### Sin’s Mechanism of Action

The third question in our search for the biblical understanding of sin is how it operates. By what mechanism does sin lead a person into disobedience? We will highlight three aspects in our study: distortion of God’s order, unbelief concerning God’s care, and rebellion against God’s authority.

**1. Components of Sin’s Mechanism of Action**

**а. Distortion of God’s Order**

In order to understand how sin distorts God’s order, we must first acquaint ourselves with that order. When God created humans, He made them with three basic needs: a need for (1) physical satisfaction, which includes items like food, comfort, sex, etc., (2) security, which is often associated with having possessions, and (3) significance, which results from receiving attention and affection from others.

The Bible affirms that all these desires, in themselves, are good and given by God, who desires to meet these needs. Scripture never condemns someone for attaining any of the three items listed above. Several biblical texts, in fact, confirm that claim: concerning physical satisfaction (Eph 5:29; 1 Tim 4:4-5), security/possessions (Acts 5:4), and significance/attention (Jn 12:26; 1 Thes 5:12).

The question arises, then, as to why God created people with needs and desires. We understand this reason in light of God’s purpose for creating humans – to establish a relationship of love. Jesus expressed God’s plan in His Great Commandments: “’You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mk 12:30-31).

How does the Lord show His love for humankind? In the Garden of Eden, His plan was to manifest His love by caring for the needs of His human creatures. The fact that people have these inborn necessities provides God with the opportunity to demonstrate His love by satisfying them. The experience in the Garden also reveals the means by which people were intended to show their love for the Lord – through obedience. In fact, Yahweh forbid Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to give them an occasion to demonstrate their love for Him by keeping His command. Jesus echoes this idea in His words to His disciples, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15).

Having established God’s original plan to establish a love-relationship with us, we can now proceed to show how sin distorts and undermines that plan. In Genesis 3:7, we see that Eve was tempted in the three areas of human need: “The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make {one} wise”.

First, she noticed that the tree was good for food. Eve had a basic requirement and desire for physical sustenance. Yet, she was tempted to eat from the forbidden fruit, which would take her beyond the boundaries that Yahweh established for satisfying that need. So then, her natural desire for physical satisfaction was stretched beyond proper limits, which led to her act of disobedience. Her natural desire became excessive and “unnatural.”

Next, Eve saw that the tree was a delight to the eyes. In Scripture, the eyes are often associated with the desire to possess something. Matthew 6:22-23 is an example: “The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” Of note is that prior to and after this text, Jesus speaks of money, which is an object desired to be possessed. However, Eve was tempted to possess something forbidden, and thus her lawful desires went beyond boundaries and again led her into sin.

Finally, Eve saw that the tree was desirable to make one wise. Here, we encounter the third area of temptation. Satan suggested to Eve that if she ate of the forbidden fruit, she would be like God. Now, she is being tempted to go beyond the order Yahweh had established to satisfy her need for significance and attention. Again, her natural, God-given desires have become pathological.

In summary, we see that God’s plan was for people to turn to Him to fulfill their basic needs in physical satisfaction, security/possessions, and significance/attention. Sin, however, distorts God’s perfect order. Unfortunately, all humanity has followed Eve’s example of violating God’s standards in order to satisfy their needs and desires. Instead of turning to God, we look to creation, the natural world, for satisfaction. Sin operates to distort God’s plan, which He originally intended for people’s good.

Orthodox Metropolitan Ilarion says it well, “Before the Fall, the singular object of humanity’s love was God, but then another item of value appeared – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good for food…”[[1]](#footnote-1) Orthodox priest Shmemann confirms,

The world is fallen because it lost the awareness that God is all in all…. Humanity’s natural dependence on the world was intended to continually lead to fellowship with God, in whom is all life…. Whenever we view the world as a goal in itself, everything comes to have value, and therefore everything loses significance, because the significance of everything is found only in God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

James employs the term “lust” to describe natural desires that have become disproportionate: “But 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).

Next, we can examine the case in Luke chapter 4, where Satan tempted Jesus. We observe that the Lord was tempted in the same three area of basic human need. In verse 3, we read, “And the devil said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.’” Here, Jesus is first tempted in the area of physical satisfaction. He was hungry because of His forty-day fast. Yet, the time to eat had not yet arrived. Satan is attempting to induce Jesus to satisfy His own needs in disregard of His Father’s will.

In verses 6-7, then, Satan resorts to his second temptation: “I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours.” Similar to his strategy against Eve, who saw that the tree was a delight to the eyes, the devil tempts Jesus with the riches of the world. Of course, in time Jesus will inherit all things as King of kings and Lord of lords, but that time had not yet come. Again, Satan wants Jesus to seek His own gain in violation of God’s plan for Him.

