

Call to Obedience #238
PO Box 299 Kokomo, IN 46903 USA
www.schultze.org

“Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him:
and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9).

Distinguishing between Sins and Failures

By Reimar Schultze

There are many well-meaning, Christians who live in a constant state of guilt and condemnation. It seems that no matter what they do, it is never right and never enough. Many of these dear believers just go on enduring this burden and its associated fruits of anxiety and depression. Some end up in psychiatric clinics, taking mood-enhancing drugs or becoming lost altogether in the back wards of mental institutions.

In a society where, as a whole, sin abounds without shame, guilt or fear of judgment, those few individuals who take sin seriously are often overlooked in their need to clearly understand what sin is and what it is not. For hamartaphobia, an excessive fear of sinning, and theophobia, an excessive fear of God, can lead to obsessive-compulsive disorders giving rise to all kinds of delusions. If we don't deal with these issues, we give the devil a lot of opportunity to crush some of the best and finest of God's chosen ones. Whatever has contributed to such debilitating behavior, whether it is doctrinal disorientation, a natural tendency toward the negative, or a low sense of self-worth, we need to draw some clear lines between sins and failures to help some of our most conscientious brothers and sisters from becoming trapped in the shadows of troublesome delusions.

What Sin Is.

There are four classical, biblical definitions of sin.

1. The Missing of the Mark.

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

This is probably the most comprehensive definition of sin. We must take care however not to take it out of context. Otherwise, we are inclined to think that we are damned to a constant state of sinfulness, never able to make God happy.

The context here is redemption. The goal of Romans 3 is to convince all men that they are sinners. This chapter tells us that all have sinned and miss the mark, that there is none righteous, no, not one. Every sinner's best righteousnesses and best good deeds are as filthy rags in the presence of a holy God. The point is that we all must come to the foot of the cross as corrupt sinners and accept the atoning blood of Jesus as our only way out of the sin problem. Once we have done this, we must look upon sin as a willful transgression of the law, neglect or unbelief in our duty toward God.

2. A Transgression of the Law.

“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4).

The law here, and anywhere in John's writings, refers to the Word given by God. It includes anything Jesus tells us to do: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Thus, sin is disobedience to the written and spoken Word of God.

3. Neglect.

“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17).

A case in point here is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and Levite sinned because they neglected to care for a man who was dying in a ditch. Yet, we must distinguish between neglect at the moment and perceived neglect in retrospect. For example, if you neglect to leave a tip for the waitress because of forgetfulness, it is not a sin. But if you deliberately refuse to

do it, you have robbed the waitress of some of her earnings, and you have sinned. Do not permit the devil to defeat you with his, "You should have done..." accusations, when at the moment, you did the best you knew how. Anytime you abide in Christ and do the best you know, you do not sin, no matter how weak your performance.

4. Unbelief.

"...whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

Unbelief, if we persist in it, is always sin. If a sinner persists in unbelief of the gospel, he will be condemned, for Jesus said that "he that believeth not is condemned already" (John 3:18). If God's children persist in unbelief, they lose the blessings of fellowship with God. It was because of this unbelief that God was grieved with the children of Israel for forty years in the wilderness, "And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:17-19). Yet, we must understand that weakness of faith is not necessarily sin. You may have enough faith to follow Jesus, but not enough to walk on water. You may have enough faith for the healing of a friend, but not enough to say to "this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea" (Matt. 21:21). If we don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we sin. But after that, faith is a matter of growth which comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).

What Sin Is Not.

1. Failure Is Not Sin.

Of course, this only makes sense when prefaced by a definition. Hence, let us say in this context: failure is accidental, and sin is willful.

Jesus said in his high priestly prayer to his Father concerning his disciples, "...they have kept thy word...and I am glorified in them" (John 17:6, 10). Jesus is saying that his disciples obeyed him in everything and that his glory was at work in their lives! How could Jesus say such a thing when his disciples failed so often and so miserably? The answer is because failure is not sin. They failed because they were weak. Weakness is not a sin. They were weak because the Holy Spirit was not yet given to empower them. They failed because they were ignorant. Ignorance is not sin. They had not lived forever in the presence of a holy God as Jesus had. They failed because they were not experienced. They were about half the age of Jesus. They lacked experience, understanding and maturity.

When you fail for any of the above reasons, you do not sin, though you may fail a hundred times each day. Wherever the lines were clear, the disciples obeyed, always. There was never a time where they deliberately disobeyed! Going to sleep in the garden when they should have prayed was not a sin but a failure. We see that Jesus regarded it as failure when he said, "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). That is, Jesus complimented them on their obedient "spirit," on their willingness to do all he asked them to do. They wanted to pray, they planned to pray, but weariness got the best of them. Had they had a greater vision of the purpose of this prayer meeting, they might have stayed awake.

2. Temptation Is Not Sin.

"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Jesus was tempted in all things. If temptation were sin, Jesus would have been the greatest of sinners. He was tempted in every thing and in every way. What is temptation but desire, and what is holiness but the rejection of those carnal or inappropriate, natural desires to choose that which is holy. Yes, the word reads "in all points tempted." Oh, how many desires were awakened in Jesus through all these temptations; yet he did not sin! Glory to God!

Do not permit the devil to accuse you of sin when you are tempted. Of course, if desire is not cut off, then desire will bring forth lust, and lust will bring forth sin and death (James 1:15). In other words, the first look is often accidental and innocent. The second is frequently willful and sinful. Also, consider the words "infirmities" and "sin" in this text. The Greek word for infirmity, *astheneia*,

means: feebleness (of body or mind); by implication, malady, disease, infirmity, sickness, or weakness. Any action, or reaction, coming out of that, is not sin. Jesus has an ocean of compassion for us in these matters, for he himself suffered from astheneia.

3. Everything Done While Abiding In Jesus Is Not Sin.

If we abide in Jesus, he abides in us, and his love abides in us. Yes, we still fail while abiding in Christ because of our humanity, but it is not sin. We do not disobey. By abiding in him, our spirit will always be willing. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). God's divine yes will become our divine yes to all that is godly in our abiding in Christ, and Christ abiding in us.

Rather than examining all your actions, reactions, thoughts and motives at the passing of each day to see if you have sinned, only to be totally confused, ask yourself these questions: Did I abide in Jesus today? Do I love my Jesus more than all else? If the answer is yes, you have every reason to go to sleep in peace. You did not miss the mark, and you did not come short of the glory of God. Since the disciples, without the Holy Spirit, could cause Jesus to smile at the end of the day, how much more can you do so with the Holy Spirit. Permit me to repeat what Jesus said to his Father concerning his often failing disciples, "I am glorified in them." That is, my glory is at work in them. So, it can be true of you as you abide in Christ, not allowing yourself to be stressed out by your infirmities.

Finally, here is the convincing thought. The Greeks have about five words for our one English word for sin. Romans 3:23 tells us that we have all sinned (hamartia) and have come short of God's glory. The word hamartia means the missing of the mark. Will we always miss the mark and come short of the glory of God? No! The angel said to Joseph, "...and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (hamartia) (Matt. 1:21). That is, Jesus will save his people from missing the mark anymore. The problem in Romans 3:23 is remedied in Matthew 1:21 – by Jesus!

John also confirms this in 1 John 3:9 when he says that if Jesus abides in us, we cannot sin (hamartia), we cannot miss the mark, and we shall not come short of the glory of God. And Paul says that within that abiding, love relationship, we shall ever be changed from lesser to higher glory (2 Cor. 3:18). This should cause us considerable exuberance! Of course, it also brings us to humility as we realize that there are degrees of glory and that none of our glories will ever outshine the glory of the Lord.