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Question: "How bad can a Christian sin?"

Answer: Christians continue to sin after they are saved – we will not be completely free from sin until we die or Jesus comes back. However, becoming a Christian results in a changed life (2 Corinthians 5:17). A person will go from producing the acts of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) to displaying the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), as the indwelling Holy Spirit has more and more control over his life. This change does not happen instantly, but it does happen over time. If a person does not demonstrate a changed life, he/she is likely not a genuine believer. Christians can commit grievous sins. History is filled with Christians (or those who claim to be Christians) committing terrible crimes. Jesus died for these sins as well. All the more reason not to commit them!

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, the Apostle Paul describes the kind of sinful lifestyles believers are saved from. Verse 11 says, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” Notice the word “were.” Believers used to be like the things listed in verses 9-10, but they are not like that any longer. Can a person who is an adulterer, drunkard, or homosexual, child abuser, etc. be saved? Yes. Is a person who lives a life of continual sin a believer? No. When we become Christians, our lives will change. Anyone who is living a sinful lifestyle and claims to be a Christian is either lying, is self-deceived, or really is a believer who is going to experience God’s judgment and discipline (Hebrews 12:5-11).

The difference between a sinning unbeliever and a sinning believer is that one loves his sin while the other hates it. The believer who stumbles in his walk with the Lord regrets it, confesses it, wishes to never do it again and seeks to appropriate God’s power and grace to avoid it. He doesn’t consider how much he can sin and still be considered a Christian. Rather, he considers how he can avoid even the appearance of sin in the future.

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Question: "What is the definition of sin?"

Answer: Sin is described in the Bible as transgression of the law of God (1 John 3:4) and

rebellion against God (Deuteronomy 9:7; Joshua 1:18). Sin had its beginning with Lucifer, probably the most beautiful and powerful of the angels. Not content with his position, he desired to be higher than God, and that was his downfall, the beginning of sin (Isaiah 14:12-15). Renamed Satan, he brought sin to the human race in the Garden of Eden, where he tempted Adam and Eve with the same enticement, “you shall be like God.” Genesis 3 describes Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God and against His command. Since that time, sin has been passed down through all the generations of mankind and we, Adam’s descendants, have inherited sin from him. Romans 5:12 tells us that through Adam sin entered the world, and so death was passed on to all men because “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Through Adam, the inherent inclination to sin entered the human race, and human beings became sinners by nature. When Adam sinned, his inner nature was transformed by his sin of rebellion, bringing to him spiritual death and depravity which would be passed on to all who came after him. We are sinners not because we sin; rather, we sin because we are sinners. This passed-on depravity is known as inherited sin. Just as we inherit physical characteristics from our parents, we inherit our sinful natures from Adam. King David lamented this condition of fallen human nature in Psalm 51:5: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

Another type of sin is known as imputed sin. Used in both financial and legal settings, the Greek word translated “imputed” means “to take something that belongs to someone and credit it to another’s account.” Before the Law of Moses was given, sin was not imputed to man, although men were still sinners because of inherited sin. After the Law was given, sins committed in violation of the Law were imputed (accounted) to them (Romans 5:13). Even before transgressions of the law were imputed to men, the ultimate penalty for sin (death) continued to reign (Romans 5:14). All humans, from Adam to Moses, were subject to death, not because of their sinful acts against the Mosaic Law (which they did not have), but because of their own inherited sinful nature. After Moses, humans were subject to death both because of inherited sin from Adam and imputed sin from violating the laws of God.

God used the principle of imputation to benefit mankind when He imputed the sin of believers to the account of Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for that sin—death—on the cross. Imputing our sin to Jesus, God treated Him as if He were a sinner, though He was not, and had Him die for the sins of the entire world (1 John 2:2). It is important to understand that sin was imputed to Him, but He did not inherit it from Adam. He bore the penalty for sin, but He never became a sinner. His pure and perfect nature was untouched by sin. He was treated as though He were guilty of all the sins ever committed by the human race, even though He committed none. In exchange, God imputed the righteousness of Christ to believers and credited our accounts with His righteousness, just as He had credited our sins to Christ’s account (2 Corinthians 5:21).

A third type of sin is personal sin, that which is committed every day by every human being. Because we have inherited a sin nature from Adam, we commit individual, personal sins, everything from seemingly innocent untruths to murder. Those who have not placed their faith in Jesus Christ must pay the penalty for these personal sins, as well as inherited and imputed sin. However, believers have been freed from the eternal penalty of sin—hell and spiritual death—but now we also have the power to resist sinning. Now we can choose whether or not to commit

personal sins because we have the power to resist sin through the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, sanctifying and convicting us of our sins when we do commit them (Romans 8:9-11). Once we confess our personal sins to God and ask forgiveness for them, we are restored to perfect fellowship and communion with Him. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

We are all three times condemned due to inherited sin, imputed sin, and personal sin. The only just penalty for this sin is death (Romans 6:23), not just physical death but eternal death (Revelation 20:11-15). Thankfully, inherited sin, imputed sin, and personal sin have all been crucified on the cross of Jesus, and now by faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1:7).