Finally, in verses 9-11, we read, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you,’ and, ‘On {their} hands they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” In this instance, Jesus is tempted in the area of personal significance. Satan wants Him to draw attention to Himself. Again, in time, all will worship the Lord, but that time had not yet come. This was the period of His humiliation. So then, both Eve and Jesus were tempted in the three areas of basic human need, yet unlike Eve, Jesus successfully resisted.

Our next key passage is 1 John 2:15-17: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and {also} its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.”

The three main area of temptation appear again: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. These enticements correspond to the three basic human needs. The lust of the flesh corresponds to physical satisfaction. The lust of the eyes corresponds to the desire for security and possessions. The pride of life is an exaggerated desire for significance and attention. When the desire for physical satisfaction exceeds limits, it becomes lust. When the desire for possessions exceeds limits, it becomes greed. When the desire for significance exceeds limits, it becomes pride. Thus, sin distorts the natural needs and desires implanted in us by the Lord. Following a similar line of thought, Mantzaridis considers the main areas of temptation to be sensuality, the desire for riches, and ambition.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Sensuality, or the inappropriate satisfaction of physical desires, is very widespread in the world today and one of the more visible expressions of sin. People generally have their “portion is in {this} life” (Ps 17:14), are “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim 3:4; сf. Prov 21:17) and “set their minds on earthly things” (Phil 3:19). It is commonly thought, “{Men} prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything” (Ecc 10:19).

Sensuality led to Israel's fall in the wilderness (Ps 106:14) and caused the sons of Eli to despise the ministry of the Lord (1 Sam 2:12-17) and Esau to despise his inheritance (Heb 12:16). Excessive attention to the physical can result in laziness (Prov 20:13; 26:13-16), drunkenness (Prov 31:4-7; 23:29-35), adultery (2 Sam 11:2-5), and even homosexuality (Gen 19). Nonetheless, in the end, such people remain unsatisfied (2 Sam 13:15).

Although enjoying earthly pleasures is not sinful in itself (1 Tim 4:4), Paul is nonetheless guarded to “not be mastered by anything” (1 Cor 6:12). Correspondingly, he urges Timothy, “Flee from youthful lusts” (2 Tim 2:22; сf. Job 31:1). Solomon advises moderation in eating (Prov 25:16) and also recommends not associating with those who indulge excessively in wine or meat (Prov 23:20).

The desire for riches leads to many ills. Because of it, people sometimes resort to illegal means (Prov 11:18; 12:12; 17;23), oppress the poor (Job 24:2-12; Hab 2:1-2, 15), and may even commit murder (1 Kin 21; 2 Kin 11:1). Some may abuse their position among God’s people for personal gain (Mk 12:38-40). Judas Iscariot, in fact, betrayed the Lord for money (Matt 26:14-16).

Riches do not satisfy the soul (Prov 30:15-16; Isa 5:8). Although wicked people may prosper in this life (Ps 37; 73; Ecc 8:14), their prosperity is short-lived (Ps 49; Isa 33:4; 2 Kin 5:20-24; Lk 12:13-21). Therefore, the Bible counsels us to put God in first place (Lk 16:13; 18:22; Heb 12:16) and to be content with what we have (Heb 13:5-6). Riches may distract from devotion to the Lord (Lk 8:14; 18:21-25). Solomon’s pray exemplifies this attitude:

Two things I asked of You, do not refuse me before I die: Keep deception and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion, that I not be full and deny {You} and say, "Who is Yahweh?" or that I not be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God (Prov 30:7-9).

The third element of the love of this world, pride, characterizes many figures in the biblical narrative. The prophets especially indicted the Gentile nations and their leaders in this vice: Babylon (Isa 47:7-9), Assyria (Isa 37:24-25; 2 Chr 32:9-19), Moab (Isa 16:6), Edom (Ezek 35:12-13), Tyre (Ezek 27:1), and Egypt (Ezek 29:3). The book of Daniel highlights God’s humbling of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4). God’s people, Israel, were not immune to pride (Isa 2:12-20), neither were their leaders (2 Kin 14:10; 2 Chr 12:1; 26:16). God considers pride an abomination (Prov 16:5), which leads to a downfall (Prov 16:18; 15:25; 18:12; 29:23).

Let us look more closely at the term “lust.” It translates the Greek word ἐπιθυμία (*epithumia*). This word can be translated either “desire” or “lust.” For example, in Luke 22:15 Jesus says, “I have earnestly desired (ἐπιθυμία) to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” Similarly, Paul employs the same word to express his desire to be with the Lord (Phil 1:23). He uses it again in 1 Thessalonians 2:17, where he strongly desires to see that congregation again.

Galatians 5:17 displays the use of ἐπιθυμία (*epithumia*) in both a positive and negative sense: “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.” The flesh has ἐπιθυμία (*epithumia*) against the Spirit, and the Spirit has ἐπιθυμία (*epithumia*) against the flesh. Therefore, “desire” and “lust” are in essence one and the same – one word expresses both concepts. Our basic desires (ἐπιθυμία) and needs are just and good. Only when we allow our desires to take us beyond God’s law, they become “lust” (ἐπιθυμία).

