

What is SIN anyway?

by Norman Walford (1323 words)

I've always had trouble understanding just what this word—SIN—means. It gets used often enough in church but the definitions tend to be a bit vague. It's like, "If you don't know what it means then by definition you must be doing it." Here are two questions, or example of the sorts of quandary I have sometimes found myself in:

First one

You're walking along the street and you see an empty drink can lying in the road that someone has dropped. You think, *That's messy, not nice!* There's a bin nearby, so you pick it up and drop it in the bin. I think most of us would agree that's a good thing to do, right? It's something we respect as citizens. Good, right even.

But then—what if you do the opposite? You see the can in the road, but instead of picking it up you walk on, leaving it lying there. Picking it up is the opposite of not picking it up. Good is the opposite of bad. So if picking it up is good, then logically leaving it there must be bad.

Bad? Evil?? Sin??? I'm not sure. I'm not comfortable with it but it's difficult to see the logical flaw in the argument.

And then if it's a right and good thing to do, then really you should do the same for the next bit of litter you see lying in the road. And the next, and the next. You'd spend your whole life picking up other people's garbage. It's confusing. Is that what Jesus did? Did he spend his whole time picking up other people's garbage. It's never discussed, but I think probably he didn't.

Second one

There's another problem I have in understanding just what sin is and is not. This relates to Jesus' childhood. We're told that Jesus was without sin. So what kind of child was he? A child who never did anything wrong would seem to be a pretty weird child, right? And yet . . . the gospel accounts imply that Jesus' childhood was really quite ordinary. Most of the time he didn't stand out as being 'different'.

You would think that his family would have walked in awe of this moral prodigy, but apparently not. We're told that his family—his mother, brothers and sisters, no one knows what happened to his father—didn't believe in him during his lifetime, not till after the resurrection. They were obstructive to his ministry and at one point even apparently reached the conclusion that he was insane. Clearly he didn't stand out as particularly extraordinary in his growing up years—it seems as if he was very much the same as any other kid.

Again, I don't know what this means; but if Jesus was indeed without sin it seems to suggest that perhaps sin is a little bit different from the way it's normally portrayed.

What to make of it?

I came across something on a tape by Adrian Plass which for me enlightens this whole problem better than anything and which I thought worth transcribing. I could edit it down but I think it's so good as to merit being quoted in its entirety:

WHAT IS SIN? by Adrian Plass

Then Jesus cried out:

"When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light so that no-one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him for I did not come to judge the world but to save it. There is a judge, but the one who rejects me and does not accept my words, that very word will condemn him on the last day; for I did not speak of my own accord but the father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life so whatever I say is just what the father has told me to say."

Jesus states unequivocally that the things he says and does are direct acts of obedience to the father. Now I believe that Jesus never sinned. In view of this, a scrutiny of the gospels may lead me to a redefinition of my personal view of sin. The idea frightens me just a little. But never mind - let's have a look at the 'sins' of Jesus

- **There's the Passover incident when the 12 year old Jesus simply disappears for three days. He causes his parents great worry - was that alright or not? Was it sin?**
- **Was it sin to kill an innocently bare fig tree with a curse just to make a point?**
- **And what about those pigs drowned because there were no other suitable receptacles for evil spirits?**

There's more.

- **Jesus cleared undesirables from the Temple courtyard by the violent application of a knotted rope to their persons.**
- **He called Peter 'Satan' when Peter tried to be supportive.**
- **He approved the use of valuable ointment on himself saying that the poor were always around but he wasn't.**
- **He was abusive to one important section of the community who disagreed with him.**
- **And he made what sounds very much like a racist remark to a needy Greek woman.**

Of course, one could assemble a correspondingly bizarre list of occasions when he displayed compassion and forgiveness with equally eccentric inappropriateness. That makes it more confusing, doesn't it?

Personally I think it becomes easier to understand as soon as we stop defining sin as 'things we shouldn't do', and redefine it using Jesus' criterion as 'something that doesn't accurately reflect what the Father is doing or saying or commanding in the particular situation we are in' - the whole thing begins to look much more dangerous - and more exciting.

The Holy Spirit interprets to us the active language of love in this mess the world has become. If we really want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus we will simply do what we are told. And sometimes we may be amazed at the things we are asked to do. Jesus never committed a sin in His life - he just did what he saw his father doing and said what he heard his father saying. His obedience led to the cross.

Pray with me:

"Lord Jesus, you were brave. You did what your father wanted whatever anyone else thought. That must have been so tough - the very people you'd come to save deserted you, ridiculed you and finally killed you. Look Lord - we really want to get into this more dynamic positive way of following but we're a bit nervous - if we do commit ourselves to the leading

of the Holy Spirit, is there a chance we'll lose a few friends - you did, didn't you? Might we not end up in some strange situation - you did, didn't you?

Lead us gently Lord - help us to listen - we want to come with you but we're frightened.

Amen"

When I ponder on this different conception of sin, problems like the ones I described at the top seem to melt away a bit—and a few more besides. Adrian Plass is taking SIN out of the realm of the legalistic, and putting it into the realm of the relational. Sin is not breaking laws, it's abusing our primary relationship. Put this way it takes a bit of pressure off and, as he says, makes the whole thing a lot more exciting and a bit less burdensome.

We've taken—I hope—salvation out of the realm of the legalistic; perhaps it's time to do the same for sin.