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Question: "What is the sin nature?"

Answer: John Wayne Gacy was put to death by lethal injection in the early morning hours of May 10, 1994 for murdering 33 young men and boys, 29 of whom he buried in the crawl space beneath his own Chicago home between the years of 1972 and 1978. After Gacy's death, he was delivered into the hands of Dr. Helen Morrison to perform a very unique autopsy. Dr. Morrison had previously interviewed Gacy, along with many other serial killers, in an attempt to isolate personality traits that were common among such ruthless murderers. Now at the request of Gacy's family, Dr. Morrison was going to remove the brain of the notorious serial killer in hopes of discovering some sort of physical abnormality that would provide answers for why Gacy destroyed so many innocent lives.

In her book, *My Life Among the Serial Killers*, Dr. Morrison commented on what she believed to be a genetically predetermined factor in people like Gacy: "He is a serial killer when he is a fetus, even as soon as sperm meets egg to create the genes of a new person." In other words, according to Morrison, there was no hope for Gacy; his genes determined his actions and his behavior. In some sense, Gacy could be excused for his behavior if there were no laws prohibiting his actions. Morrison did not see any separation between the natural ability in her patients and their moral ability.

Is such a thing true? Or is there instead a division between each person's natural body and their intrinsic essence or nature—that which makes them who they are from a moral standpoint? Atheists and naturalists say 'no,' but the Bible counters with the reality that there is a spiritual and moral side to every person that is distinct from their physical body. And Scripture also states

that it is this component of a person who has inherited what is called a 'sin nature' that produces everything from white lies to atrocities such as those committed by John Wayne Gacy.

The Reality of the Sin Nature

Some psychologists and scientists have attempted to deny that humanity is inherently sinful or 'bad.' For example, the founder of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow, said: "As far as I know we just don't have any intrinsic instincts for evil." Agreeing with Maslow is noted psychologist Carl Rogers who stated, "I do not find that...evil is inherent in human nature." Both Maslow and Rogers dismiss sin and instead say if a person is committing evil acts, then the 'patient' is psychologically ill and must be brought back to mental sanity through medication and therapy.

However, history has shown that the evil actions of humanity transcend mere mental disorders. Commenting on the Nazi atrocities, Catholic monk and priest Thomas Merton observed, "One of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him perfectly sane. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. . . . And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane ones who are the most dangerous."

Various philosophers have also tried to either deny a sin nature or explain it away through various means. One example is Jean Jacques Rousseau, an 18th century philosopher, writer, and composer of Romanticism, whose political philosophy heavily influenced the French Revolution. He believed that mankind was naturally good and that each person was born an 'innocent savage.' If each person was born innocent, how did Rousseau explain humanity's evil actions? Simply put, Rousseau claimed that society corrupted people, and that is why they end up exhibiting bad behavior. However, as various opponents of Rousseau's claims soon pointed out to him, societies are comprised of people, and are therefore only a collective manifestation of individual wickedness.

Even some theologians have tried to deny an inherent sin nature in humanity, with the most famous being the Culdee Monk Pelagius who rejected the notion of a person being born anything but perfect and innocent. Pelagius' theological wrestling matches with the famous Augustine resulted in the condemnation of Pelagius' teaching in the early church, although it still lives on in various places today.

The fact is that the reality of a sin nature is clearly seen in human behavior. Such truth caused Reinhold Niebuhr to comment, "The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith." Expounding on Niebuhr's statement in more detail, R.C. Sproul describes the situation this way: "If each one of us is born without a sinful nature, how do we account for the universality of sin? If four billion people were born with no inclination to sin, with no corruption to their nature, we would reasonably expect that at least some of them would refrain from falling. . . . But if everybody does it, without exception, then we begin to wonder why."

The Bible provides the answer as to why every person sins. Scripture says that God created humankind originally good and without a sin nature: "Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our

image, according to Our likeness. . . . God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). However, Genesis chapter 3 records the fall of Adam and Eve, and with that fall, sin entered into the two previously sinless creatures that God had made. And when they, in turn, had children, their sin nature was passed along to their offspring. That sin nature immediately manifested itself in the very first man born from Adam and Eve, a man named Cain who became a murderer (Genesis 4:8).

Instead of only the image of God being passed down through the human procreation process, a sin nature was passed as well: “When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son *in his own likeness, according to his image*, and named him Seth” (Genesis 5:3, emphasis added). The fact is that each and every person born from the beginning has inherited the sin nature of his parents, with both the Old and New Testaments speaking to this fact. For example, David says, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). In another Psalm, David states: “The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth” (Psalm 58:3). His son Solomon wrote: “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

The Old Testament prophets also affirmed that a sin nature exists in everyone born of human parents. Jeremiah said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). The prophet Isaiah stated: For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away” (Isaiah 64:6).

