

We Cannot Not Sin

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In this article, we affirm that all mankind inherited a sin nature from Adam. We explain how this conclusion was reached and its impact.

Sin and Sinners

It has long been observed that humans can't help behaving badly. For thousands of years, vast resources are spent on teachers, policemen, judges, soldiers, psychologists, neurologists, and theologians to define, curb, and cure humanity's moral condition.

We all want a good and just society¹ but we can't get it because of Adam. In the beginning, it was good. God said so!

Then Adam disobeyed God.² And because of what he did, his children lost everything including innocence. The human race is now tainted with sin. We are sinners not because we sin; we sin because we are sinners.

That is not true! God created us good so how would one man's act undo God's good creation? God is just, how would it be just for everyone to be made sinners because of one man's act? How would it be just for God to condemn sinners who had no choice but to be born sinners?

Our experience shows that we can choose to sin or not to sin. We can choose. We are not helpless. We are sinners because we sin; there is no 'sin nature' that is passed down from Adam to us.

Everyday you drive to work. How often do you drive in the other lane, against incoming traffic? What if I sat beside you and used every ways and means to get you to drive against traffic, would you? So what do we say of the person who sometimes drives against traffic? There must be something wrong with her!

Everyday you eat. How often do you eat vomit, eat poo? What if I sat beside you everyday and enticed you to try? Your body would *naturally* reject it. Because it is against your *nature*. So what do we say of the person who sometimes eats vomit and poo? There must be something wrong with him!

We think sinning is normal because nobody is perfect. In reality, sinning is abnormal because we were not created to sin. We know we should not sin but we do so anyways, as if our will was in bondage, as if we are slaves to sin.³

*The Bible says children shall not suffer from the sins of the father. Therefore, we do not suffer from the sin of Adam.*⁴

There, the Bible speaks on justice for it would be unjust for a man to be punished for another's sin. That passage does not attempt to explain what makes us sinners or how our sin relates to Adam's. The passage that does that is Romans 5:12-21.

¹ Or a good-for-me, just-for-me, society.

² Gen 1-3

³ **Romans 6:17-18 (ESV)** But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

⁴ **Ezekiel 18:20 (ESV)** The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Adam-Sin-Death vs. Jesus-Righteousness-Life

Let us carefully walk through Romans 5:12-21 and demonstrate that it is *the* key passage for the debate.⁵

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

Clearly, Adam's disobedience made it possible for all men to sin, so their deaths are because of their own actions, not because of any sin nature inherited from Adam.

If death is the penalty of sinning, why do infants who have not yet sinned, die? They die because it is in the nature of the human race to die ever since the Fall due to the sin of one man.⁶ Before we judge this to be unfair, we first accept that this is what Gen 3:3 and Rom 5:12 teaches.

In earlier times, the only law God declared was: "Thou shall not eat the fruit." Yet, people still die even though they did not break that law. So perhaps people were always meant to die but Adam, by disobeying God, died earlier.

The absence of a written law does not mean there was no moral law. After the Fall, people broke the moral law. Cain killed Abel, Sodom and Gomorrah happened, and so on. Sin existed in the world, it was just not counted. Sin came through one man and death through sin, hence all man die.

13-14 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

The one who was to come is the second Adam: Jesus Christ.⁷ Paul's main point in Romans 5:12-21 is to contrast between Adam-Sin-Death vs. Jesus-Righteousness-Life. He repeats and emphasises the point throughout Romans 5:12-21.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

Some say this is *unfair* because we were not involved in Adam's sin, why should we die? Also, we were not consulted in Jesus' sacrifice, why should he die? Cause if he died for me, but I do not accept him, then from my perspective, his death is meaningless.

Others say this *does not make sense* because how can sin transfer from Adam to me? How can this free gift get transferred to me from an event that happened 2000 years ago?

Let us not think too highly of our ability to judge God's sense of fairness and how he does it. We know that Adam's trespass (sin) caused us to die. We know that Jesus' sacrifice (grace) caused us to live.

Before we give up because it's unfair or doesn't make sense, let us continue to follow Paul's carefully laid out thoughts.

⁵ For a more complete exposition, the reader is referred to commentaries on Romans by John Stott, Douglas Moo, Leon Morris or F.F. Bruce.

⁶ Genesis 3:3 (ESV) but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:45 (ESV) Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

Thus, Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 show the tight link in Paul's theology between Adam and Jesus.

¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.

Paul says, "... not like..." The first way it is not-like is in how **one** trespass brought condemnation but the **one** free gift is greater because it covers **many** trespasses, i.e. we don't need more free gifts to cover many trespasses. Christ's sacrifice is a once and for all event.⁸

¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

The second difference is how much greater life-through-Christ is than death-through-Adam. If the trespasses is a debit of RM1,000, then the grace of God is a credit of RM1,000,000 to you. This 'life-through-Christ' is only achieved by grace, O Amazing Grace!, and this free gift of righteousness.

How can righteousness be given? When I do something good, I cannot transfer that goodness to someone else.

It is imputed on us. The modern man is proud to explain how the birds and stars and waves and atoms move, so what can he say when confronted with the question: "How does righteousness move from Jesus to not just another person, but to many sinners who do not yet exist?"