Due to a misunderstanding of this concept, many mistakenly feel that the way to overcome sin is to suppress all natural desire. Church history is full of examples of monks, hermits, and other religious persons who attempted to overcome sin in this way. They deprived themselves of food, comfort, marriage, money, friendship, etc., thinking that such self-denial will lead to greater spirituality. However, if we define spirituality by God’s Word, we must reject this position. Our God-given desires are good. God created us this way and He wants to meet our needs. Only when these desires take us beyond appropriate limits do they become evil.

Paul’s words to the church of the Colossians are key here:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch! (which all {refer} {to} things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, {but are} of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Spirituality is not attained by suppressing all natural desires, but by fulfilling them in accordance with the will of God. We can now better understand Solomon’s words in light of this teaching:

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven – A time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance. A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to shun embracing. A time to search and a time to give up as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; a time to be silent and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

In other words, no action or desire in itself is evil. Everything depends on how we perform those actions or satisfy those desires. Do we fulfill them in line with God’s Word, or in contradiction to it? We can compare the “art of obedience” to playing a musical instrument. When we play the right notes at the right time, beautiful music results. When we do not, we create dissonance.

Therefore, to avoid sin, one must simply remain within the boundaries that God has established. We must be mindful that God desires to meet out legitimate needs and desires (Ps 78:10-12). We recall David’s sin with Bathsheba, when God said that He was ready to meet David’s sexual needs, if David would have looked to Him to provide (2 Sam 12:8). Seeking fulfillment through sin, as Ezekiel relates, never satisfies (Ezek 16:28-29).

**b. Unbelief concerning God’s Care**

Related to sin as “distortion” is the idea of sin as “unbelief.” Hebrews 3:18-19 makes this clear: “And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? {So} we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.” Israel’s disobedience, therefore, was rooted in unbelief.

Earlier, we stated that God provided Adam and Eve with an expression of their love for Him by refraining from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This command was also a test of their faith. The tree had the potential to give them something – it was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and could make them wise. These are good things, but the method of their attainment was not. The first humans were called on to trust God to meet their needs and not seek another means.

Therefore, the tree provided a test of faith. As long as Adam and Eve maintained their trust in Yahweh to care for them, there was no need to take from the forbidden fruit. If their faith weakened, though, the tree would have added appeal and would put them in danger of sinning.

Satan’s strategy, now, becomes clear. He began his deception of Eve by asking, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” (Gen 3:1). The devil exaggerated the limitations that the Lord gave to his first humans. He was attempting to picture God in Eve’s mind as a demanding overlord who did not care for her. Then, Satan directly challenged God’s goodness: “The serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’” (v. 4-5).

Until the moment of this temptation, Eve was confident that God cared for her and that He would not withhold any good thing from her. Satan, though, suggested that God is withholding something needful for her that she must take for herself. Regrettably, Eve believed the serpent’s lie, and her faith was shaken. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church reflects this thought:

Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Page concurs, “(Satan’s) question as framed implies that God is unjust…. God has placed unreasonable restrictions on Adam and Eve…. Satan planted in her heart seeds of doubt concerning God’s benevolence.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The drama continues in verse 6: “The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make {one} wise.” Eve had already noticed this tree many times before. Now, however, she sees it in a different light – as a means to obtain these benefits. Previously, the tree served as a means for Eve to express her love for and trust in the Lord. As a result of Satan’s suggestions, though, Eve perceived the tree as a way of satisfying her needs and desires independent of God which led to her disobedience.

**Reinhold Niebuhr advanced the following theory of the relation of sin to unbelief. He proposed that the root of sin was anxiety. He observed the tension people experience between freedom and finitude. Because of human freedom, people want to do whatever they desire, while, on the other hand, they are limited by time, space, strength, resources, etc. In order to find liberation from this tension in human nature, persons must choose between three options. First, they can express their freedom to the maximum and rebel against God and hurt others in the process. Second, they can suppress their freedom and passively give way to sensuality and immoral living. Third (and preferably), they can trust God to provide their needs and curb their freedom out of respect for Him.**[[6]](#footnote-6)

**c. Rebellion**

The final element in our proposed mechanism of sin is rebellion. Unlike the first two elements, rebellion has no logical basis. We can understand how sin could arise through distortion of God’s order or through human unbelief. Because people doubt God, they are ready to seek fulfillment independent of Him, which leads to a distortion of His order for their lives.

However, sometimes sinful acts make no sense at all. This is because sin simply compels people to rebel against God’s authority. If the Lord would say, “stand,” sin would say, “sit.” If God would say, “speak,” sin would say, “keep quiet.” Paul enlightens us about this truth in Romans 7:8: “Sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind.” Titus 3:3 reveals that sin causes us to hate one another. Sin creates in people’s hearts hostility toward God and others.