In the New Testament, Paul affirms an inherited sin nature when he says, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). And the Apostle John says this to his readers: If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Students of Scripture have all reached the conclusion that the Bible teaches each and every person possesses a sinful nature, with Charles Spurgeon summing up the reality when he said: “As the salt flavors every drop in the Atlantic, so does sin affect every atom of our nature. It is so sadly there, so abundantly there, that if you cannot detect it, you are deceived.”

In one sense, Dr. Helen Morrison was right in her assessment of human nature. When children are conceived, they are predetermined—not to necessarily become a serial killer like John Wayne Gacy, but to sin in some form or fashion.

Misconceptions about the Sin Nature

Although the biblical teaching of a sin nature is clear, there are a number of misconceptions that both Christians and non-Christians have about it. First, some people think that a sin nature means that a person cannot tell right from wrong or behave in a ‘good’ manner towards someone else. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus acknowledged that someone could perform good acts and yet still have an evil sin nature when he said, “What man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If *you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children*, how much

more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:9–11, emphasis added).

In fact, the Bible says each person is equipped by God with a conscience that instinctively knows right and wrong. Paul confirms this truth when he says, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Romans 2:14-15).

Next, some believe that a sin nature means that every person will eventually end up a like a Ted Bundy or John Wayne Gacy. However, this isn't the case at all. A sin nature does not mean that every person will be as bad as they can possibly be, but rather than each person is as bad *off* as they can possibly be from a spiritual standpoint. Every person is spiritually dead and cut off from God, but the degrees of wickedness in each person will vary.

Lastly, some Christians have been taught that they lose their sin nature once they receive Christ as their Lord and Savior. But Scripture says that the sin nature remains after a person becomes a believer in Christ and that a struggle with that sin nature will continue until they are glorified in eternity. Paul bemoaned his struggle when he said, "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. . . . But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me" (Romans 7:15, 20).

The struggle between the sinful and regenerated spiritual nature in a Christian will be quite evident to a person who has been born again, but such a battle will not occur in a person who has not become a believer in Christ. They remain spiritually dead and are not sensitive to sin as a Christian is.

The story is told of a man who once came to a preacher and said, "You talk about how heavy sin is, but preacher, I don't feel a thing." The preacher thought for a minute and then asked, "If we put 400 pounds of weight on a corpse, do you think he'd feel it?"

The Consequences of the Sin Nature

The reality of the sin nature brings with it many disappointing consequences. The first effect is that each and every person is born spiritually dead. That is, they are devoid of any spiritual life or desire for the things of God. Jesus affirmed this condition when asked by a person if he could first go bury his father before following Christ. Jesus responded by saying, "Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:22). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul (describing his readers' condition prior to being born again) says simply "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1).

The lack of spiritual life in a person results in behavior that is both hostile toward God and mindfully ignorant of His truth. In Romans, speaking about the hostility and inability of spiritually dead people to respond to God, Paul says, "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so" (Romans 8:6-

7). The Apostle underscores the same fact in his first letter to the Corinthian church: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The final and natural consequence of the sin nature is eternal death—an eternal separation from God. God’s wrath remains on those who are not born again (John 3:36), and so their destiny is only one of judgment, which is spelled out in the book of Revelation: “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14-15).

The Cure for the Sin Nature

Fortunately, there is a cure for the sin nature and a way to escape the judgment of God. The cure is the new birth, which is described by the Apostle John in Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus: “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again. The Spirit breathes where He desires, and you hear His voice, but you do not know from where He comes, and where He goes; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit’” (John 3:3–8).

The good news is that Christ’s sacrifice supplies spiritual life for any person who calls on the name of the Lord for salvation. Paul says, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:10). The Apostle also highlights this spiritual regeneration when he writes, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Spirit of God takes up residence in each person who is born again and supplies the power to not only defeat the effects of the sin nature, but to supply strength to defeat the old sinful nature’s pull to do wrong in God’s sight. Paul says it like this: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16–17).

The great news is that the sin nature can be defeated by the One who did not inherit a sin nature from His earthly parents (Jesus was born of a virgin). Through His finished work on the cross, Jesus, being sinless, satisfied God’s wrath for sinners and rose again to offer life to those devoid of spiritual life.

Conclusions

The fact that each person ever born possesses a sin nature is verified by human experience and the Word of God. The good news is that Christ provides a way of conquering the inherited sin nature and a victory that can be experienced both in this life and the next. No matter how bad off the person is, Jesus can defeat the sin that enslaves him. As John Calvin put it, “For certainly, Christ is much more powerful to save than Adam was to ruin.”

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