Some truths are not explained in detail, it is grandly asserted:

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

Just because we don't understand how something works, it does not mean it is not true. Just because we don't know how Jesus imputes His righteousness on us, it does not mean it is not amazingly, gloriously, praise-worthily true. Just because we don't know how Adam's sin was imputed on us, it does not mean it is not true.

¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

To the question, "Has Adam's disobedience made us sinners?", the answer is yes. Therefore, we sin because we are sinners.

No! Sinners mean people who sin. Adam's disobedience just means sin entered the world through his example, influencing the world we live in but it does not mean humans have inherited Adam's sin or are somehow unable to choose to sin or not to sin.

But "through one man's obedience, many will be made righteous" means that Christ's free gift of righteousness is imputed on us.⁹

Since the passage puts Adam and Jesus side-by-side, then would it not make better sense to read it as "Just as Adam's sin was imputed on us, so Jesus' righteousness was also imputed on us?"

²⁰⁻²¹ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

With the introduction of the law, for example the Ten Commandments, we have a clearer idea of God's moral law.¹⁰ This means we actually know

⁸ **Hebrews 9:26 (ESV)** for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Hebrews 10:12 (ESV) But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

⁹ If this is rejected, then we have a whole different and far more crucial topic to handle.

¹⁰ which is the universe's moral law.

enough to say, "I broke this law." With the law, we can now count our trespasses ... which *increases*(?).

If humans are freely able to choose¹¹, then you would think that knowing more of God's moral requirements, would help some, the pious few, to choose to sin less and thus reduce the number of trespasses. But that is not what the text says, "the law came in to increase the trespass", *as if* it is the Law's purpose to show how utterly helpless we are to keep God's law. Indeed, I believe it is so.

¹¹ Of course we are free to choose, to eat, to drink, to act. What I mean by free to choose here is there is something in our nature that pulls us away from God's way, i.e. we cannot not sin.

Other Bible Passages

While Romans 5:12-21 is the key passage that links Adam, Death, Sin, and us, there are other illuminating passages, which we will cover a few briefly.

Romans 6:17-18

The Bible describes mankind as slaves to sin. This suggests some sort of bondage that is against our will.

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

For many Christians, this description of enslaved-to-sin-now-set-free explains how they were able to escape a life of crime, addiction, wickedness to start a new life in Christ.

Would you describe being a Christian, a slave of righteousness, as being in bondage against your will?

Just as we who are slave to sin possess a will in sinning, so also we who are slaves to righteousness possess a will in following Christ. And yes, just as sin acts within us so that we cannot not sin, so also the Holy Spirit acts within us so that we cannot not walk towards God's purpose.¹²

Psalms 51:5

If there is any doubt that sin resides in us from birth, this passage removes that doubt.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Some commentators have suggested that this means David was conceived in an adulterous or sexually immoral circumstances.

First, there is nothing in all Scripture that would substantiate that. Second, the whole of Psalm 51 demonstrates David's complete humility and submission to God. Surely, he would not mid-way stop to blame his mother!

If he would not blame his mother, would he then blame God?

Who blames God? While it is true that God formed David as he forms all humans and all things, yet it is not God to blame for sin in Man, but Adam.

This is just poetic expression. David does not expect God to make him literally 'whiter than snow' (v7). Therefore, 'in sin did my mother conceive me' just means 'I have been sinning since as far back as I can remember.'

¹² **1 Corinthians 9:16-17 (ESV)** For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For *necessity* is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.

Taken in isolation, that interpretation may possibly be true. But when one considers Romans 5:12-21, Romans 6:17-18, Psalms 51:5, Romans 7:15-20, and other 'sin' passages, the Bible is clearly unimpressed with man's ability to choose not to sin. The Bible as a whole sees mankind as condemned and innately predisposed to sin.

Romans 7:15-20

Our everyday experience testify against us. The most zealous Christian can wake up in the morning, fervently determined to not sin for that day, and before the sun sets, or before he walks out his bedroom, he has compiled a list of trespasses.

Paul knows this all too well.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

There are some parts in the passage that eludes our first reading, which demand further study. But for our purposes, we can clearly see a complex interaction between the man and sin.

We, who have developed a Christian conscience, can understand the inexplicability of doing the very thing we hate; of not doing the good we want but doing the evil we do not want.

Twice Paul puts the root cause here: "Sin that dwells within me."

Therefore, the Bible validates our day to day struggles with sin. Struggles that continue on as a Christian.

Statements of Faith

Having been convinced of this truth from Scripture, churches establish and affirm it in their Statement of Faith. The following are extracts. Full statements are found in the links in the sidenotes.

Provisionist

We affirm that, because of the fall of Adam, every person inherits a nature and environment inclined toward sin and that every person who is capable of moral action will sin.¹³

¹³ Provisionist Statement of Faith ([link](#))

Methodist

Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam¹⁴ (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.¹⁵

¹⁴ i.e. Original sin is not following the example of Adam.