**2. Errant Understandings**

**а. Judaism**

The Judaistic view of sin is summed up in the terms “*yester tov*” and “*yester ra*.” These two impulses, translated “impulse to good” and “impulse to evil” respectively, are present in each individual from birth as part of God’s creation order. Our task is to develop the former and suppress the latter. Rabbis cite Genesis 8:21 in support: “The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This passage is taken to refer to the evil impulse.

The following considerations, though, stand in contradiction to the system *yester tov, yester ra*. First, in Genesis 1:31 we learn that God initially created all things “very good.” The “evil impulse” is certainly not good. In addition, Paul taught that sin entered the world through Adam’s transgression (Rom 5:12), not by God’s creative act. Finally, if God implanted both a good and evil impulse in humans, then He becomes the author of evil. James rejects this claim (Jam 1:13, 17).

**b. Liberal Theology**

Liberal theology appears in various forms and advances various doctrinal positions. The common feature among liberals is a rejection of the total truth-value of Scripture. Along with that, liberals tend to underestimate the fallen nature of humans.[[8]](#footnote-8)

For liberals in general, the human dilemma is caused by poor education. If people had proper upbringing and good educational opportunities, they would develop into morally excellent individuals. Erickson well summarizes liberal thought:

Liberals do not believe that humans’ original nature has been corrupted; rather, they view human nature as intrinsically good and capable of developing further. What is needed is not some radical transformation by grace from without, but development of the potential divinity of humans, amplification of the divine presence within. Nurturing of the strengths, ideals, and aspirations of the human race is what is called for, not a supernaturalistic alteration. Humans do not need a conversion, a radical change of direction. Rather, they need inspiration, a vision of what they can become.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In refutation of this view, we appeal to Paul’s teaching in Romans 7, where he clearly states that people are in slavery to sin and that knowledge of the Law is inadequate to liberate them:

For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want…. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members (Rom 7:19-23).

We also note that the level of education in the world increases yearly. Yet, we do not observe a corresponding increase in morality, but rather a decline. Also important to note is that God gave Israel a perfect law under the tutorage of the finest instructor in ethics in Old Testament history – Moses. Nonetheless, in spite of all these advantages, Israel failed to become an obedient people.

A final point in refutation is the time when the Jewish teacher Nicodemus approached Jesus with the appellation: “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God {as} a teacher” (Jn 3:2). Apparently, he was looking for instruction from the Lord as a teacher in order to increase his understanding and insight into the things of God. Jesus unexpectedly responded: “You must be born again” (Jn 3:3). He thus revealed that the human dilemma was not a lack of education, but the need for a new heart, a new birth.

In the following sections, we will detail several liberal views on sin.

**1) Remnant of Animal Nature**

Some hold to the opinion that people sin due to a remnant of animal nature left over from the evolutionary process. Therefore, the moral perfection of humanity is only a matter of time. Eventually, the human race will mature, cast off its animal nature, and attain moral integrity.

However, this theory finds no biblical support. According to Genesis, Yahweh created humans not from apes, but from the dust of the earth. We also recall Paul’s teaching in Romans chapter 5 that the origin of sin is not a remnant of animal nature, but inherited depravity from Adam.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**2) Teaching of Spinoza**

The French philosopher Baruch Spinoza created a unique approach to understanding sin, associating it with human finiteness. He proposed that God, being a perfect being, possesses all the qualities that make up perfection. Other beings, though, since they are finite, possess only some of these qualities. Depravity, then, is not a distortion or perversion of human nature, but simply the absence of certain of these qualities necessary for perfection. People do not need deliverance from slavery to sin, but rather need to develop the qualities they lack. Yet, even a quick glance at Spinoza’s theory reveals its lack of coherence with biblical truth. Sin is not the lack of certain qualities, but disobedience to God (1 Jn 3:4).[[11]](#footnote-11)

**3) Teaching of Schleiermacher**

The German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher theorized that our main problem was sensuality, that is, dependence on the material world. At creation, God endowed humanity with an innate sense of God’s presence. Jesus developed this God-consciousness to the highest degree. We, however, fail to develop our God-consciousness due to sensuality and therefore fail to reach our moral potential.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In refutation of Schleiermacher, we respond that, according to Jesus’ teaching, the seat of sin is not in material things, but in the human heart (Mk 7:20-23). When found in contexts discussing sin, the term “flesh,” i.e., σάρξ (*sarks*), refers not to the human body, but to the sinful nature of the heart. One must also consider that the material world in itself is not evil. It was created by God. Finally, according to Colossians 2:20-23, asceticism is of no value in overcoming the sin nature.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**4) Liberation Theology**

Liberation theology claims that the human dilemma consists in improper interpersonal relations.[[14]](#footnote-14) Unjust social structures support the abuse and oppression of certain peoples, which leads to the general disorder of life in this world. Especially noted is the discrimination of minorities and women, and the oppression of poorer nations by wealthy ones. In the case of the latter, wealthy nations obtain inexpensive raw materials from poorer ones and resell manufactured products back to them at inflated prices. If we could rectify unfair social structures and institutions, humanity could reach utopia.

