

Defining Sin

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Date: 04 January 2026

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn back to Exodus chapter 20, and we can read again verses 1 and 2. Now, you might be thinking, well, that's a depressing thing to think about as a new year begins.

And in many ways, sin is not a topic that we're eager to focus on. You know, we would not put a banner outside the church saying, come and discover more about sin.

It's something that people maybe recoil from. And in many ways, for some people, it's the Bible's emphasis on sin that is the thing that they find most off-putting about Christianity.

I hope, though, that looking at this will actually be very helpful for us, because the truth is we need to take sin seriously. And when we do take sin seriously, we discover two things.

We discover how important the gospel is, but we also discover just how beautiful the gospel is. And to take sin seriously is just simply to think about sin in the same way that we think about everything else in life that's incredibly important.

[1 : 36] So, if you're driving today, you take the road conditions seriously. Every one of us who drove today, you are focusing and thinking much, much more carefully, because the roads are very dangerous.

You're taking the conditions of your brakes seriously every time you drive. If you're entering into an operating theater, you take hygiene seriously. If you're stepping into a boat to go out to sea, you take the weather seriously.

In all these areas, we take things incredibly seriously, and we do it for one reason. We take these things seriously so that we end up not dead. That's why we do it.

That's why we take these things seriously, and the Bible takes sin seriously for exactly the same reason. In other words, we're not taking sin seriously in order to increase our misery as dull Presbyterians.

Not at all. We take sin seriously to discover more about the thrilling, life-giving joy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, I hope we'll see and discover more of that as we look at this series together.

[2 : 49] Today, we're going to introduce it by thinking about defining sin. And we're going to look at three things. One massive lesson. One huge mistake. One astonishing miracle.

So, we'll go through these one by one. First of all, one massive lesson. And the massive lesson that I want to just highlight and spend a bit of time looking at is this. It's the fact that sin is defined by God.

Sin is defined by God. That's the starting point for understanding sin, and it's the starting point for taking sin seriously. Sin is defined by God, and that definition operates antithetically.

In other words, sin stands in direct contrast to the nature and character of God. Everything that sin involves is always something that God is not.

And that has some important consequences. It means that sin is not defined by us. So, we don't actually set the standards for what's right and wrong or good or bad.

[3 : 54] And it also means that the definition of sin never changes. Because if sin is defined by God, it means that the definition of sin is tied to the unchanging nature and character of God.

That's the big lesson. Sin is defined by God. Now, the Bible unpacks that for us. And the category that the Bible uses to give us more detail about that is what we call the law.

And we read the Ten Commandments, and we see lots and lots of laws are given in the Bible. And there's this important connection between the law and our understanding of sin.

This is captured very well in another shorter catechism, Question and Answer, Question 14, which maybe we'll come to later in the year with the kids. It asks the question, what is sin?

And it says, sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. Now, that definition, as you can see, is in two parts. What we call sins of omission, what the catechism

describes as a want of conformity.

[4 : 55] In other words, not doing the things that God asks us to do. That's sins of omission. And then the other category is sins of commission, transgression of the law of God.

Where God's told us not to do something, and we do it. And all of this is teaching us that God's standards of what is right and wrong, good and bad, is revealed to us in God's law.

And that standard will always conform to the nature and character of God. You see that really clearly in the passage that we read, what we call it when the Ten Commandments were given. And what highlights it in particular is the first couple of verses that we read, what we call the preface to the Ten Commandments, what we read in verses 1 and 2 of Exodus 20. We'll read it again. The Ten Commandments are prefaced by the words, In other words, it's the nature, character, and identity of God himself that shapes everything that's going to be given in these Ten Commandments.

[6 : 10] And that's why the Ten Commandments is much, much more than just a kind of list of do's and don'ts that people are supposed to tie and match up to. No, far more important is that these Ten Commandments are teaching us about what God is actually like.

And so if you go through the Ten Commandments, you'll see them, that they teach us more about God. I'll put them on the screen. We'll go through them very quickly. Sorry that the writing is so small. I just wanted to have them all on one screen at the same time.

First commandment, you should have no gods before me. That's because God is real. God is real. And only God is God.

If there is an absolute of reality, if there is a source from which everything else comes, if there is an ultimate being, it's God.

He's real. And so having another God is absurd. Second commandment, not to make carved images. God is the creator.

[7 : 13] And so to use a part of creation, whether it's a piece of wood or something from under the sea or whatever it might be, carved into something, is ridiculous because you're making a creature and bowing down before it as though it's your God.

