

Q. What is sin?

A. Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in the world He created, rebelling against Him by living without reference to Him, not being or doing what He requires in His law—resulting in our death and the disintegration of all creation.

Text: 1 John 3:4

- LSB – “Everyone who does sin also does lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”
- NET – “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; indeed, sin is lawlessness.”
- NLT – “Everyone who sins is breaking God’s law, for all sin is contrary to the law of God.

Again, we see the importance of understanding the importance and role that the Law of God plays in this world.¹

- If there is no standard by which we can determine what is right or wrong, then it is impossible to define – or punish – sin.

Letham is helpful:

The principal words for sin in the New Testament are ἁμαρτία (sin), ἀνομία (lawlessness), ἀδικία (unrighteousness or injustice), παράβασις (transgression), παρακοή (disobedience), and πίπτω (the verb fall). All these terms have in common a deviation from the law or requirements of God. The range of words used for sin warns us against viewing it by one term alone.²

¹ Surprisingly, the majority of recent commentaries and study Bibles either make no comment about “lawlessness” as referring to God’s moral law, or, they say that John is not using the Greek word (*anomia*) this way. This is surprising, seeing that John is himself Jewish, and would understand lawlessness this way. Moreover, this verse is the only use of the word in the epistle, and so to make such a categorical statement seems forced. When we look at the use of *anomia* elsewhere, it seems that it is indeed referring to God’s law (see, e.g., Matt. 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12; Rom. 4:7; 6:19 [2X]; Tit. 2:14; Heb. 1:9; 10:17).

² Letham, Robert. Systematic Theology (p. 371). Crossway. Kindle Edition. (emphasis mine)

As we saw earlier, the universal scope of God’s law written on every heart forms the basis of why every mouth will be shut and the whole world will be subject to God’s judgment (**Romans 3:19** [CSB]; cf. 2:14-16).

Being reminded of this helps us understand the NLT’s wonderful paraphrase of Paul’s conclusive statement in Romans 3:23:

- “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.”

Sin, then, is the missing of the mark³ of God’s sovereign and righteous standard, namely, perfect obedience to His Law, done out of faith, in love, and by a submissive heart, unto His glory.

- This is why theologian Robert Letham can say, “Sin is any transgression of the law of God and thus is directed principally against God.”⁴
- **Psalm 51:3** (LSB) – “Against You, You only, I have sinned *and* done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak⁵ and pure when You judge.”

Since “sin” is ultimately against God,⁶ then, we must see it as more than just simply missing the mark. Sin is not some impersonal ‘accident’ or ‘misstep’ or ‘mistake.’ No. It is the active, willful, and hostile rejection of God’s rightful Lordship over all things, including us.

- **Romans 8:7** (LSB) – “because the mind set on the flesh is hostile towards God, for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so.*” (emphasis mine)

Robert Letham is helpful:

Sin is any transgression of the law of God and thus is directed principally against God...This is a reflection of the New Testament terms for sin, which are mainly negative—transgression, disobedience, lawlessness, lovelessness,

³ BDAG, the standard academic Greek Lexicon, defines the verb (“to sin”) as follows: literally ‘*miss the mark, be in error.*’ It is in reference to “offending against God, man, religious or moral law.” [emphasis mine]

⁴ Letham, Robert. *Systematic Theology* (p. 366). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

⁵ NIV = “so You are right in Your verdict and justified when You Judge.”

⁶ Sin is exceedingly abominable since it is primarily against God. For a thorough treatment of this theme, see Ralph Venning, *The Sinfulness of Sin* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, repr. 2016), 29-36.

unrighteousness, godlessness. The consequences of sin are guilt, broken relationships with God and others, death, and condemnation. Since it is a choice directed against the living God, it is a choice for death.⁷

The Origin of Sin

Sin appears to have originated in the angelic world,⁸ wherein some of the angels – most notably Lucifer⁹ – freely and intentionally rejected God, seeking to be like God themselves.¹⁰ No repentance is possible for them, but they are kept in chains awaiting judgment.¹¹

This very sin – the ignoring and rejection of God and His sovereign, loving, and life-giving, rule¹² – was then replicated in the garden by Adam and Eve when they fell for the lie of the serpent.

The words of the wicked tenants in Jesus’ parable capture well the proud, hateful, and God-rejecting heart behind all sin:

- **Luke 19:14** (KJV) – “But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have¹³ this *man* to reign over us.”¹⁴

Like Israel of old,¹⁵ humanity will have any god to be their king, except the true and living God.

⁷ Letham, Robert. *Systematic Theology* (p. 366). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

⁸ See Job 1:6–2:10; John 8:43–44; Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 2:10–11; 11:3; 1 Pet. 3:19–20; 2 Pet. 2:4; 1 John 3:8; Jude 6, 9; Rev. 12:7–17.

⁹ Watson, in his *Body of Divinity*, writes, “The origin of sin, from whence it comes. It fetches its pedigree from hell; sin is of the devil. ‘He that committeth sin is of the devil’ (1 John 3:8). Satan was the first actor of sin, and the first tempter to sin. Sin is the devil’s first-born.”

¹⁰ See, for e.g., John 8:44; 1 John 3:8. I would hold to a modified understanding of passages like **Isaiah 14** and **Ezekiel 28**. The classic view is that the prophets are referring to the fall of Satan, whereas it has become in vogue to reject this interpretation and see only YHWH’s rejection and condemnation of the earthly kings He is addressing through the prophet. I believe that *both* are being addressed, for both the OT and NT teach that earthly rulers can be influenced and directed by heavenly powers in the heavenly realms.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 369-370.

¹² Bunyan defines sin as, “the dare of God’s justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeer of His patience, the slight of His power, and the contempt of His love.” In *A Puritan Golden Treasury* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, repr. 2011), 260.

¹³ Literally, “We do not want” (so ESV, LSB, etc.).

¹⁴ NIV (cf. NET) – “We don’t want this man to be our king!”

¹⁵ See, for e.g., Judges 8:22-27; 1 Samuel 8; Isaiah 44-48, etc.

- This is because the heart of idolatry, as we will see in our next catechism question, is self-serving 'worship.'