

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

HAMARTIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Sin

The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us

UNIT 3: THE NATURE OF SIN WHAT SIN IS IN ITS FULLNESS

Lesson 7

What Is Sin?

A Biblical Definition

More Than Mistakes, More Than Weakness — Sin as Offense Against God

“Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” —

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 14

Key Texts: 1 John 3:4; Romans 3:23; 14:23; Psalm 51:4; James 4:17; Matthew 6:12; Isaiah 53:6

“Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.”

Psalm 51:4, NASB 1995

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Introduction

We have now completed Unit 2, which traced the origin and spread of sin through both the narrative of Genesis 3–11 and the prosecutorial argument of Romans 1–3. We have seen where sin came from, how it entered the world, what it did in the moment of its commission, how rapidly it escalated across human generations and civilizations, and why Paul can declare with juridical precision that the entire human race stands guilty before God without a word of self-defense remaining. We have established the scope and the history of sin with considerable thoroughness. We turn now, in Unit 3, to a different and equally essential question: what exactly is sin? Not where did it come from or how far has it spread, but what is it, precisely, in its nature? What does the Bible actually mean when it uses the word “sin” and its cognates? What are the specific categories and dimensions that constitute the full biblical understanding of the thing we are talking about?

This question is less simple than it appears. The English word “sin” is a single term that covers an enormously rich and varied biblical vocabulary. The Old Testament employs at least a dozen distinct Hebrew words to describe different dimensions and aspects of the human condition of rebellion against God, each word illuminating a different facet of the same fundamental reality. The New Testament is similarly rich, with Greek terms that variously describe sin as missing the mark, crossing a boundary, rebellion against a sovereign, unpaid debt, moral disease, and lawlessness. To understand what sin is requires working through this vocabulary with care, attending to the specific nuances that each term contributes to the total biblical picture.

Beyond the vocabulary, this lesson addresses the structural question that the entire vocabulary points toward: the orientation of sin. Is sin primarily a horizontal offense, harm done to other human beings, violation of social norms, disruption of human flourishing, or is it primarily a vertical offense, rebellion against God, violation of His character and commands, an assault upon His glory and authority? The answer that Scripture gives to this question, most memorably voiced in David’s Psalm 51, is unambiguous: sin is first and finally a vertical offense, a transgression against God Himself, before it is anything else. This vertical orientation of sin is not merely a theological refinement; it is the foundation upon which the entire doctrine of atonement rests, and it is the truth that every reduction of sin to horizontal categories or psychological dysfunction has obscured to the immeasurable impoverishment of the gospel’s proclamation.

The lesson also engages the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s definition of sin, “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God”, as the most precise and comprehensive confessional formulation the Reformed tradition has produced. This definition has the significant virtue of capturing both the active and passive dimensions of sin, both the doing of what God forbids and the failure to do what God commands, and thereby establishing that the moral standard applies not merely to behavior but to the entire orientation of the person: thought, desire, word, and deed, omission and commission alike. Understanding this definition in its full implications is essential to understanding the full scope of the human condition that the gospel has come to address.

A word about method: this lesson is more lexicographical and systematic in its approach than the preceding lessons, because the subject matter, the definition of sin, requires it. We are not following a narrative or a prosecutorial argument but assembling a comprehensive biblical portrait from multiple texts and multiple terms. The student who works carefully through this material will emerge with a vocabulary for sin that is richer, more precise, and more biblically grounded than the impoverished vocabulary of the therapeutic culture, and therefore better equipped both to understand the human condition accurately and to offer the gospel’s specific, targeted address to each dimension of it.

I. The Vocabulary of Sin

Why the Bible Uses Many Words for One Reality

A. The Richness of the Biblical Vocabulary as Theological Testimony

The first observation to make about the biblical vocabulary of sin is that its very richness is itself a theological statement. The fact that the Old Testament employs at least a dozen distinct Hebrew words for sin, and the New Testament employs nearly as many Greek terms, testifies to the multi-dimensional character of the reality being described. Sin is not a simple, one-dimensional phenomenon that can be captured in a single term. It is a complex, many-faceted reality that presents different aspects from different angles of observation: as the violation of a standard (missing the mark), as the crossing of a boundary (transgression), as the insurrection of a subject (rebellion), as the bending of what should be straight (iniquity), as the failure to discharge an obligation (debt), as the absence of trust (unbelief), and as the rejection of the law (lawlessness). Each term illuminates a genuine dimension of what sin is; none of them individually captures the full picture; and together they constitute the most comprehensive and exact account of human moral failure in the history of human thought.

This linguistic richness stands in striking contrast to the poverty of the vocabulary that contemporary culture has substituted for the biblical one. As we observed in Lesson 1, the therapeutic culture has largely replaced the biblical vocabulary of sin with the vocabulary of dysfunction, brokenness, and mistakes, terms that describe the horizontal and psychological dimensions of human failure without engaging the vertical and moral dimensions that the biblical vocabulary foregrounds. The reduction of sin's vocabulary is not merely a semantic change; it represents a theological impoverishment of the understanding of the human condition. A vocabulary that can only say "broken" where Scripture says "guilty," only "dysfunctional" where Scripture says "rebellious," and only "mistaken" where Scripture says "lawless" has lost the capacity to engage the full depth of the problem, and therefore the full depth of its solution.