Theologians of this movement seek justification for their perspective. First, they observe the obvious and widespread suffering in the world. Second, they feel that God wants to alleviate suffering and provide for people’s needs. Therefore, they conclude that the Church should be wholly committed to social action in bringing this about. They also draw from Scripture, citing passages that rebuke injustice and advocate for the poor (see Mic 2:1-2; Isa 5:8; Amos 6:5-6; Jam 5:1-6).

Adherents of liberation theology indict the traditional approach to biblical interpretation in undergirding evil social structures. They take issue with the traditional approach of consulting the Bible first to define our behavior, and then seeking to apply these principles to everyday life. We must do the opposite – look first at human need, and then turn to Scripture to find methods to meet those needs. The methods for change-making are as follows. Initially, the Church can preach Scriptural principles of goodness and justice. Beyond that, followers of Christ can promote strikes and demonstrations. Even more extreme measures can be appropriate – the use of violence and revolution. As noted above, this teaching finds greatest acceptance in poorer nations, especially in Latin America, and among minorities in industrialized nations.

Interestingly, the same basic approach is championed in the thought of Karl Marx and other communist leaders. Marx taught that if we could establish a perfect society, in which all people had equal opportunity, then a new humanity would evolve that had genuine concern for others. Both communists and exponents of liberation theology claim that humanity’s problem lies neither in one’s relationship to God, nor in the internal condition of persons, but in oppression in society. To eliminate injustice and oppression, both groups embrace revolution. One major difference between these groups exists – one is religious and the other areligious. Liberation theology, then, is in reality a hybrid of communism and Christianity.

Does liberation theology truly reflect the biblical view? We note the following contradictions. First, contrary to the claim that the starting point for theological reflection is not Scripture, but human need, we affirm that Scripture is primary. God knows the human situation better than people do and in Scripture, He lays out a perfect plan for the resolution of all human ills. Proponents of liberation theology use God’s name to justify their own approach, but reject His agenda for humanity.

Second, the Bible warns against over attachment to life in this age. Paul counselled the church in Colossae, “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:1-3). Although the Lord promises us blessing in this life, our hope is in the future revelation of Jesus Christ. We cannot expect utopia in this life. The author of Hebrews relates that Old Testament saints considered themselves “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13). Peter called his readers “aliens and strangers” (1 Pet 2:11). In the first chapter of this epistle, he wrote, “Conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay {on earth}” (1:17). Peter compares our time on this planet with a journey. Our true home is God’s eternal kingdom. For now, we are strangers on the earth.

Third, the Bible opposes the use of violence for meeting personal needs. Jesus taught His disciples, “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matt 5:38-41). Followers of Jesus are obliged to keep His Word.

Peter echoes this teaching: “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this {finds} favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly” (1 Pet 2:18-19). Furthermore, Peter relates that even the Lord Jesus suffered unjustly on the cross. These passages clearly contradict liberation theology, which teaches resistance to personal insults and injustices. Scripture declares that enduring poor treatment without complaint finds favor with God.

It is true that the Bible often addresses the issues of poverty and injustice. Nearly all of these passages, though, are taken from the Old Testament. The question arises whether the Old Testament is speaking of poverty and injustice in society in general or among God’s people. This question is complicated by the fact that these two entities, i.e., “church and state,” were at that time one and the same. Adherents of liberation theology conclude that these Old Testament texts refer to society in general and therefore urge the Church to social action.

To resolve the question, one must appeal to the New Testament, where secular society and the people of God were two different overlapping entities. Remarkably, the New Testament addresses poverty and injustice almost exclusively in the context of the Church (see Acts 11:29; Gal 2:10; 2 Cor 8-9; Jam 2; 1 Jn 3:17). Consequently, the corresponding Old Testament texts likely had God’s people in view as well. Nonetheless, the New Testament does not forbid involvement in social action. One can cite the example of the Good Samaritan. The Old Testament has a clear example as well in Jonah’s preaching to the Gentiles of Nineveh.

The guiding principle in this regard is found in Galatians 6:10: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” In 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, Paul also wrote, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within {the church}? But those who are outside, God judges.” In light of the above, we conclude that God does not forbid involvement in social action, even encourages it. Yet, His first priority is order in the Church, which is God’s new society that will someday replace the secular order and endure forever.

We also draw insight from the history of Israel. Through the Law of Moses, Yahweh provided Israel with perfect social structures. In addition, Moses was unparalleled as a leader. However, even under such ideal conditions, Israel failed to create a utopian society. They sinned, worshiped idols, etc. Israel’s example shows that humanity’s true problem is not external, but internal – in the human heart.