God is creator. And so to worship him through some kind of created image is crazy. Third commandment, don't take God's name in vain. That's because God is serious. What God says, what God does, how God behaves, what God promises, what God commands, it all matters. It's all serious. It's not something to be taken lightly or trivially. Fourth commandment, to keep the Sabbath day, to observe the Sabbath principle, that's actually because God is happy. When the Sabbath principle was established at creation, it was for God to rest from his works to see the beauty of the world that he had created.

And that principle of enjoyment, of happiness, lies at the heart of the Sabbath principle. Many of you may have grown up with a very, very different perspective of the Sabbath. That's not the way it should have seemed because that principle of rest and of enjoyment, of appreciation of what God has made, it all lies in the fact that God is happy.

[8 : 32] There's a contentment, a beautiful contentment in God. Fifth commandment, honor father and mother. That's the whole idea of superior to inferior, that those who are superior to us, we respect them, we honor them, and of course God is our ultimate superior.

Sixth commandment, don't murder God's life-giving. Of course he's going to give that commandment. Seventh commandment, don't commit adultery. Of course God's going to give that commandment because God is faithful, always faithful.

Eighth commandment, don't steal. God is just and fair. Ninth commandment, don't bear false witness. God is true. Tenth commandment, don't covet. God is generous. He pours out blessings upon it.

In other words, all the commandments are arising from the nature and character of God. You see the same pattern in the very specific commands given to Israel regarding their sacrificial system in the book of Leviticus.

I've put a passage up on the screen. You'll see lots and lots of commands are given in Leviticus. You shall not swear by my name falsely. You shall not oppress your neighbor. You shall not do injustice in court.

[9 : 37] You shall not go around slander. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. And you'll see there's a phrase that appears again and again and again. Why? I am the Lord, verse 12. I am

the Lord, verse 14.

I am the Lord, verse 16. I am the Lord, verse 18. All of these commands are tied to everything that God is.

And this is where we see a big difference between us and God when we consider ethics and taste. we are often able to contradict our ethics and our taste.

So we might have an ethical position that we'll hold to, but our actual tastes and what we like and what we're drawn to can contradict that. So, in other words, we might hold to a belief that something's wrong, but yet we still find it really appealing.

So I think that greed and inequality's wrong. I still want to be a millionaire. I think that self-glorification is wrong. I still love it when people praise me and give me approval.

[10:43] I think coveting is wrong. I still wish I had a tractor. And in lots of much more serious ways, in my heart, you'll find a contradiction between the things that I believe are wrong and yet the stuff that I actually kind of crave and chase and want.

We can separate our ethics and our taste. God cannot do that. God's ethics and his taste, to use that phrase, are always in harmony.

They're always utterly holy. You see an example of that in Isaiah. God says, I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery and wrong. And that statement there captures really powerfully the way in which the way, the nature and character of God always shapes, always shapes his law and his standards and what he likes and what he dislikes.

And all of this is teaching us that in God, there's a magnificent connection between morality and stability. So the God who defines right and wrong is the God who's infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

And so that means that whenever we look at a law of God, it's leading us back to the unchanging unity, simplicity, and immutability of God.

[12:08] So his law reveals his righteousness, his righteousness conforms to his holiness, his holiness is tied to his immutability. It's all telling us that God is unchanging, so right and wrong is unchanging.

His law is perfect. His law is stable. The massive lesson is that sin is defined by God. And this brings up a crucial consequence that I've maybe said sometimes before, but it's so important to say it again because you have to remember this every single day.

Whenever you see something sinful, whenever you encounter something that is awful, whenever you are confronted with something that's wrong, you have to remember that is not what God is like. That's never what God is like. Now, we see this kind of thing all the time in the world around us. So we'll see politicians standing up, making promises.

We know they'll never keep them and they never do. you've got to remember God is never like that. We'll come across people who are two-faced. They're one thing to us one day, they're a different thing to us another day.

[13:28] They're kind to us, then they're talking about us. We feel like we're being betrayed. God is never like that. We see people who are being manipulative and they're using power to their own advantage.

They're being deceitful, they're being abusive, they're being selfish. And God is never like that. And when someone hurts you and someone treats you in a way that you know is wrong, you must remember that is never what God is like.

And it's especially important, this is where it's especially important to draw a really clear distinction in our minds between God and people and particularly people who are connected with the church because everything that I've described there in terms of examples, people who hurt us and maybe be two-faced and maybe be selfish, you don't just find that in the work and in school and in places like that, you find it in church as well.

