

Call It What It Is !

Christians seem to operate with a very specialised vocabulary, words that are often echoes of past centuries and which mean little or nothing to everyone else. Worse still, if those words still have some meaning for the general public, sometimes that meaning is far from what the Christian understands. Effective communication is stifled at birth! And then we find that different Christian believers somehow manage to interpret what seem to be simple and straightforward words in complex and confusing ways.

There is probably no more striking example than the word 'sin'.

To the average person in the street, the only way in which that word may have been used in their hearing will have been in the phrase 'living in sin', an antiquated term for couples living together in a heterosexual relationship but without being married to each other. As the majority of couples these days choose NOT to get married, the phrase will most likely have been used in a joking way, mocking the moral standards of the past. And so 'sin' becomes branded as an outmoded idea which is somehow connected with sex!

But perhaps Christians who use the word frequently may also be confused, not really understanding its true – and simple – meaning. The Greek word used in the New Testament and translated 'sin' is *hamartia*, meaning 'missing the mark' and borrowed from archery. ¹ If you failed to hit the bullseye, you had 'sinned'. In our case, the 'bullseye' is a perfect life, lived in complete accordance with God's standards and demands, and the Jews had a comprehensive catalogue of what was acceptable and not acceptable to him – what they called the 'Law of Moses', contained in the first 5 books of the Bible.

Those requirements were certainly demanding, but there are at least two people recorded in the New Testament who apparently thought that they had kept every single commandment. One of them changed his mind about that later!

The first is the young man whom we call 'the rich young ruler'. His encounter with Jesus is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke ² and in each account he claims to have kept all the commandments. However, when Jesus 'raises the bar' and challenges his love of wealth, he is saddened and goes away grieving.

The second is that zealous Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, whom we know as the apostle Paul. Recounting his history in Judaism, he even says that he was 'found blameless' as regards the Jewish Law. ³ However, after his encounter with – and transformation by – the Lord Jesus Christ, he changed his tune, calling himself the foremost of sinners.⁴

Sometimes I have heard people say something like "I don't try to follow all the rules and regulations set out in the Bible; I just want to follow Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount." It makes me wonder whether they have actually **read** the Sermon on the Mount, because what Jesus taught then was **even tougher** than the Law as given through Moses. OK, he didn't emphasise all the rules about foods that could or couldn't be eaten or many other detailed laws, but he challenged his hearers about **both actions and motivations**, rather than just about obeying 'the letter of the law'.

Early on, he sets the scene: *"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."* (**Matthew 5:17-20**) That is definitely no easy ride.

In the following verses, he extends the letter of the Law by equating verbal abuse with murder and lustful thoughts with adultery. A little later, he says that the Law and the teaching of the Prophets is summed up like this: *"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you"* (**Matthew 7:12**).

¹ I understand that one of the main Hebrew words for 'sin' in the Old Testament has the same basic meaning of 'missing'.

² **Matthew 19:16-26, Mark 10:17-22, Luke 18:18-30.**

³ **Philippians 3:6.** See also **Acts 22:3, 23:1, 24:16, 25:8.**

⁴ **1 Timothy 1:15.**

I am fairly certain that even Saul of Tarsus and the ‘rich young ruler’ would have needed to admit that they each failed according to those steep demands, which reach beyond the visible outward performance and expose the inner workings of our hearts. They, like the rest of us, would have ‘missed the target’.

Paul (once he had realised his own fundamental failure to match up to God’s standards) expressed the situation clearly and succinctly: *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)*. The word translated ‘fall short’ is *hustereō*, which basically means ‘to lag behind’ and it conjures up two images for me: Firstly, the picture of a feeble archer whose arrows don’t even reach the target but fall short – total failure! And then the general picture of just being unable to keep up, like a child whose short legs can’t keep pace with adults who are walking on ahead. (Childhood memories coming back?) In reality, as Paul says, we all find ourselves unable to reach the target, or to ‘keep up’ with the pace that God has set.

That would be pretty terminal for all of us without the next verse! “... *being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*”¹ From total failure to glorious inclusion!

Have you noticed? Paul doesn’t classify sin, putting some wrong actions in a ‘severe’ category and counting others as minor and insignificant. In fact the apostle James says that breaking the Law in a ‘small’ matter is just the same as breaking it with actions that we might view as more significant and serious.² Thinking back to archery again, we could apply the popular saying ‘a miss is as good as a mile’. We have all missed the target, some by much, some by little, but we have all missed it.

Our tendency to classify sin, to make excuses for ourselves when what we have done (or not done) doesn’t seem too serious, only lands us in more difficulty. Let’s look at that word again: *hamartia*, ‘missing the target’. If we didn’t have the word ‘sin’ in our language, how would we try to translate it? To me, the simplest definition is ‘failure’. All sin is failure and all failure is sin. When I share this understanding with people, some of them object: “It was bad enough that I needed forgiveness for my sins; now you tell me that I need forgiveness for my failures as well!”