Finally, this system contradicts the actions of our Lord during His triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. The Jews expected Messiah to be a political deliverer and to overthrow their Roman oppressors. Yet, Jesus did not satisfy those expectations. Upon entering Jerusalem, He did not proceed to the Roman garrison to overthrow it and start a revolution, but to the Jewish temple to cleanse it. In this way, He demonstrated that the human problem was not in bad governments, but in people’s spiritual condition. Jesus is not a revolutionary, but a Savior from sin.

**c. Roman Catholicism**

The Roman Catholic teaching can be summed up in the phrase “deprivation of original holiness/justice.”[[15]](#footnote-15) It is proposed that God created humans with two aspects: a higher aspect and a lower one. The higher one is identified with reason and volition, while the lower one consists of desires (passions).

Our goal for moral development should be to be guided by reason and harness our passions. For this purpose, God gave humans so-called “original justice/holiness,” which consists of spiritual power that enables one to live by the “higher aspect.” When Adam sinned, however, humanity lost this original holiness and came under the power of passion.

We read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness. They become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image – that of a God jealous of his prerogatives” (№ 399), and, “The harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered” (№ 400). So then, through Adam all receive a human nature “deprived of original holiness and justice” (№ 404). Humans are born with an inherent tendency to sin, called “concupiscence.” Concupiscence, though, is not in itself considered sin – only when someone decides to yield to its impulses.

In addition, Catholics believe that, although human nature is distorted by sin, the will is nonetheless free and under certain circumstances can still move toward God.[[16]](#footnote-16) Therefore, our goal should be to restore the original harmony human nature enjoyed with the aid of the grace provided for in the sacraments.

In many respects, the Catholic teaching derives from Augustine’s early views. He gave definition to the idea of concupiscence and believed that the will of a fallen human is still free. However, Augustine considered that people are free to do what they *want* to do, but not what they *ought* to do. Since fallen human nature constantly produces sinful desires, people will behave accordingly. Therefore, people sin of their own free will.

Later in life, Augustine altered his views and began to teach that the human will was enslaved to sin and that persons were not free to move toward God. God must take the initiative to draw people to Himself. He does this only for His elect. Thus, Augustine laid the theological foundation for the later development of Calvinism.

After Augustine, the Western Church adopted a more moderate form of his teaching. It agreed that without grace, no one can turn to God. However, it differed from him in rejecting the idea that God predestines only certain individuals to receive this grace. This opinion was canonized at the Second Council of Orange (529).[[17]](#footnote-17) Since that time, the Roman Catholic Church has moved closer and closer to Augustine’s original teaching about the Fall, defending the doctrine of human free will that can cooperate with the grace of God.

In evaluating the Catholic teaching, we note it diverges from the idea of “total depravity,” as discussed in the section on “inherited depravity,” and better approximates the position “Semi-Pelagianism.” Additionally, even though evangelical believers heartily concur that God’s grace is necessary to restore human nature, they challenge the claim that this grace is provided through the sacraments. We will investigate this issue in more detail in chapters 21-23 in our discussion of sacramental theology.

Another weak point in the Catholic position is dividing human nature into higher and lower aspects. This leaves the impression that reason is essentially better than the material aspects of human nature, which undervalues part of God’s created order. Here, we see the effect of Greek philosophy, where the mind is good and the body is evil.

The biblical portrait of humanity differs from the Catholic one. Scripture affirms, especially in the Old Testament, that the Lord created humans “very good” in all respects. Therefore, it is improper to divide human nature in this way, but rather one should view it holistically. The human struggle is not mind against body or “higher aspect” against “lower aspect,” but the individual in his/her entirety against sin.

**d. Eastern Orthodoxy**

Let us examine how the Eastern Orthodox view sin and human depravity. They consider that people do not inherit depravity from our forefather Adam, but only mortality.[[18]](#footnote-18) Mortality is what leads to sinful behavior. Because people fear death, they focus more on earthly things than on heavenly ones. Behavior, in turn, follows after our thought processes. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve reflected more on spiritual/heavenly concerns and consequently conducted themselves in submission to the Lord. After death entered the world, people became engrossed in affairs connected with their earthly survival. As a result, vices like passion, fear, sorrow, anger, hatred, etc. entered the human experience.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Correspondingly, Nikon claims that our problem is that the “mind.... has become enslaved to irrational passions.”[[20]](#footnote-20) He also writes, “Just like the soul longs for future pleasures, the body longs for present and temporary pleasures.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In the words of Maximus the Confessor, “Having become a transgressor and mixing his rationality with sensuality, people acquired a passionate drive to know sensual things.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Mantzaridis adds,   
“Man, subject to corruption and death, is constantly spurred on to sin and becomes a slave to it.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Meyendorff describes human nature as “bound by mortality, inevitably sinful.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

The Orthodox view is also expressed in the following excerpts:

The necessity of satisfying the needs of the body… lead to “passions,” for they present unavoidable means of temporary survival…. There is indeed a consensus in Greek patristic and Byzantine traditions in identifying the inheritance of the Fall as an inheritance essentially of mortality rather than sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality.[[25]](#footnote-25)

From the “old Adam,” through his natural birth, man inherits a defective form of life – bound by mortality, inevitably sinful, lacking fundamental freedom from the “prince of this world.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

The Orthodox tradition of Saint Marcus Eremita does not feel that people participated in Adam’ sin: “We are passed down by inheritance not transgression, but death.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

So then, Eastern Orthodoxy stresses our inheritance of mortality, not depravity. The former, in fact, is thought to cause the latter. Bulgakov expresses it this way:

Due to original sin, the human body lost its sophistic “glory.” Instead of enjoying kingdom glory in the world, people became enslaved to the body, which submits to the elements of the world instead of the service of the spirit.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In Orthodox thought, then, the path to victory over sin is not deliverance from our sin nature through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but victory over the fear of death through His resurrection. Kuraev writes, “We consider that Christ came in order to rise from the dead (1 Pet 3:21). We are saved not by the death of Christ, but rather that in Him death lost its power.”[[29]](#footnote-29) After people are delivered from their fear of death, they can then turn their attention to heaven and conduct themselves accordingly.

In addition, since sin is rooted primarily in physical passions, aroused by death, the key to victory over sin lies in suppression of bodily necessities, i.e., in overcoming passions by acquiring the quality of *apatheia,* i.e., “impassibility.”[[30]](#footnote-30) One should embrace ascetic cleansing not only from “all that is… sinful,” but also from “all sensual and mental images.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Let us qualify this point. On the one hand, Orthodoxy rejects the teaching that matter is in itself evil. Nikon comments here:

The ascetic struggle is waged not against matter, but against the unnatural, contra-natural. Bodily necessities are not killed off, but their improper use. Using created things is not forbidden, but their abuse.[[32]](#footnote-32)

On the other hand, since the material world and bodily necessities distract from spiritual things, abstaining from bodily desires has practical value.

Mantzaridis, looking at this question from the vantage point of Gregory Palamas, adds necessary elements to our discussion. In agreement with what has already been said, he connects sin with attachment to the physical: “Man loves the world because he loves his own body, while a love of the spirit generates love for God,”[[33]](#footnote-33) and, “The source of passions is the concern for the flesh…. Excessive satisfaction of bodily desires breeds the passions.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Nonetheless, he still believes in the essential goodness of the physical: “The body is good…. What is evil, and should be considered the child of sin, is concern for the body.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Therefore, one should withdraw for contemplation of God and develop a spiritual mindset in order to obtain a higher level of morality and spirituality. This is best accomplished through the monastic life: “By restricting even the proper use of God’s gifts, the monk mourns for the misuse of these gifts by Adam, which expelled man from Paradise, and concentrates himself on preparing for the age to be,”[[36]](#footnote-36) and, “The stillness of the desert provides man with the fittest atmosphere for pursuing his work of concentration and self-awareness.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

We need to include still another consideration. A key to Orthodox thinking is distinguishing “nature” and “person,” both in regard to God and to humans. They even propose the existence of two wills in people: the natural will, which corresponds to “nature,” and a gnomic will, which corresponds to the person. The first was initially oriented toward God, but was weakened by the Fall. The second appeared only at the time of the Fall and enables individuals to make free decisions in spite of their weakened condition.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The Orthodox view in general is based on Romans 5:12: “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.” Orthodox theology claims that this verse teaches that the root cause of sin is the presence of death in the world.[[39]](#footnote-39) The word “because” in the final phrase “because all sinned,” translates the Greek phrase ἐφ ὧ (*eph o*), which the standard Russian translation renders “in him (all sinned).” The relative pronoun ὧ (*о*) stands in the masculine gender and singular number and could refer to Adam. However, the Greek term θάνατος (*thanatos*), i.е., “death,” is also in the masculine singular.

Consequently, Orthodox commentators refer the pronoun ὧ (*о*) to the word “death,” and translate the verse: “…in death all sinned.” Thus, death becomes the root cause of sin. The Orthodox see further support in 1 Corinthians 15:22: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”This verse specifically links human mortality with Adam’s sin.

Before we proceed to a refutation of the Orthodox view, it will prove insightful to compare this teaching with the ancient philosophy of Neoplatonism, from which the Eastern Church has borrowed heavily (see Appendix B). According to Neoplatonism, perfection consists of unity, in particular, unification with the “One.” Any deviation from this state is considered evil.

