

# The Misunderstanding of Sin and What God Did About It

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

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We are potentially moral beings. We can decide to act in accordance with the needs of one another, our planet, and our God. When we opt to not work in union with God's will, we sin. Sin means "missing the mark." It's like when an archer shoots an arrow, and it fails to hit the target.

We're cracked pots. We're imperfect vessels. We're beautiful messes, and we're paradoxes. We're selfish and selfless. We're a lovable, melting pot of sinner and saint.

Due to our very real free will, we humans have a very real propensity to screw up, make mistakes, and sin. Sinning is a bit like getting frostbite; once you've experienced frostbite on the tip of your nose or the tips of your toes or fingers, those areas become more likely to become frostbit again in the future. And with each new instance of frostbite increases the likelihood of new experiences of frostbite. It's also a bit like trying to eat just one potato chip or one spoonful of ice cream, once you've had a taste, it's tough not to eat more. Sinning is also very much like an addiction. The more you do something, the more it becomes a habit and a pattern deepened in the brain becomes established. In time, those pig-tailed neuro-pathways become widened to become neuro-superhighways which

become our default way of being. **So the wide neuro-pathway becomes the broad way to destruction.**

Progressive Christians view a relationship with God, as a way to break apart those dysfunctional superhighways. A relationship with God provides a way of repenting (transforming) to establish alternative neuro-pathways, ones that with enough nurturing and practice can become such a dramatically different “new normal” way of being that we can say that we have been converted, saved and are “born again.”

In Jesus’ day, sin had become reduced to legalistic notions about being ritually impure and “dirty” and unworthy of participating in Temple practices. Jesus subverted that notion. Instead of treating sin as a way of being vengeful, “if you commit x transgression, you deserve y punishment,” etc. Jesus saw that when sin is committed, it harms both the sinner as well as persons his/her actions may have harmed. Jesus emphasized restoration and reconciliation of relationships (forgiveness) – not the doling out of more punishments that only further alienate people from one another.

The early Christians were known by the Romans for their deep love for each other and how they tended to the dying, sick and the lame; how they took pains to provide burials for paupers and those written off by others; and how they sought to forgive each other and restore relationships. Tertullian, an ancient

Roman scholar, is famously reported to have said that the word on the street about the early followers of Jesus was, “Look at that those Christians! See how they love each other!”

A substantial risk is involved on God’s part as there is a great potential for suffering, both on the part of humans and God, due to this free human choice. There are varying degrees of this potential choosing. People are not easily able to choose and act in complete accord with God’s preferences and aims. We are only able to do so in varying degrees. On our own, none of us can fully satisfy God’s callings. Sinfulness and falling short of the mark is part of our human nature.

Progressive Christianity tends to suggest that from the very beginning, we have had both propensities to seek union with God as well as tendencies to attempt to do things our way.

Genesis 1:26-27 proclaims that humans are created in “the image of God.” Numerous doctrines have been generated in response to this “Imago Dei.” Like God, humans have creative free will and agency.

Sin is using free will to walk away from God and from whom we are meant to be. It is falling short of the mark of God’s initial aims for our lives. Sin is the extent to which we do not follow God’s initial intentions or accept grace – choosing instead to go our way out of communion with God. Sin means doing what we shouldn’t do and failing to do what we should. It means living falsely and contrary to the ways of God. We sin when we do not see things the way they truly are thus we do

not understand the full consequences of our actions. If we did, we would not do them, because we would realize that we are only causing suffering to ourselves and others.

It's not as simple as obeying God or not obeying God. We have been given the ability to be creative; we can initiate many wondrous things of our own as well as we can adapt or improvise upon God's actions and callings. Sometimes, our collaborations with God result in much beauty and goodness. However, at times, we really botch it – sometimes big time. Human history is rife with examples of both, we produce beauty, but we can also produce disaster. However, Christianity suggests that we'd do well to reject doctrines that focus exclusively upon the shortcomings of humanity as "totally depraved." We aren't doomed entirely to sin, transformation is possible! However, we need help, and this is most effectively done through experiencing the freely given grace shared in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

All humans have experienced brokenness and "dis-ease" of some sort in themselves and the world. As Christians, we realize there is more to life than alienation and suffering. We also know about and experience God's grace, forgiveness, acceptance, and love. God offers us the power to avoid, minimize, and heal future brokenness in ourselves and others. Being God's creation, we will continue to stumble, and our ways may seem to be ridiculous and hypocritical folly to others. We care about all people and seek to demonstrate the value of our Way. We lovingly remind the world that the Church isn't a museum of saints, it's a hospital for sinners," and that Christians aren't perfect, we're simply people who realize that we're forgiven and have hope sufficient to arise every morning

knowing that, in Christ, we have a fresh start, a second chance, and a new beginning. As the Apostle Paul put it,

*“So from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. (II Corinthians 5:16-19)*

Ultimately, progressive Christianity shifts the focus from “avoiding sin” to “focusing on love.” Humans tend to become where we place our intentions and energies. If we focus on avoiding sin, we may end up caught up in the mires of it. Put another way, a well-meaning Christian “campaign to stamp out sin” will always bring about less light, love, and wholeness in the world than a “campaign to live in love.” Instead of focusing solely on not sinning, we seek to emphasize following Jesus’ over-arching teachings that God is love, God loves us, and we are called to love ourselves and our neighbors in response.

It’s a positive approach, or as Paul above writes a “new” approach, which is important for anyone who is recovering from the scars of a judgmental church upbringing or the destruction of this world. Granted, we’ll never be able to love perfectly, but some practices and disciplines can help us to love the best that we can. Further as we practice love more, the side-effect is that we leave sin further and further in the rear-view mirror.