¹⁵ Methodist Articles of Religion, Article 2 and 7. ([link](#))

Westminster Confession of Faith

They [Adam and Eve] being the root of mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature

conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by original generation.¹⁶

¹⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 6 ([link](#))

Roman Catholic

If any one asserts, that the prevarication of Adam injured himself alone, and not his posterity; and that the holiness and justice, received of God, which he lost, he lost for himself alone, and not for us also; or that he, being defiled by the sin of disobedience, has only transfused death, and pains of the body, into the whole human race, but not sin also, which is the death of the soul; let him be anathema:—whereas he contradicts the apostle who says; By one man sin entered into the world, and by sin death, and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned.¹⁷

¹⁷ Council of Trent, 1st Decree. ([link](#))

Baptist Faith and Message 2020

In the beginning man was innocent of sin and was endowed by his Creator with freedom of choice. By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race. Through the temptation of Satan man transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original innocence whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin.¹⁸

¹⁸ Baptist Faith and Message Article III ([link](#))

Despite many differences, the churches are united¹⁹ to affirm Original Sin. This unity shows that the issues on Salvation, *are a separate issue* from Original Sin, whether salvation is by faith alone (Protestant) or by faith and works (Roman Catholic), or whether a person is so sinful as to be able to freely choose God (Provisionism), by-prevenient-grace choose God (Arminianism) or totally unable to choose God (Calvinism).

¹⁹ Here are some more: Anglican (Article 2 and 9), Lutheran

Impacts Evangelism and the Christian Walk

This article started this enquiry on the relationship of man and sin, as if to solve a puzzle. Far from being a pass time for Christians who have nothing better to do, the results of this enquiry have eternal consequences because it affects the reality of the Gospel and the Christian walk.

Right Diagnosis to Right Prescription

We first begin with this analogy from Neil Shenvi's "Why I believe":

Imagine I'm playing pickup basketball at a park when I suddenly collapse. A crowd gathers, but they don't agree on what happened. Some people say I just tripped and should get up and "walk it off." Others suggest I twisted an ankle and may need a brace to finish the game. One person runs to get ice, another to get an ACE bandage, a third to get a bottle of Advil from the pharmacy across the street. All of them offer to help me up to my feet.

While I'm lying on the ground a woman rushes up to me with a look of extreme concern. She says: "I'm a doctor. I saw this man fall and I know exactly what happened. We need to get him to a hospital immediately." She crouches down beside me and says urgently: "You can't feel your legs and you can't move. I'm going to call an ambulance; your life is in danger." I immediately tell the crowd, "Do exactly what she says."

The people around me are incredulous. They think she is wildly overreacting. They begin to question her credentials. They start to

speculate loudly about her real, ulterior motives. Yet, in spite of their skepticism, I have reason to believe her. Why? Because I can't feel my legs and I can't move. Somehow she knew these two truths, even though no one else did. No matter how implausible her claims might seem to bystanders, I have crucial information they don't have. I have firsthand, immediate, and undeniable awareness of my own condition. Based on that knowledge, my trust in her is justified.

What Shenvi describes here is the revelation I experienced. The 'first-hand, immediate and undeniable awareness of my own condition' broke me and led me to Christ in desperation. Without that conviction of Sin, there is no Good News, no evangelism.

Every Hour I Need Thee

Every Christian knows that we walk this journey only by the grace of God. This walk encompasses the day to day decisions we make, e.g. to sin or not to sin. The difference between a non-Christian and the Christian in facing sin is the Christian has the Holy Spirit.

Nobody denies that the Holy Spirit is necessary in the Christian walk. The world is so sinful and the years of habit so deeply engrained, that, of course, the Christian must lean on the Holy Spirit to overcome sin.

If a man before being a Christian is free to sin or not to sin, then after being a Christian, knowing now the moral requirements of God, the exemplary sacrifice of Christ, the damnation of Hell to come or the rewards of Heaven due, then the Christian can depend on himself to choose not to sin *on the grounds that he was created good.*

More than that, because Man is free to choose to sin or not to sin, it makes sense to stack the scales against sinning. More schools. More laws. More parenting. More teaching. More punishing. More encouraging. Sanctification through Education. Sanctification through Legislation. And God's help would be the bonus that ultimately tips the scale.

But if a man before being a Christian accepts that he is innately²⁰ sinful, then after being a Christian, realises that because he still lives in the flesh and that the only way to overcome the sinful desires is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to walk in the Holy Spirit and to dwell in the Holy Spirit²¹, the Christian will choose not to sin *by leaning exclusively on God and not on himself.* For apart from God, he can do nothing.

Without affirming Original Sin, the Christian Faith can become a "Do More" religion instead of "It is Done" religion.

Conclusion

We confess that we all have a flawed sense of God and ourselves. This flaw is innate in us. Hence, why we need the Bible, the Reservoir of Truth.

The idea that all mankind has inherited a sin nature from Adam may seem ridiculous and irrelevant, at first. This article has shown that this is a Scriptural truth, defended across the ages by wide spectrum of the church and it impacts how we share the Gospel and how we walk the Christian life.

²⁰ i.e. in his nature.

²¹ **Ephesians 5:18 (ESV)** And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

Galatians 5:16 (ESV) But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

John 15:5 (ESV) I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.