

# Sin is Less

**1. What is Sin?** Let's start with the word itself. The English word sin comes from the German word *sunde*. Sunde means to break apart, sunder, and disconnect. The Hebrews had several words for sin which shed light on its meaning: *Hattah*, which meant to *miss the mark* or *target*, *Awon*, which means to *twist or deviate*, and *Pesha* which means to *break* a covenant or *betray* your family. All three Hebrew words capture the idea that sin hurts the relationship between God and us. In other words, when we sin we are **off the mark, twisted** and **betrayers** of God. The Greek word for sin was *diablos*. It meant "to scatter." Diablos became the basis for other words related to evil like diabolos, devil, teufel. The language used in Genesis 3 tells us that the serpent "severs" the relationship between God and mankind. When we reflect on these various words we find that sin and the evil it reflects bring disharmony, strife, confusion etc. between us and God. All of these terms reflect the fact that sin causes a breaking and *scattering* of our natural unity and relationship with God.

**2. Original sin and its results.** The first sin is called "**The Fall**" or the Lapse. It is explained in story-form in Genesis 3:1-24. The ancient story-form used in Genesis is not meant to be interpreted the way a movie or modern historical text might explain things. It does literally tell us what God wants us to know. First it tells us that the Fall was our fault. God gave us everything and it was good, but mankind freely chose to disobey. Second it tells us that both death and sin are a result of our own choices. God is not to blame for the problems of the world. Third it tells us that God did not give up on us. He immediately promised a rescue plan (the *Protoevangelium* of Gen 3:15).

What does the Church teach about the fall? 1. There were **two individuals** who through a **personal act** rejected God's plan. 2. It was their **free choice** that brought sin into the world. 3. Their **original innocence** was destroyed, along with many of their **preternatural gifts**. Preternatural gifts are the gifts that allowed mankind not to die, and also allowed his intellect, will

and body to work perfectly with each other. These gifts were lost in the Fall. 4. The **nature of their sin was pride**. Adam and Eve decided to do it their own way. 5) Man betrayed the missions he was given by God to worship (rest in God), till the soil and take care of God's creation, and be fruitful. Instead man acted in pride, thus worshipping himself and settling for a lesser and limited life.

**The Fall.** Notice that sin bounces (rebounds) back on the sinner; we did nothing but wound ourselves. Sin did not hurt God. The punishment for sin is built into the sin itself. Sin is its own punishment. It is addictive in its very nature. In fact the worst punishment built into sin is that we enjoy it. It not only breaks our relationship with God, it hurts us.

Another point is the motive for us to sin comes from **fear**. Paul tells us that Adam made his choice because of "fear of death." (Hebrews 2:15) Genesis does not go into details but the serpent played on some sort of fear. Perhaps the serpent was scary. We know the prospect of death was scary. This resulted in Adam and Eve's choice of disobedience over God's will. As Yoda wisely pointed out "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering."

Also notice how Eve thought through her sin. She saw that the fruit was 1) yummy, 2) attractive and 3) would make her wise. Sin always involves a rationalization (i.e. excuses). Always. It always involves relativism. Eve made her own rule in defiance of God's simple request. But God is always at work and ready to help us, as Paul explains in Romans 5: 20 "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

**3. The Nature and Effects of Sin.** According to the Catechism *sin is an offense against God as well as a fault against reason, truth and right conscience* (ccc 1849).

It is important to note that there is no such thing as a “private sin.” We may have done it in private, but sin has effects outside of our rooms. All sin impacts others either directly or indirectly. Sin violates ourselves and damages our relationship with God. It affects our ability to love and thus hurts others. It destroys love in our hearts, and so we are unable to do the good that we should do. Long-term sin can create vices that eat away at our souls and destroy the few virtues we might have. It isolates us and slowly destroys our ability to follow the mission that God call us to live. All sin is an act of pride on our part. All sin acts against justice, since it does not give to God what we owe, which is everything. Sin destroys love and our ability to love. Sin is an act that is intrinsically **selfish**, and is rooted in “me first” thinking.

True love, in contrast, is choosing the good for the other “as other,” i.e. for their own sake and not for what we get out of them. Sin is choosing what *seems* good for me. But what seems good can have a hidden death inside of it. While sin can hurt others, it always destroys some part of us, because we were made for relationships and love.

**The Nature of Sin.** Saint Augustine had a simple but penetrating view of sin and its effects. He explained that sin always involves two simultaneous things: first sin involves us **turning away from God**, and second **simultaneously choosing something else as our “god.”** *There is always some form of idolatry in every sinful act.*

This turning from God leaves us empty and unable to turn back to God on our own. We may want to reunite with God, but we cannot repair our own brokenness. We have nothing with which to fix ourselves and reconnect with God.

