### Definition of Sin

**1. Terminology**

In our search for a definition of sin, we will find it helpful to study the biblical terms used to designate it.[[1]](#footnote-1) In Scripture, one concept may be expressed by various terms. We will especially note this in regard to sin, since the Bible uses many synonyms to characterize it. When Jews and Greeks heard the words we will soon examine, they were aware of their basic, “secular” meanings as well. Therefore, we will also include in our investigation the more common uses of these terms.

The first terms to examine are the basic Hebrew and Greek terms for sin – חָטָא (*hata*)andἁρματία (*harmatia*), which are conventionally translated simply “sin.” In its various grammatical forms, the word חָטָא (*hata*) appears 580 times in the Old Testament, while ἁρματία (*harmatia*) occurs 255 times in the New Testament. The basic meaning for both terms is “miss the mark,” as in Judges 20:16: “Out of all these people choice men were left-handed; each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss (חָטָא).” So then, one who sins is “missing the mark,” or failing to live up to God’s standards.

The Hebrew term חָטָא (*hata*) also overlaps in meaning with the Greek word πλανή (*plane*) – “turn from the way.” We cite Proverbs 19:2 as an example: “He who hurries his footsteps errs (חָטָא).” Therefore, חָטָא (*hata*) also describes sin as turning from the right path. The Greek synonym, πλανή (*plane*), is found 53 times in the New Testament in the same sense. Matthew 22:29 will serve as an example: “You are mistaken (πλανή), not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God.” The view of the Sadducees, to whom Jesus was speaking, erred from the truth.

The following terms both carry the sense “harmful.” They are רַע (*ra*), κακός (*kakos*) and πονηρία (*poneria*). The word רַע(*ra*) is usually translated “evil.” We encounter it 1682 times in the Old Testament. The connotation of “harmful” is well illustrated in Jeremiah 39:12, where Nebuchadnezzar orders the captain of his bodyguard concerning the prophet, “Take him and look after him, and do nothing harmful (רַע) to him.” Another example is Amos 6:3: “Do you put off the day of calamity (רַע).” So then, sin is harmful and benefits no one. We find this same meaning for κακός (*kakos*), and πονηρία (*poneria*), i.е., “harmful,” in Luke 16:25 and Matthew 7:17.

Our next term is רֶשַׁע (*resha*), which appears 497 times in the Old Testament and is typically translated “wickedness” or “lawlessness.” Its basic definition, though, is “anxiety/turbulence” as illustrated in Isaiah 57:20: “The wicked (רֶשַׁע) are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud.” Sin is restless and not content to stay within the boundaries God has established.

The Greek term ἀδικία (*adika*) is found 85 times in the New Testament and usually translates as “injustice/iniquity.” It is a legal term denoting a “transgression,” as in Acts 18:14: “When Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrong (ἀδικία) or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you.’” Gallio did not punish Paul because he had committed no transgression. Sin, then, is a transgression of God’s law.

The Hebrew עָוֹן (*aon*) occurs 316 times in the Old Testament, and is translated “lawlessness,” “sin,” “injustice,” or “guilt.” Its basic meaning, though, is “to distort.” We see an example of the latter in Psalm 38:6, where David says, “I am bent over and greatly bowed down (עָוֹן).” David describes here a physical distortion of his body. Similarly, sin is a distortion or perversion of human nature.

The final descriptive word for sin that we will examine is פָשַׁע (*pasha*). This word is encountered 175 times in the Old Testament and is rendered by various terms, like “lawlessness,” “transgression,” “wrongdoing,” “guilt,” etc. Its basic denotation is “rebellion,” and is so used in 1 Kin 12:19 in reference to political revolution: “So Israel has been in rebellion (פָשַׁע) against the house of David to this day.” Sin rebels against God’s authority.

**2. Essence of Sin**

**а. Sin as Lawlessness**

In light of the wide spectrum of nuances that the concept of sin encompasses, we will be well advised to focus on a more concrete definition. The Word of God, in fact, provides us with such a definition in 1 John 3:4: “Sin is lawlessness.” The essence of sin, then, is a violation of God’s laws. Other Scripture passages confirm this idea.[[2]](#footnote-2) Romans 4:15 reads, “Where there is no law, there also is no violation.” Sin is defined by law. Therefore, the absence of law makes its violation, i.e., sin, impossible. Similarly, Romans 5:13 states, “Sin is not imputed when there is no law.” The same idea is encountered in Romans 7:7: “I would not have come to know sin except through the Law.”