And often people have been badly hurt in church and what's tragic is that the awful experience that people have in church, that then becomes the lens through which they look at God because they think that's what the church is like, that's what God is like.

You must never make that mistake. When we are treated badly by people, it's because they're sinning.

[15:01] And sin is everything that God is not. And so you must remember that if something is evil and wrong, God defines sin.

The reason it's evil and wrong is because it's going against the nature and character of God. God defines sin. So that's the one big lesson. From that comes one huge mistake that we can very, very easily fall into.

what's the big, what's the huge mistake? The huge mistake is thinking that sin is not a big deal. And it's so easy to think like that. It's so easy to think that sin is not a big deal.

And it's particularly challenging for us today because all around us, we are living in a culture, we are watching entertainment, we are reading books, we are living in an environment saturated with the mindset that sin isn't that big a deal.

And it's so easy to get sucked in by that. Two massive things have happened in our culture in the past hundred years. One is that lots of things that are sins are now not seen as sins.

[16:09] And so things that to our grandparents and great-grandparents would have been unthinkable are now very, very acceptable. Even more so though, the second thing that's happened is that there is stuff that we still think is bad, but we find it really entertaining and captivating.

And so you'll see that so often of the most popular sources of entertainment and stuff is actually full of behavior that's wrong.

I'm not saying, I'm not like, I'm always worried when I say like this that I'm kind of sounding all like a bit sort of pious. I'm not saying that kind of movies, TV shows are wrong. I'm not saying that at all.

These things can be so powerful, so powerful and so helpful in the way that they portray things that are wrong and that can be helpful. But I think you know what I mean, that behavior that it's just, it seems to me, maybe I'm getting old, but it just feels as though things have just got to a level now where there's just, there's so much that, you know, in what entertains us that is just not right, not fair, not helpful, not beneficial.

And I think it all comes from the fact that we think that sin's not a big deal. That's a terrible mistake to make. It's so important for us to recognize how serious and dangerous and horrible sin is.

[17:37] Two individuals in the New Testament give very powerful examples of this. One is the man that Jesus met in Mark chapter 5. He was known as Legion. He was possessed by a legion of demons.

And when you look at the behavior of this man, he lived among the tombs. No one could bind him anymore, not with a chain. Night and day among the tombs, he was crying out, cutting himself. He confronted Jesus as soon as he saw him.

When you look at this man, one thing is so clear to see. Sin is utterly destructive. And looking at this man is important because in Legion, you kind of get a kind of, I don't know how to describe it, but you just get a completely unfiltered view of sin in this man.

It's just, the mess is just, it's just there for everyone to see. And the big thing that this is teaching us is the destructive power of sin.

You can see this man. His life is being destroyed. He's even trying to destroy himself. That is what sin is trying to do. Sin is not just this kind of, like, kind of naughty thing.

[18:44] It's destructive. And what you see in this man is telling us what sin is trying to do to all of us. Sin wants to destroy us.

Sin wants to destroy us. And so you see that so powerfully in this man, but you also see it in the lives of so many people around us today.

You see humanity's greed is destroying our environment. Addiction is destroying so many people's lives. Sexual immorality is destroying relationships and destroying people's self-esteem.

Unforgiveness is destroying families and friendships. Gossip is destroying relationships in the workplace, in school, in communities. You see that sin is out to do one thing.

It's out to destroy us. You see the same in the other example that I want to give you, which is Judas Iscariot. And I want to highlight Judas because in Judas the influence is so much more subtle.

[19:46] You see in Mark 14, a woman came, she broke a flask of a hugely expensive perfume and those who watched it were indignant. They were saying, she broke the glass, she put it on Jesus, she anointed Jesus with it and some who watched were indignant, saying why was that ointment wasted?

Why was it not given, sold, and the money given to the poor? And we know actually from John's gospel that it was Judas who was one of the main ones who was saying that.

And you can see that that ties to what it says in verse 10. Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus to them. When they heard it, they were

glad and they promised to give him money.

He sought an opportunity to betray him. And there you see the subtle but the same destructive influence of sin. You see in Judas that sin, the sin of greed just set him onto a path that had terrible consequences.

So if we think that sin is not a big deal, we're making a massive mistake and that's something that we want to just emphasize very clearly. It's really easy to think that when we talk about sin, it's so easy to think that we're actually kind of, that we're just using that as a kind of theoretical framework to accuse people or to judge people, you know, as though we're sort of, you know, just like looking down our noses and everyone saying, oh yeah, look at all those sins.

