

Your Forever-Key to Freedom From Sin

What if you received Christ's forgiveness and then never committed a sin ever again? Suppose you never killed anyone, looked at pornography, told a lie, smoked a cigarette or even so much as exceeded the speed limit for the rest of your life. Would that be enough? Would you be happy? Would God be pleased? I don't think so. Working hard trying to change your behavior doesn't work.

Yes, sin is the problem. But we miss the point when we come up with a list of wrong behaviors we must avoid. Well-meaning Christians end up arguing about what's on the "sin list." Those who, because of personality or circumstances, are able to toe the line reasonably well feel self-righteous, and those who can't feel shame. Every now and then (or more often) we feel truly bad because of the sins we have committed. We're grateful for God's forgiveness and resolve to do better.

That is all well and good, but it's such a tiny part of our problem, or why Jesus came. When John the Baptist sees Jesus for the first time, John cries out to the crowd, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The word "sin" is singular. It's not sins, but sin.

Yes, Jesus offers you forgiveness for every wrong thing you've done or will do—every lie, speeding ticket, sexual indiscretion, or even murder. Those are sins. But what is this "sin," the really big problem? I know talking about sin is unpopular, but hang with me. This ends up being really good news!

From Sins to Sin

Suppose anger is your thing. You've hurt people close to you with your destructive words and violent actions. You've

damaged property and destroyed relationships. When did that become sin? Surely pummeling your spouse or child is wrong. But how much choice did you have? You got pummeled as a child, and no one ever showed you a healthy way to manage emotions.

So, was your first angry outburst at 2 years old a sin? OK, you didn't know any better. But did you know better at 5 when you tried to beat up the kid who tried to steal your lunch in kindergarten? Or how about at 10, when the bully called you names? Or at 17, when you discovered your buddy had been sleeping with your girlfriend? Have you tried to stop your angry outbursts now? How's that working out for you?

Can you see the problem? Looking at sin as specific acts is just too superficial. We could go through the same process with sexual promiscuity, telling lies, fear, addiction, greed and every other category of sin.

Jesus said, " For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immorality, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies" (Matt. 15:19). We truly can't help it!

And that's the real sin problem.

The Sin Problem

When God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, not only did they not do wrong things; they didn't even want to. Before the fall, can you imagine Adam trying hard to contain his anger at Eve, or Eve wrestling with whether or not to tell Adam the truth? No. Their very nature was in line with the image of God in which they had been created. Their natural instincts and desires were as perfect as their environment and their behavior.

Enter the serpent. As a result of Adam and Eve's rebellious sin, their very nature changed. And every human being ever since has been born with faulty DNA. That's how David could say, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother

conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). And it's why the young man Jesus talked with could say "All these I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" (Matt. 19:20). Refraining from wrong behaviors wasn't and isn't enough.

That's why forgiveness for sinful acts we do, as glorious as it is, doesn't help much if that's as far as it goes. The angry, lustful, prideful, fearful, selfish, rebellious DNA we are born with dooms us to act out in sinful ways regardless of how hard we white-knuckle it.

And more than that, how could we ever to hope "to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8) without a new nature? You can't go from violent outbursts of anger to loving everyone as God does, or from "looking for love in all the wrong places" to living in sexual integrity and cherishing one spouse forever, without a new heart.

Oh, what a relief it would be to have our DNA changed!

Transforming our Sin Nature

Jesus came to take away "the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Wow! That becomes so much more amazing when you understand the size of the problem. Jesus came not only to deal with our sins, but with our sin nature. He offers us, as John Eldredge writes, the utter relief of holiness.

That's the kind of true transformation we need. It's the changing of your heart on the inside so your behavior flows naturally in the way God originally created you. It's what we are promised:

Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean. From all your filthiness and from all your idols, I will cleanse you. Also, I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk

in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them (Ezek. 36:25-27).

Wouldn't it be wonderful to tell the truth by default? Or respond to major stress with courage instead of fear? Or to instinctively turn away from a sexual stimulus not from your spouse? We can argue among believers about how "perfect" we can become this side of heaven, but the message of the gospel is that your heart can be changed. That's the really great news!

That doesn't happen by accident. We don't usually experience that in one instant. It comes through a lifestyle of walking with Jesus, by sticking around, by being in His presence. There we are "transformed into the same image from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Oh, what a relief it is!

And we'll keep talking about the transformation process in the weeks to come.

Your Turn: *Have you been trying hard to stop sinning? To change yourself? How does understanding the need for the heart change God promises change your focus? Leave a comment below.*
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