If we had no solution for sin, if there were no prospect of complete forgiveness, then of course adding what we might call our ‘failures’ to the list would just deepen the pit and make matters much worse. We would be drowning in a sea of guilt and unworthiness. **But we have the solution.** Not just a solution, but the solution. There is no other.

We might not think of it as ‘guilt’, but the memory of our individual past failures can too easily haunt us, accusing us and pointing out our worthlessness, giving us a very poor opinion of ourselves, pushing us towards self-hatred. Don’t be confused; this is not humility, this is not how our Father sees us. Yes, of course he sees our failures, all of them, and they are certainly not what he wants in our lives, but he has provided the solution. Jesus shed his blood so that my failures can be forgiven, as well as what I have tended to call my ‘sins’, so a whole fresh prospect of openness lies before me.

One of the first passages I was shown as a young believer – and I remain really grateful for being shown it – was **1 John 1:8-10**: *“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us.”* The key word is ‘confess’. No, it’s not a religious word; it simply means ‘to say the same thing’.

We have all been there! We do something or say something and very soon we have the sense that it wasn’t quite right. The Holy Spirit is giving us a nudge and saying ‘that was wrong!’ So we try to duck around it and justify what we said or did, giving ourselves excuses why what we did wasn’t really wrong at all. But he doesn’t give up; that little ‘voice’ keeps on saying ‘that was wrong’. We may try to hold out for a bit longer, but hopefully experience tells us that we are trying to fight a losing battle, and we give in: ‘OK, Lord, I admit it, what I did was wrong’, and we come to him for forgiveness – and receive it!³

All the time we were resisting, what we were really saying to the Holy Spirit was ‘No, you’re wrong; what I did was OK’ – though we probably wouldn’t have put it quite so bluntly as that! And then, when we do give in, we are finally agreeing with his diagnosis and we ‘say the same thing’. That’s confession!

¹ ‘Justified’ = ‘made innocent’; ‘redemption’ = ‘ransom’; ‘propitiation’ = ‘price paid for reconciliation’.

² **James 2:10**

³ The Holy Spirit is persistent, but it is possible for any of us to continually resist his promptings and harden our hearts to the point where there is no going back. See **Hebrews 3:12-13, 12:15**

Now, if we take that same process and fit in 'failure' instead of 'sin', we find the same forgiveness for our failures, and experience the release and freedom that come from knowing that the price has been paid for them as well; we don't need to carry that load, either. Like Paul, I may be able to say "*I know that nothing good dwells in me*" but that still doesn't send me down into the pit of despair and self-loathing. My failures, as soon as I acknowledge ('confess') them before the Lord, are covered and dealt with and my account is cleared. A new dimension to having a clear conscience!

It's not only personal, simply limited to our own individual walk with the Lord. A clear understanding of sin and failure, forgiveness and restoration is pivotal for our relationships with each other, and the key to it is in knowing for certain that we have the remedy. Facing up to sin and failure is never going to be easy, but knowing that our Father's loving forgiveness is there, just waiting for us to take hold of it, gives us the strong incentive to come out into the open and 'walk in the light' with each other.¹

When someone does something which hurts someone else, the world system doesn't really have a very satisfactory process to follow, though obviously people get by. Either there is a degree of reconciliation, probably involving an apology, or else there is a barrier built up and people stop making meaningful contact with each other. It may look OK on the surface, but scratch a little deeper and we find resentment and antagonism. That may even be the case when there has been an apology and an apparent reconciliation – all smiles on the outside, but maybe something unsettled brewing away inside, something that may be carried for years.

Sadly, that can happen between Christian believers as well, and probably does so more often than we would like to think. Words of 'forgiveness' may have been uttered, but still the offended person hangs on to the problem and doesn't really let it go. The word translated 'forgive' in the New Testament means 'let go', so if we are behaving like this, it shows that we have not really forgiven the other person who hurt us.

There are two key passages where the Lord Jesus tells us clearly how to manage broken relationships, **Matthew 5:23-24** and **Matthew 18:15-17**. They are effectively two sides of the same coin. Something has gone wrong between two believers, and the two passages describe different actions depending on who first becomes aware of the problem.

In **Matthew 5**, one person is about to present their offering to God (in accordance with Jewish worship) and becomes aware that something they have done has caused their 'brother' to have something against them. In other words, they realise that they themselves have done something which has broken what had previously been a good relationship. Jesus effectively says "Drop everything! Don't be concerned about presenting your sacrifice properly, but go and get that relationship restored! OK, when you have done that, then of course you can carry on with your worship to God."

