

Is it a Sin to...

Hespeler, April 14, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 3:12-19, Psalm 4, [1 John 3:1-7](#), Luke 24:36b-48

In my free time, I often like to hang out in various online forums. And, as someone who is frankly fascinated by the Bible, I particularly like to hang out in forums where people discuss the Bible, its interpretation and its application in Christian contexts. And when I hang out in such places, there is a certain sort of question that comes up with annoying frequency.

People constantly seem to write to ask what I think of as the sin question. They want to know if something is a sin, usually asking about some specific action, attitude or way of being. They never ask about the ones that everyone would agree about, of course. Nobody writes to ask if it would be a sin to kill my neighbour because I don't like the way that she planted her hydrangeas.

Oddly Specific

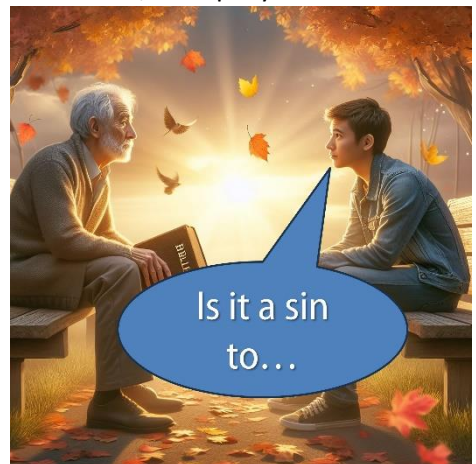
But they do ask about some other oddly specific things. "Is it a sin to jaywalk?" or "Is it a sin to live with my girlfriend or boyfriend?" They want to know if it is a sin to feel attraction to a man or to a woman, to not feel like they are the gender that they were declared to be at birth, to use someone else's Netflix password. It is quite obvious, if you read through some of these questions, that these are not just hypothetical questions. They are asking about something that is or perhaps soon will be part of their life.

And the mere fact that these questions come up so regularly in forums where people can be anonymous tells me a great deal. It tells me that a lot of people really want to do the right thing. And, for many people, that amounts to following the right list of what is allowed or not allowed. Morality, in other words, can just be sorted out in a simple series of yes or no answers.

Simple Questions?

But I don't really think that many of these are simple yes or no questions. Yes, sure, sometimes the sin question has to be answered in a firm and straightforward way. Yes, it would be sinful for you to murder your neighbour, not to mention illegal. But in other cases, a simple yes or no can be deceptive.

A simple yes or no answer to the jaywalking question, for example, could be unhelpful. If you do cross a street in an unsanctioned way because you are selfishly hurrying, not thinking of anyone else and you make a car swerve and cause an accident then, sure, I would call that sinful. But if you dash across the street, possibly risking your own life to push a child out of the path of an oncoming car, I think that most people would see that a bit differently. You might still get a ticket, but I'm not going to say that you are sinful for that act.



Relationship Questions

Of course, this all gets a lot more complicated when you are talking about questions related to sex or attraction, which affect us on a much more personal level. And I get that many people would just prefer to have a list of acceptable and unacceptable actions or relationships. It seems to make things so simple and orderly. But the more I see the way that works out in practice, the more problematic it seems to be.

I have seen more than enough relationships that have fit the traditionally acceptable parameters – the “right” genders involved, the “acceptable” activities engaged in – that turned out to be relationships that were abusive or dehumanizing to one or both of the people involved. And I’ve seen other relationships that didn’t fit the parameters but that were mutually affirming, and the people involved only brought out the best in each other.

If I’m going to call out the reality of sin in our relationships, I feel like I need to do much more than consult a list of dos and don’ts. What people bring to their actions – the respect and integrity that they act with – has to mean more as far as I am concerned.

Social Control

Another reason why people prefer to have simple answers to the sin question is because it is a form of social control. The person who can give that yes or no answer claims an extraordinary amount of authority. And even if they do so by referring to some Bible verse or another – even if they claim that it is the Bible’s answer and not theirs – the mere fact that they are the one selecting and interpreting the verse gives them power over other people. And so, the history of the discussion of the sin question has been a long story of people being forced to conform to certain ideas of what society is supposed to look like.

Now, I do think that we need to take sin very seriously. It is something that gets in the way of us all achieving our full potential. I know we often don’t want to talk about it, probably mostly because of how talk of sin has been used by authoritarians to impose their idea of order on others. So, we need to find ways of talking about it that get beyond all of that.