[21 : 14] That's the mindset of the Pharisees. That was the way that they behaved. That's not what sin is at all. Sin's not this kind of theoretical subject. It's not this kind of list of standards that we can use to look down our nose at other people.

None of that. All of that, looking down your nose at someone is just another example of sin. Sin is an utterly real life subject and it's everything that makes our lives horrible.

It's everything that's wrong. It's everything that causes suffering and illness and injustice. sin is just, well, not coming to church often enough or using bad language or something like that.

We've got to have a much, much bigger view of sin. Sin is everything that is wrong with the world. And so, every time you look at something that's wrong, every time you look at the world and you see something and you think, I wish that wasn't there.

When you see child slavery, you see famine, drug addiction, inequality, poverty, illness, lies, deception, betrayal, cruelty, selfishness, all of that is there because of sin.

[22 : 35] Sin's a massive thing, a massive problem. Sin has got one objective. It wants to destroy us. And this is where we see a crucial difference between God and Satan.

God is revealed in the Bible as creator, the source of everything that is good and he's the one who defines everything that is right. Satan is the uncreator.

He's the destroyer. He's never the creator. He's the uncreator, always working to undermine, undo the creative acts of God.

Sin is a departure from everything that God is and from everything that he's made creation to be. So we must, must, must not have a small view of sin.

So, big lesson, massive lesson is that God defines sin. Huge mistake is to think that sin is not a big deal.

[23 : 37] Sin's a massive problem. But, I want to close by looking at one astonishing miracle. As we learn about sin, one of the things that quickly happens is that the gulf between us and God gets stretched.

And it gets stretched far, far further than we realized before. And in many ways, that's one of the functions of the law that God gives. It's to reveal our sin and the law does that.

It exposes us as guilty before God. So every single, every single time we read the Ten Commandments, every single time I read the Ten Commandments, I'm not thinking, oh well, I've kept them and I'm still going strong.

No. You read them and you think, oh man, I'm guilty. And for some of the commandments, as Jesus went on to explain, we might not have done the actual outward act of the commandment, but the inward desire is there in my heart.

And so, the law and all the Bible's teaching about sin, it's stretching, stretching the gulf between God and us. But, there's an amazing word in Exodus chapter.

[24 : 55] God reveals His law that reveals an astonishing miracle. As God reveals His law, He declares, I am the Lord, your God.

I am the Lord, your God. And this means that this law is given in the context of a relationship.

And the term that the Bible uses to describe that relationship is the word covenant. It's a relationship that speaks of the deepest commitment and the utmost seriousness. And that means that in all this language of law and sin that Exodus 20 and so many other parts of the Bible reveal, we're seeing two crucial things.

We're seeing the unchanging character of God. He's the Lord. But we also see the unrelenting commitment of God to His people.

He's the Lord, your God. God. And that's why taking sin seriously is so important. because the holiness of God and the horror of sin is telling us just how far above us God is.

[26 : 10] But the more you understand that, the more you have seen, the more you will see just how far Jesus has come to reach us.

Understanding sin puts God higher than we ever imagined and puts us lower than we ever thought. And that's exactly where Jesus meets us.

As soon as you think about the nature of God, as soon as you think about the impeccable perfection of God, and you set that alongside the hideous nature of sin, the destructiveness of sin, the cruelty, the selfishness, just the awfulness of sin, when you start thinking about these two categories, you realize that the most incompatible creature to come into God's presence is the sinner.

The most incompatible creature to come into God's presence is the sinner. Now, the Pharisees understood that. The Pharisees, the early leaders in the church in the New Testament, they understood that principle.

That's why they were horrified at the idea that Jesus was supposed to be the Son of God and yet he was mixing with all of these people whose lives were a mess.

[27 : 34] but Jesus taught them something crucial and we see that Jesus says something very different because we're saying that the most incompatible creature to come into the presence of God is the sinner.

That's true and Jesus says that's exactly who I've come for. As he was passing by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax collector's booth.

He said to him, Follow me. And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick have come not to call the righteous, but sinners.

And in coming for us, he died in our place, rose again, so that all our sin would be washed away, so that we would be as white as snow.

[28 : 50] And that means that the more we take sin seriously, the more we look to Jesus with joy and with awe and with never-ending thanksgiving.

And for all of us here today, if we're feeling conscious of our sin, burdened by it, Jesus is saying, Look, just come to me again and we can say to him, Lord Jesus, please cleanse me.

And that's exactly what he'll do. Amen. Let's pray.