Matthew 18 describes the situation from the other person's viewpoint. They have not done anything wrong, but they see that their 'brother' has done, and it is likely to be something that directly affects them.² So, Jesus says, go to him **in private** and tell him what he has done, in the hope that he will listen to you and the relationship will be restored. Then you will have 'won your brother.' If he doesn't listen, then there is a process to follow, always with the aim of restoration, but it definitely starts with that one-to-one conversation, **before** the situation is even mentioned to anyone else. Jesus is very clear about that!

In each case, the one who knows that something is wrong is the one who needs to take the initiative. We can't just wait for the other person to approach it from their angle. Nor can we – as the injured party – talk to anyone else about it until after we have had that private conversation. And, if the other person **does** respond positively and the relationship is restored, the problem is removed and there is no reason to tell anyone else about it, anyway!

Obviously, there will be a central need for confession and forgiveness, whoever starts the process. The one who did wrong will need to agree that it **was** wrong and 'say the same thing'. The one who was wronged will need to extend forgiveness in the same way that they have themselves received forgiveness through the blood of Jesus, "*forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*"³ That 'just

¹ **1 John 1:5-7**

² Some of the old Greek texts say 'sins against you', others just say 'sins'. So there is certainly a responsibility to act if you are the 'injured party', and maybe also if wrongdoing has taken place but not specifically against you.

³ **Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13.**

as' is the Greek word *kathōs*, which means 'in exactly the same way as'. In other words, on the basis of confession and taking hold of the forgiveness which is ours through the blood of Jesus shed for us. On that basis, the wrong is truly forgiven and forgotten, and certainly not held onto by the injured party. There is no way that they can come back to the offender at a later date and say something like 'you remember that you did wrong against me on that occasion . . .' No, it is dealt with completely and finally and not held against us at all. No 'leverage'!

That may all sound like a very involved process. In fact, it probably takes longer to describe than to put into practice. But can't we just 'forgive and forget'? Yes, of course we can, if we really can 'let go', but the forgetting is the more difficult part and we are often just a bit too keen to remember what we think people may 'owe' us from past encounters. Taking the process through confession and forgiveness – spoken out in both cases – is an extra insurance that neither side will resurrect the problem against the other. The version of the 'Lord's Prayer' recorded in **Matthew 6:12** says "*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" The word translated 'forgive' simply means 'let go'.

A lovely, simple process, not only restoring a potentially broken relationship, but restoring it on the basis of the forgiveness that both individuals have themselves received from God through the death of Jesus. It underlines that our relationships with others in the Church are not just because we are friends and get on OK with each other, but fundamentally because our relationships with each other are based on, and dependent upon, our individual relationships with the Lord. In an amazing way, through the simple process of confession and forgiveness, a wrong word or action can actually be the starting point for the deepening of relationship between us. The Lord doesn't waste any opportunity!

But can it still go wrong? Yes, of course it can; we're human! Probably one of the commonest ways in which the process can fail is when one 'side' or the other refuses to see that it is sin/failure that they are dealing with and, as soon as that understanding is missing, the prospect of real forgiveness and reconciliation goes out of the window!

Why do we do it? For the 'guilty' one, there may be an attempt to pretend that it wasn't really sin: it was a 'silly mistake', an 'accident', a 'bad choice of words' or some such smoke screen. Instead of acknowledging that 'yes, it was my wrong action and I accept responsibility for what I said or did', and so opening up the way to experience afresh the forgiving grace of God, this time channelled through our brother or sister.

It is harder to see why the 'innocent' party could want to pretend that no sin was involved, but it does happen. Somehow there seems to be a desire to hold onto blame against the other person, perhaps to give a feeling of having some 'leverage' on them, almost like blackmail. Or perhaps just to foster a sense of 'oneupmanship': 'They're the guilty party; I have every right to feel that I am better than them.' Either way, the way of grace is blocked; there is no repair to the broken relationship and any semblance of everything being OK between them is based upon pretence rather than on truth and reality. A vital part of the building up of the Body of Christ is denied, and the whole Body suffers. We are called upon to deal truthfully with each other, in actions as well as words.¹ There is no room for 'papering over the cracks'.

How we complicate things unnecessarily! Realising and acknowledging that our 'failures' and our 'sins' are one and the same thing; seeing that **we have the solution** in the death of the Lord Jesus; dealing honestly with each other in a way that deepens our dependence on the Lord and builds us together in him.

If it isn't sin, then we have no remedy and we are left with heartache and disunity. If we will only **call it what it is**, then we shall discover afresh the grace of God and move forwards in fellowship, 'walking in the light' together.

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¹ **Ephesians 4:15 & 25**