In light of Orthodoxy’s dependence on Neoplatonism, it does not surprise us that the former also frequently link sin with disunity. Lossky, for example, asserts, “After the original sin, human nature became separated, fractured, and torn into many individuals.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Therefore, one must strive to reunite with the “general human nature” that Christ restored (see chp. 8, “Deification”). Maximus the Confessor taught: “The fall broke the chain of existence – into the world came death, which disunites and decays.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

The Orthodox conception of sin overlaps with Neoplatonism in still another way. In Neoplatonism, the “Fall” is when the soul “is turned away from this vision by matter, by the necessities of the bodily life, which enslave it to the changes of the sensory world.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Therefore, the soul must separate itself from the world and become impassionate, contemplating spiritual things. The similarity with Lossky’s teaching is striking:

For the soul itself is impassionate, yet when it exits from its inner simplicity into the outer world, it becomes subject to passions. Renunciation of the world brings the soul back to itself, into focus, it is the restoration of the spiritual being returning to fellowship with God.[[43]](#footnote-43)

We can note an obvious connection between these two aspects of the Orthodox view of sin: sensuality and disunity. The material world changes and thereby disrupts the perfect unity of the spiritual world. Precisely for this reason the Greeks despised the material world: “It is temporal and changing.”[[44]](#footnote-44) We also note Orthodoxy’s clear dependence on Neoplatonism and its divergence from biblical revelation. We thus now proceed to its refutation.

Returning to the Orthodox claim that the phrase ἐφ ὧ (*eph о*) in Romans 5:12 should be translated to “in death (all have sinned),” we respond that nowhere in the New Testament is that phrase translated “in something.” In this context, the preferred translation should be “because,” which all major English translators employ. Instead of translating “in death (all have sinned),” we read “because (all have sinned).”

All the consequences of Adam’s sin are passed on to his descendants. In Romans 5:14-15, we learn about our inheriting mortality. In verses 16-19, Adam’s guilt is passed on. One may safely assume that inherited depravity is implied as well. Other texts specifically indicate that we received from Adam a sinful nature:

- …knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life *inherited from your forefathers* (1 Pet 1:18).

- Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were *by nature* children of wrath, even as the rest (Eph 2:3).

According to Scripture, our problem is not over-occupation with bodily and earthly affairs, but the sinful state of our hearts:

- For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting {and} wickedness, {as well} {as} deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride {and} foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man (Mk 7:21-23).

- The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it (Jer 17:9).

Some Orthodox teachers are ready to admit that people inherited from Adam a sinful nature.[[45]](#footnote-45)

However, although Eastern Orthodoxy officially adheres to the goodness of the material world, yet in practice it treats it as something unclean that hinders spiritual development. This is why Orthodox teachers laud the monastic life and ascetic practices. However, the Bible plainly teaches that suppression of legitimate bodily desires does not aid in overcoming sin (see above discussion on “Distortion”).

**e. Selfishness as the Root of Sin**

Some Scripture passages seem to indicate that the root problem of sin is selfishness. The Bible reveals, for example, that a sinner turns “to his own way” (Isa 53:6), and that in the end times, “people will be lovers of self” (2 Tim 3:2). The gospel teaches us to live for God, not for ourselves (2 Cor 5:15).[[46]](#footnote-46)

On the other hand, although the Bible warns about selfishness, it never identifies it as the basic element in sinful behavior. Jesus’ Great Commandments do not exclude love for oneself: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39). It seems that a prerequisite for normal relationships with others is a healthy respect for oneself.[[47]](#footnote-47) Although Thiessen believes that sin springs from selfishness, he nonetheless concedes,

There is, we grant, a proper love of self. It constitutes the basis of self-respect, self-preservation, self-improvement, and of a proper regard for others. None of these are inherently sinful. What we do mean is such an exaggerated love of self, as puts self-interests ahead of God’s interests.[[48]](#footnote-48)

We must also consider the following point. At times, it is necessary for people to act in their own interests. In fact, all human actions can be characterized this way. For example, if someone has an extra sum of money, then the decision arises whether to spend it on oneself or give it to another. The thing that prompts this person to give the money away is a *personal desire* to do so. This individual *prefers* to bring someone else joy. So then, this person is, in a sense, acting out of self-interest in serving another. He or she is being ruled by a personal desire, which in this case turns out to be an altruistic one. Therefore, the key to moral living is not to suppress all personal desires, but to develop good ones that lead to acts of generosity and godliness.

We can qualify the claim of sin as selfishness in still another fashion. Some people demonstrate great commitment and self-sacrifice in devoting themselves wholeheartedly to what they perceive to be a good cause. Adherents of false religions, for example, do so. Yet, such “unselfish” behavior is not admirable since in it involves a rejection of Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father.[[49]](#footnote-49)

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17. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second\_Council\_of\_Orange. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is proposed that God’s clothing of Adam and Eve in animal skins symbolizes their receiving mortality (Слово об обожении // под ред. Архимандрата Никона (Иванова) и Протоиерея Николая Лихоманова. – М.: Сибирская Благозвонница, 2004. – P. 60). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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