We must make a distinction, however, between sin as an act and sin as a habitual nature. When persons violate God’s laws, they commit acts of sin. When people sin, though, they are acting out of a sinful nature inherent to them due to Adam’s fall. This “sinful nature” is a habitual propensity to commit acts of sin.

The apostle John deals with both these aspects in his first epistle. In 1 John 1:10, we read about specific sinful acts: “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us” (1:8). Prior to that, though, John reveals the source of sinful acts – the sinful nature, which he also calls “sin”: “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” David makes this distinction as well. In Psalm 51, he acknowledges his transgression before Yahweh: “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight” (v. 4). At the same time, he recognizes in himself this innate propensity to sin: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (v. 7). In our study, we will initially treat sin as concrete acts and later will deal with the sin nature.

**b. Sin and Temptation**

When we speak of sin as “lawlessness” or violation of the law, we imply that there is a choice of the will involved. This is the key to understanding the difference between sin and temptation. James helps us here: “Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (Jam 1:14-15). Note the difference between lust and sin. Evil desires can arise in people’s minds or hearts. If an individual makes a decision to act upon that desire, he or she commits sin. Similarly, an evil thought can arise in one’s mind. If one chooses to embrace the thought, that person has sinned. If no movement of the will toward sin is made, the person has simply been tempted.

We cannot control what enters our mind or heart. We are responsible for how we respond to those thoughts or desires. We cannot control who knocks at our door, but we can control whom we admit into our house. Similarly, we cannot regulate random thoughts or desires, but, with God’s help, we can determine our response.

According to James 1:14-15, when lust conceives it gives birth to sin. Lust conceives at the moment when the will acquiesces to it. Therefore, temptation operates before the participation of the will, and sin after its participation.

When tempted, we can rely on God’s promise through Paul, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). Jesus also instructed His disciples that prayer strengthens one’s resistance to temptation (Lk 22:40).

**c. Role of Law and Conscience**

If sin is defined by law, how do we know what God’s law requires? The Bible states that all people know God’s standard of right behavior. It is available either through the study of Scripture or through conscience.

Scripture enlightens us as to a life pleasing to the Lord. The teachings of our Lord and the apostles gives us needed guidance for moral living as Christians. The Mosaic Law served not only to reveal God’s righteous standards, but also to show human inability to observe it, leading sinful humanity to Christ to receive salvation by faith. The Old Testament law remains a helpful guide to proper behavior when understood in the light of New Testament revelation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We understand God’s standards not only through Scripture, but also by means of conscience. The Greek term translated conscience is συνείδησις (*suneidesis*). Conscience can convict a person who knows nothing of the Bible. In Romans 2:12-16, Paul speaks of conscience as the “law, written in the heart.”

Two theories exist concerning the origin of conscience. Is conscience an aspect of humanity’s original created state, or something introduced as a result of the Fall? The latter view theorizes that by eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve received the “knowledge of good and evil,” or conscience. On the other hand, Thiessen, who champions the first view, explains that although in the Garden, Adam and Eve received experiential knowledge of good and evil, the theoretical knowledge of good and evil through conscience was implanted in them from the beginning.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Greeks originally employed the term συνείδησις (*suneidesis*) in the sense of “self-awareness.” In time, the word came to include the connotation of “reflection on one’s life.” Eventually, the Greek philosopher Seneca expanded its meaning until it came to mean judgment on the rightness of one’s conduct. It is interesting to note that there is no word for conscience in the Old Testament. Instead, the function of the conscience is ascribed to the “heart.” In the first century AD, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria combined the Old Testament concept of conscience with the Greek word συνείδησις (*suneidesis*).

Although only one Greek word expressed the general idea of “conscience,” the biblical text modifies it with various adjectives:

* 1. Good conscience (ἁγαθός – *agathos*, or καλός – *kalos*)
  2. Clear conscience (καθαρός – *katharos*)
  3. Pure conscience (ἀπρόσκοπος – *aproskopos*)
  4. Evil conscience (πονηρός – *poneros*)
  5. Defiled conscience (μιαρός – *miaros*)
  6. Seared conscience (κεκαυστηριασμένων – *kekausteriasmenon*)
  7. Weak conscience (ἀσθενής – *asthenes*)

For convenience’s sake and ease of study, we will condense this list of seven types of consciences to three main categories: good conscience, evil conscience, and weak conscience.