First John’s Approach

Our reading this morning from the First Letter of John might help us to find a better way of talking about such things. It might not seem that way at first, of course. In fact, this particular passage has caused no end of trouble on the issue of sin in the life of the church down through the centuries. For example, it offers a definition of sin that only seems to affirm the approach of people who obsess over the sin question. **“Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness;”** it says, **“sin is lawlessness.”** I mean, if **“sin is lawlessness,”** is that not basically the same thing as saying that there is a list of approved and nonapproved actions that you can point to to tell people that some action or another is a sin?

But that is not the end of what John has to say. He goes on to say, **“You know that [Christ] was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.”** He is not just saying, mind you that Jesus came to bring forgiveness of sins but to take them away altogether. And he explains that odd statement by saying, **“No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or**

known him.” So, he is saying, not merely that sin can be forgiven; it can be completely eradicated from our lives!

An Infamous Verse

Now, you may not know this, but that particular verse has an infamous history in the Christian church. Autocratic Christian leaders have sought to create communities where believers can live out this promised sinless life. But, since they are still stuck with the definition of sin as following a list of approved behaviours, the only way they can accomplish that is by taking personal control of the list.

And guess how that usually ends – with the leader defining whatever they want to do and what their cronies want to do as “not sin” because they are abiding in Christ. Meanwhile, they use their power over the list to manipulate and control every aspect of everyone else’s lives.

I would not want to have to tell you how often this kind of situation has led to horrible outcomes like child abuse, exploitation and even things like murder. And I cannot believe that any of that is what was intended when the Apostle wrote this letter. The sin that he is talking about, the sin that Jesus has eradicated, has to be about more than a list of do’s and don’ts.

Acting in Righteousness

“Little children,” he continues, **“let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.”** You see, what this is ultimately about is acting in righteousness. Doing the right thing. And the standard of that is not to be found in some list or set of laws. It is to be found in Christ himself.

Therefore, you must not allow anyone, not even the most pious Church leader, to take that power away from Christ. What he is promising is that, so long as we keep our gaze and focus fixed on Christ, we will find the way to righteous action. But it is not about controlling others, especially not about controlling them to our own ends.

Can You Live Without Sin?

Now, I do think it is important to note that this letter isn’t actually promising you that can make your way through this life without sinning. It is not promising you that you will always act in perfect righteousness. The promise is that, so long as we fix our eyes on Jesus and his righteousness, we will act right. But he also says, that **“What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”**

Jesus is not fully revealed, he’s saying, so we cannot fully perceive all that Jesus is. And if we do not fully see him or know him, we will obviously fail and fall short of true righteousness. So, even if he promises that we may live a sinless life, he is also saying that the fullness of that potential will only be realized when Jesus is fully revealed at the end of all things.

Acting in Ignorance

In our reading from the Book of Acts this morning, Peter confronts the people in Jerusalem with their sin in rejecting Jesus. But he sums it up like this: **“And now, brothers and sisters, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.”** Sin is indeed often a result of ignorance – of our

failure to see the true nature of what is right. We are deluded because we have been trapped into unhelpful ways of seeing the world.

God is gracious in forgiving us our sins, but, more important, God is willing to wipe out our sins as well. **“Repent, therefore,”** Peter continues, **“and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”**

That is saying much the same thing as the First Letter of John. In Christ, God does not just want to forgive but also to wipe out our sin. That means it no longer has power over us because Jesus, in revealing righteousness, will ultimately obliterate our ignorance. It also means that God is committed to wiping away all of the damage and pain and sorrow caused by our sin both in ourselves and others. Hallelujah, all thanks be to God.

Finding Better Ways

The way we have become accustomed to talk about sin in the church, has not necessarily served us well. By creating coercive lists of acceptable and unacceptable activities, we have often encouraged people to become obsessed with the question of whether this or that thing is sinful. That only encourages a kind of unhealthy scrupulosity. And, if Jesus came to set us free from sin, that is not the kind of state Jesus wants us to be in.

Because of all of those kinds of problems that such an attitude towards sin has created, we’ve often gone to the other extreme and avoided talking about the concept of sin altogether. That’s not a helpful reaction either. Jesus came to set us free from the effects of sin, but also from the obsession with it. Jesus came to set us free from unhelpful feelings of shame or guilt that get in the way of us embracing our true nature in Christ.

First John’s Promise

As you do seek to live as a follower of Jesus in this world, you are definitely going to get things wrong. You’re going to act out of ignorance sometimes. Sometimes some of your baser instincts will get the best of you despite the best of intentions. This is a part of being human. But the promise of First John is that, as we fix our eyes on Jesus and the righteousness of God that he has revealed to us, sin doesn’t have to have power over us. It doesn’t need to dominate our whole lives. Jesus has wiped it away. Hallelujah, let us live in the freedom of Christ.