Through the gift of divine love given by Christ on our behalf on the Cross two things happen to correct sin: first Jesus heals our broken souls (redemption and salvation) and then second reunites us to God (sanctification). The first part turns our hearts away from idols and sin, and the second turns us back (and unites us) to God.

Sin is in essence an *univitation* to God. Sin tells God to get lost. Our actions speak louder than words and make us into either God’s children or enemies of God. When we choose evil He leaves, i.e. we kick Him out. When we allow God to forgive us and heal us, God easily fixes the problem through the gift of His Son and heals our relationship.

**Sin is less.....** Here is another way to understand sin. We are made for eternity and infinite love. God had big plans for us, and gave us everything in the good world He created. He implanted a desire in every one of us for something more than the world can offer. We sometimes replace the deepest desire we have for something that falls short. That’s what sin is. Sin is choosing something that does not fulfill. Something less..... And we become less as a result. In fact we became infinitely less as a result.

**Aquinas and Malo:** *Malo* is Latin for sin. The word malicious (bad intent) derives from it. When we turn away from God we typically choose lesser things (idols) in an attempt to fulfill us. Aquinas points out that the four big idols are: **1 Power, 2 Wealth, 3 Pleasure, and 4 Honor.** These are not bad in themselves but when we put them in the center of our lives and use them to replace God, something is very wrong.

(unofficial) Universal Rule #3: **Everyone worships something.** It may be God or it may be something else, but we always have some sort of “god” that we order our lives towards. If you figure this “something” out then you get a good picture of what makes a person tick. If someone worships power, wealth, pleasure and/or honor, then they are worshipping idols. These are all forms of false worship....settling for something less. This is why God gives us His grace in the form of the 3 theological virtues. Faith, Hope and Love transform mere human likes and aspirations and turn them into means to worship the one true God. Sin is undone by Christ, who frees us from these addictions of the heart.

**The Beatitudes: the remedy to sin.** Remember the beatitudes? Christ knows that we always worship something. He also understood the human heart, in fact He made it. So he gave us a recipe for turning our hearts away from false idols and truly loving him. They are contained in the beatitudes in Matthew 5.

*Blessed are the poor.....*

this beatitude rejects wealth as our fulfillment.

*Blessed are the meek...*

this beatitude rejects power as our god.

*Blessed are the sorrowing...*

this beatitude rejects pleasure.

*Blessed are the least...*

this beatitude rejects honor and fame.

**Christ understood!** Jesus understood the things that draw us towards less, towards evil. His beatitudes are designed to lead us to freedom from the traps of the heart, because the heart is what leads us to good or evil. Following the beatitudes leave our hearts free to love. They encourage virtue and love.

**Image or Idol?** God made the world, and it is good. We have a **choice** on how we view the world. We can see creation as an **image**/reflection/icon of God. This means we see God in His creation, and use it as a way to lead us to the creator. Or we can see creation as an **Idol**. When we idolize the things of this world we ignore *who* made the world, and do things our way, and worship the creation. Idols get in the way of our relationship with God. As a result of idolatry the things of this world become our god. So the question we are faced with every day is how do we see the world: as an image or an idol?

#### 4. How to Understand Sin.

**Original Sin.** Why can't we go back to Eden? God's grace is not something we naturally have as humans, it's a gift. So once lost, the birth of a new person does not automatically put grace back in us. We inherit this original sin by just being born. We call this lack of God in us "**Original Sin.**" We contrast this state with **personal sin** which is sin freely committed by a person, not just inherited.

Original sin a state, not a decision. Each person must get the gift from God in a free act of Baptism that wipes away sin and unites us with Him.

The impact of original sin leaves us with an ugly inclination to sin called **concupiscence**. Sorry to have to tell you but everyone has it. It is our **tendency towards evil** instead of good. It causes a **disordered relationship** between our intellect and will and it disorders our desires. Concupiscence is not sin itself, but a general "downward" tendency in humanity due to original sin. The short definition: *our inclination to sin*.

**Two degrees of Sin.** 1 Jn 5: 16-17 explains that there are two types of sin ("there are some sins which are not mortal"). The first is mortal sin. **Mortal sin** is a grave offense against God. This degree of sin destroys our relationship with God. In order to be a mortal sin your action must have grave matter, full knowledge and complete consent. Our relationship can be restored through confession. God has to heal it, we can't. The second type is called **venial sin**. These are less serious offenses (the two differ in gravity). Venial sins hurt and weaken our relationship with God. They can lead to mortal sin.