The good conscience is one that convicts a person after committing a sin. The experience can be described as a painful heart (1 Sam 24:6; 2 Sam 24:10), or a sense of guilt (Gen 3:8; Jn 8:7-9), or unpleasantness (Rom 13:5). The book of Acts describes the conviction of conscience as being “pierced to the heart” (Acts 2:37) or being “cut to the quick” (Acts 7:54). Curiously, in one case the Greek adjective πονηρός (*poneros*), which typically refers to an evil conscience, can connote the conviction caused by a good conscience (Heb 10:22). Another characteristic of the good conscience is that it does not convict one who has not sinned (see 1 Pet 3:16, 21; Acts 23:1; 2 Tim 1:3; 1 Tim 3:9; Acts 24:16). Finally, it indicates whether a future course of action is forbidden (1 Tim 1:5, 19; Heb 13:18).

Unlike the good conscience, the evil conscience fails to convict a sinner. It can be described as a “seared conscience” (1 Tim 4:2). Such an individual has lost sensitivity and responsiveness to the conviction of a good conscience. It also permits unlawful behavior (Tit 1:15). The evil conscience is also known by the synonym “depraved mind,” of which Scripture often speaks (2 Tim 3:8; 1 Tim 6:5; Rom 1:28; Jonah 4:11).

The third general classification of conscience is the weak conscience. It can be contrasted with the evil conscience. An evil conscience will allow forbidden behavior, while a weak conscience will forbid legitimate behavior. In other words, the evil conscience allows what God forbids, while the weak conscience forbids what God allows (see 1 Cor 8:7-12; 10:25-29).

In addition, unlike the good conscience that does not convict the innocent, the weak conscience will convict one who had not truly sinned or has already received forgiveness. The weak conscience is well described in 1 John 3:19-20: “We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.” Here, the word “heart” reflects the action of a weak conscience. It may condemn one for sins already forgiven.

In summary, the good conscience warns us before we commit sin, while the evil conscience permits such behavior. After a transgression, the good conscience will convict the offender, while the evil conscience will not. The weak conscience will forbid behavior that God permits, and may convict one when no true sin was committed or condemn for sins previously forgiven.

In light of the fact that one’s conscience may be in different conditions, we need guidance as to how to respond to the messages it sends. Scripture counsels to not violate conscience by participating in questionable behavior (Rom 13:5; 1 Tim 1:19; 3:9; 1 Pet 2:19; 3:16). Even if the act is not strictly sinful, acting against conscience can itself be considered sin (1 Cor 8:10-12; Rom 14:20-23). Paul, for example, consistently followed the dictates of conscience (see Acts 23:1; 24:15-16; Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 2 Tim 1:3; Heb 13:18).

As noted above, a weak conscience may forbid a legitimate act. This is because the believer is undergoing the “renewing of the mind” (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23). To the degree that this process is advancing, the believer will have an increasingly clearer perception of what it permitted and what is not and subsequently will enjoy more freedom in the Lord. Yet, while this process is underway, it is still advisable to refrain from questionable behavior until one is convinced that the behavior is acceptable.

If a good conscience convicts of sin, one must confess the sin, repent of it, and seek reconciliation with others as needed (1 Jn 1:9; Lk 19:8-9). If the weak conscience unjustly condemns, then one may “assure one’s heart” through faith in the blood of Christ, shed for our forgiveness (Heb 9:14; 10:22; 1 Jn 3:20; Acts 15:9). If we are unsure whether we are hearing from a good conscience or a weak one, we can appeal to Scripture and the Holy Spirit for clarification.

**3. Classification of Sin**

We can classify different types of sin. For example, there are both external and internal sins. External sins concern what a person does in the body. Stealing, adultery, and the like are examples. Internal sins occur in the heart and mind. They include pride, lust, jealousy, etc. Other people can witness an external sin, but only God sees the heart and tests the mind. Interestingly, the Old Testament Law focuses more on external behavior, while the New Testament, which presents a higher moral standard, gives more attention to internal sins. This is very evident in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where He revealed that the internal condition of a person is just as important as their public behavior.

Another set of categories is the distinction between sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission involve doing what is forbidden. Sins of omission are failing to do what is required. James brings out the latter by writing, “Therefore, to one who knows {the} right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jam 4:17). We can also highlight “social sins,” that is, participating in the sins of others or one’s culture, such as not testifying against a guilty party (Prov 29:24). Correspondingly, Paul charges the church in Ephesus: “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them” (Eph 5:11).

So then, we may sin in many ways: in what we do or do not do; in what we say or do not say; in what we think or do not think; in what we intend or do not intend to do. God’s standards are so high because they are a reflection of His holy nature. This truth stands behind the words of Jesus, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). God cannot change or lower His standards because He does not change. We observe them not only to avoid punishment, but also to imitate the Lord.

