A transgression of a religious or moral law, especially when deliberate.
2. Something regarded as being shameful, deplorable, or utterly wrong.
3. *Theologically*: Deliberate disobedience to the known will of God.

And here is how the Bible defines sin:

The Hebrew and Greek words translated "sin" throughout the Bible revolve largely around two major concepts.

The first is that of transgression. To transgress means "to step across" or "to go beyond a set boundary or limit." This is the idea of sin that is taught in the Hebrew Bible. And this type of sin can be by illustrated by any athletic playing field with boundary lines. Whether it's a wrestler on a mat or a football player running down field, if that player crosses over the line, he/she has gone out of bounds has committed a "transgression." To rightly be a part of the game, the players have to stay within the limits the field. Crossing the line has negative consequences for you and your team.

It is this idea of sin that caused King David to confess his adulterous murderess affair to God (Psalm 51) *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence*

But this idea of "crossing the line" also has a passive expression; what in contrast to the previous sin of **COMISSION** is called a sin of **OMISSION**. You see, sin doesn't just exist when there is purposeful violations of the law. We can also sin by simply not doing what we know is the right thing to do. Or as the Apostle James phrased it: "*Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.*" (James 4:17).

But when Jesus came along he raised the bar in our understanding of sin. Most of the words translated "sin" in our New Testament involve a second concept, meaning "**to miss the mark.**" Again, using a sports illustration, even if playing by all the rules, if a player aims for the goal and misses, **how many points does he/she get? None**. He missed the goal, missed the mark at which he was aiming. The Greek word refers to an archer's arrow falling short of the target.

Another example of "falling short" comes out of the classroom. Most academic courses and all those dreaded tests are graded according to a minimum standard. If we don't meet that standard, we fail that test or course. A minimum level of performance is expected, and anything less than that standard is failure. So by not meeting that standard, we "miss the mark" and don't pass.

This is the idea of sin that Paul had when he *wrote [for we] all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23)

These then are the two biblical concepts of sin: one is to intentionally cross a line, the other is to fail to measure up to a standard.

And both of these concepts, transgressing or missing the mark, need a basic standard of measurement. If we cross over a set boundary, then there must be a defined boundary to cross over. And if we miss the mark, then we must have a mark or standard at which we were aiming.

God set the moral boundaries for all who would follow Him in the Ten Commandments (Ten "you shall not's...") and in his farewell speech, Moses spelled out the consequences of crossing those boundaries. He labeled our choice in crossing or not crossing the line as life & prosperity verses death & destruction.

And Jesus set the mark for our aim with the Great Commandment: *you shall love the Lord God with all your heart, mind, and strength ... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Sin, then, is to transgress those boundaries or to fall short of the goal that God has set for us.

And what happens in a society, culture or nation when such sin is practiced but is no longer acknowledged?

What happens when we sin but do not admit that that is what we are doing?

This is what happens.

That nation, that society, that culture, that person, begins to deteriorate. Just as Moses warned, our choice is between **life & prosperity or death & destruction**.

Thus while some people and dictionaries may want to want to lose the word, the notion of **sin** is fundamental to who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. To ignore or minimize our sinful state is like ignoring a large and growing cancerous tumor; hoping things will just turn out alright. But that will not do. Death will be the result unless drastic action is taken.

And in the spiritual realm, the cancer of sin must be dealt with, or we will all perish. But the good news in all this bad news is that is exactly why Jesus came into our world to do: He came to destroy the effects of sin and bring us back into a right relationship with God.

Having paid the price of our sin for us, Jesus offers us the cure – forgiveness of our sins and peace with God when we accept his gift, his substitution of his life for ours.

That is why Paul went on to write: ***since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; [we] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*** (Romans 3:23)

Let me give you one more example from the athletic field of just what it is that Jesus has done for you and me.

The famous Harlem Globetrotters in a basketball game filled with hi-jinks, always bring children out onto the court for some half-time competition. One of their contests is to stand a young child on the foul line (or worse the mid-court line) and let them try to shoot a basket. Of course the ball never even makes it to the basket until Meadowlark Lemon or Curly Neal comes over, picks the child up, places them on his shoulders, and begins shooting baskets for them – now never missing whatever the distance.

That is exactly what Jesus has done for us. Soon as we are willing to acknowledge that we are sinners, that we have fallen completely short of God's mark... that we need a savior (not just a life coach) then Jesus picks us up, places us on his shoulders, and scores the goals for us.

That is the good news towards which the bad news of sin points us.

That is why we need to know what sin is,
And to admit that we are sinners
and deserving the payment for sin which is death ...
So that we will return to God
And accept the free-gift of God -- forgiveness
Given to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.