#### Recap: 3 Conditions for a Mortal Sin

**Grave matter:** this is specified in the Decalogue and is a serious violation of the natural law.

**Full Knowledge:** presupposes knowledge of the sinfulness of the action.

**Complete consent:** deliberate personal choice.

*\*All three must be met for it to be a serious (mortal) sin.*

**Commission and Omission.** Can *not* doing something be wrong? Yep. A **sin of commission** is the choice to do an evil act. A **sin of omission** is NOT doing something we should. It's just as bad. Sometimes there is no "neutral" in the moral world. **Not** telling your parents where you are because you know they would not approve (i.e. you are at a party without their permission) is lying.

**Material and formal Sin.** **Material sin** refers to the *objective* aspect of a sin. This part of a sin we can judge. Sometimes something bad happens by accident. Evil has happened although someone might not be held **culpable** (responsible) for it. We call this a **material evil**, when something bad happens, even by accident.

**Formal sin** are intentional sins. Only God knows perfectly the formal sinfulness of a person because others cannot know knowledge and intent.

**Cooperation with Sin.** Is it wrong to help someone commit a sin? This depends on several factors. We cannot formally cooperate in sin. **Formal cooperation** means we purposefully act and agree in our wills to assist in evil. Or we purposefully do nothing to stop evil because we agree with it. An example of this would be willingly selling bullets to a guy who just told you he plans to murder someone you happen to dislike. We sometime **materially cooperate**, but without consent or without knowledge. This is unintentional cooperation and not often culpable. This means we help evil by assisting unwillingly or unintentionally.

**All sin is ugly.** Our culture often glamorizes evil. The entertainment industry sometimes makes thieves, adulterers, and murderers look cool without showing the evil side effects their actions have on their souls and others. It is good to step back and realize that evil is a deformity and rottenness in reality. Evil clothes itself in beauty, but will eventually reveal itself to be empty at the core.

**The 7 Deadly Sins.** This list contains seven vices that can be manifested in sinful actions. Each vice and the sins they engender use creation in such a way that **creation is loved above the creator**. They are also called the “**capital**” sins (cap or capitus is Latin for head) because they cause and engender other sins.

The list is attributed to Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) who described Seven Deadly Sins in his commentary on the Book of Job called the **Moralia**. Here is his original list.

The 7 Deadly Sins	
1. Superbia...	Pride
2. Invidia ....	Envy
3. Ira...	Anger (wrath)
4. Avaritia...	Avarice (greed)
5. Accedia....	Sloth (spiritual laziness)
6. Gula....	Gluttony
7. Luxuria....	Lust

**Why the list?** He made the list so that folks would not commit these sins without realizing how serious they were, and also so that they would be able to confess any such sins and gain absolution. Interesting fact: The original sin ‘Tristia’/Sadness was later replaced by ‘Accidia’, i.e. Sloth (immobilizing *spiritual* sadness). Bonus fact: the sins are listed in decreasing order of severity. The top five are psychological sins, dealing with the mind that is twisted away from God, while the bottom two deal with sins of a more physical nature. Dante used this list for his vision of hell (inferno) and the ascending purifications of purgatory (pergatio). Physical sins can be fixed or changed more easily than sins of the mind. Pride is present in all sinful decisions.

### 5. Temptation

Temptation is not sin itself. It is not sinful to be tempted. For instance Jesus was tempted in the desert but did not sin. **Temptation is an attack on the will and intellect from inside or outside of us.** Temptations can become sinful. They can move from temptation to actual sin when we make a choice using our free will.

The Church explains that there are 3 primary sources of temptations that lead to sin: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Bible identifies in 1 Jn 2: 16 how temptations tend to work in and on us: “*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but of the world*”. In other words 1) general **physical lust**, 2) disordered desire for things seen by **the eyes**, and 3) **pride** are huge sources of temptation. Where do you think John got this list from?

## Questions and Vocab

1. List the various words for sin and their meanings.
2. What does the serpent tempt Eve with? What three things did she find appealing about it?
3. What basic facts does the Church find in the Genesis 3 account of the Fall?
4. What was the impact of the first sin on Adam and Eve? List the various results, See Genesis 3.
5. Explain why is original sin passed down?
6. What are the two simultaneous aspects of every sin according to Augustine?
7. What is sin an absence of?
8. What does sin do to human nature?
9. What does concupiscence do to mankind? Explain the various results and effects.
10. Where do we get the distinction between mortal and venial sins? Please write the quote out.
11. What three criteria are needed for a mortal sin?
12. Explain the difference between formal and material sin
13. Explain the difference between sins of omission and commission.
14. Give an example of material and formal cooperation with evil.
15. List the 7 deadly sins. Which of these is present in all sin? Why are these in this order?
16. What does the bible identify as the three sources of possible temptation in us?

### **Vocab**

Protoevangelium (include verse)

Original sin

The fall

Personal sin

Concupiscence

Mortal sin

Venial sin

Formal sin

Material sin

Formal cooperation

Material cooperation

Sin of omission

Sin of commission

Culpable

Capital sins

Temptation

1 John 2:16's list of temptations