**4. Degrees of Sin**

Although all sins are grievous, the Bible nonetheless speaks of degrees of sins – some are more serious than others. The following passages make mention of this (Jn 19:11; Ezek 8:6; Matt 11:22; Matt 23:14). The use of the word “abomination” for transgressions especially grievous to God also confirms this observation (Prov 29:27; Lev 18:22; Deut 22:5).[[5]](#footnote-5) Nevertheless, whether or not a certain sin can be classified as an abomination or not, a sin of any degree can lead to condemnation. According to Scripture, only one offense is sufficient to condemn (Jam 2:10-11; Gal 3:10).

The main categories to distinguish degrees of sinfulness are: sins of ignorance, habitual sins, and deliberate sins. Sins of ignorance are committed without the person’s knowledge that such behavior is sinful. The Mosaic Law required a violator to bring a sacrifice, thus indicating that the act was nonetheless considered sinful before Yahweh (see Num 6:11; 15:22-29; Lev 4-5).

Likely, the reason that sins committed in ignorance are still considered sinful is that people have access to God’s standard, either through the Law or through conscience. In the first three chapters of Romans, in fact, Paul appeals to conscience and the Law to show that all persons are sinful and guilty before the Lord. God calls those guilty of sins of ignorance to repentance (Acts 17:30). The Bible also reveals that those committing sins of ignorance are shown greater mercy (1 Tim 1:13) and receive less punishment (Lk 12:47-48). The psalmist’s prayer is worthy of imitation: “Keep back Your servant from presumptuous {sins}” (Ps 19:13).

A habitual sin is committed when a person, due to weakness of character, continues to commit the same offense over and over. Hebrews 4:15 refers to this as “our weaknesses.” Mueller defines it as “the habitual evil inclination… which is produced and confirmed by repeated sinful acts.”[[6]](#footnote-6) A person trapped in a sinful habit must confess the sin to the Lord and strive for victory in this area by relying on God’s grace in Christ.

Unlike the sin of ignorance or habitual sins, deliberate sins are known sins that the person has no specific predilection toward, but are nonetheless consciously committed in disregard of God. The Old Testament refers to such acts as sinning “defiantly” (Num 15:30-31). The New Testament calls it “sinning willfully” (Heb 10:26).[[7]](#footnote-7)

There are two other types of sins mentioned in Scripture: the sin leading to death, and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is also called the unpardonable sin.[[8]](#footnote-8) Two options exist for explaining the “sin leading to death”: a sin that results in physical death, or one that leads to spiritual death. The first option gains support from 1 Corinthians 11:30-32, where those who are disrespectful to the Lord’s Supper may die prematurely. We may also cite Acts 5:1-11, where Ananias and Sapphira perished for lying to the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, understanding it as spiritual death coincides with other passages that speak of an unpardonable sin (such as Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-31). John states that prayer for someone who has committed the sin resulting in death is unprofitable, which is consistent with an unpardonable sin. Hebrews 6:4-6 informs us that those who fall away from the faith cannot be renewed to repentance.

Many wonder what Jesus meant by blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: “Any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the {age} to come” (Matt 12:31-32). This comment by Jesus was provoked by the Pharisees’ claim that the Lord cast out demons by “Beelzebul the ruler of the demons” (Matt 12:24).

Mueller defines blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as follows: “The sin against the Holy Ghost is committed only when the Holy Spirit has clearly revealed the divine truth to the sinner and the sinner nevertheless utters blasphemies against it.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Similarly, Horton understands it as the complete rejection of the work of the Spirit in drawing a person to Christ, thus making this individual’s salvation impossible.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. See Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 583ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a detailed analysis of the relationship of Old Testament law to New Testament believers, see volume 2, chapter 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thiessen, p. 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marino B. The Origin, Nature, and Consequences of Sin // Horton S. M. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – BookMasters. Kindle Edition. – P. 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Hebrews 10:26-29, the word “sinning” is a Greek present participle, which indicates continuous or repetitive action. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Martin R. P. Blasphemy // Wood D. R. W., Marshall I. Howard. New Bible Dictionary. – 3rd ed. - Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996. – P. 142; Rees T. Blaspheme, Blasphemy // Bromiley G. W. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. - Grand Rapids, МI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001. – V. 1. – P. 522. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mueller, p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Horton S. What the Bible Says about the Holy Spirit. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1976. – P. 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)