The pastoral implication of this linguistic richness is significant: effective pastoral care requires a rich vocabulary of sin. A pastor who can only identify one type of spiritual problem, the same generic "sin" applied to every situation, is like a physician who knows only one diagnosis. The doctor who can distinguish between different diseases can prescribe appropriate remedies for each; the doctor who diagnoses everything as the same condition will address some problems effectively while missing the specific character of others entirely. The pastor who knows that Cain's problem in Genesis 4 was primarily *pesha* (willful rebellion against explicit divine warning) but that the disciples' failures in Mark 14 were primarily the result of weakness and *astheneia* (spiritual frailty) rather than deliberate defiance can offer specific, targeted, gospel-shaped counsel to each, drawing on the specific dimensions of the atonement's provision that address each specific form of the human problem.

B. The Organizing Principle: Sin Is Always Against God

Before surveying the individual terms, it is essential to establish the organizing principle that gives all of them their deepest meaning: every form of sin, however it is described and whatever Hebrew or Greek term is used to name it, is primarily and fundamentally an offense against God. This is the thesis of Psalm 51:4, the verse that the entire lesson takes as its governing text. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, arranged the murder of Uriah, covered up his crimes for months, and produced incalculable human suffering in his wake. And in his deepest confession, the prayer that has become the church's model of penitence across three millennia, he declares: "Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:4, NASB 1995).

This declaration is not a denial of the horizontal harm, Bathsheba was violated, Uriah was murdered, and a kingdom was destabilized by David's sin. It is a theological prioritization: the deepest and most fundamental dimension of David's sin was not its horizontal effects but its vertical character, it was an offense against God, committed in God's sight, against God's law and character and authority. The Creator whose image David bore as king was the primary wronged party; the human beings who suffered from his sin were the secondary victims of a primary rebellion against God. This vertical primacy of sin is not a peripheral theological refinement; it is the foundation of the entire doctrine of atonement. If sin were primarily a horizontal offense, the remedy would be

primarily horizontal, apology, restitution, reconciliation between persons. But if sin is primarily a vertical offense against God, then the remedy must be primarily vertical: a divine act of forgiveness, a provision of righteousness, an atonement that satisfies the justice of the God against whom the offense was committed.

The same vertical orientation is implicit in every term in the biblical vocabulary of sin. Missing the mark presupposes that God has established the mark, the standard of His own holiness, at which the creature is aimed. Transgression presupposes that God has drawn the boundary, the line of His command, across which the creature has stepped. Rebellion presupposes that God is the sovereign, the King whose authority the creature has defied. Debt presupposes that God is the Creditor, the moral Lawgiver to whom the creature owes perfect obedience and who holds the ledger of unpaid obligations. Lawlessness presupposes that God is the Lawgiver, the Author of the moral order whose rejection constitutes the creature's deepest self-identification. In every case, the term only makes sense in relation to God, and the offense that it describes is always, at its core, an offense against Him.

“Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.”

Psalm 51:4, NASB 1995

II. Sin as Lawlessness and Transgression

1 John 3:4; Romans 4:15; 5:14

A. Anomia: Sin Is Lawlessness (1 John 3:4)

The Apostle John provides the most direct and comprehensive definition of sin in terms of law in 1 John 3:4: “Every one who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness” (NASB 1995). The construction of the verse is remarkable: John does not merely say that sin involves lawlessness or that lawlessness is a component of sin. He makes an equation: “sin is lawlessness” (*hē hamartia estin hē anomia*). The two terms are identified with each other: to sin is to be lawless, and to be lawless is to sin. There is no form of sin that is not lawlessness, and there is no form of lawlessness that is not sin.

The theological implication of this equation is profound. If sin is lawlessness, the rejection of God's law as the governing authority of human life, then the remedy for sin is not primarily psychological (the healing of dysfunction) or social (the correction of unjust structures) but theological and legal: the forgiveness of the lawbreaker by the Lawgiver, the provision of a righteousness that the lawless creature cannot manufacture, and the transformation of the rebellious heart by the Spirit of the One whose law has been defied. John's equation of sin and lawlessness also establishes that sin is not fundamentally a matter of bad consequences or harmful outcomes; it is a matter of violated authority. A sin that “harms no one” in the horizontal dimension is still lawlessness if it violates the command of God, because the God against whom it is committed is not “one no one.” He is the One to whom all worship, obedience, and gratitude are owed.

The immediate context of 1 John 3:4 in the argument of the letter is also significant. John is writing to Christians about the incompatibility of genuine faith with the practice of sin: “No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him” (1 John 3:6, NASB 1995). John is not teaching sinless perfectionism; the same letter declares that “if we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves” (1:8). He is rather establishing that the person who has genuinely received the life of Christ cannot continue in the practice of sin as a settled way of life, because the Christ they have received is Himself the destruction of the devil's work of lawlessness (3:8). The definition of sin as lawlessness in verse 4 provides the theological grounding for this argument: the one who is united to Christ, who is Himself the fulfillment of all righteousness (Matthew 3:15), cannot continue in a settled pattern of the lawlessness that Christ came to destroy.

B. Parabasis: Sin as Transgression of a Known Boundary

The Greek parabasis (transgression, literally “a stepping across”) is Paul's preferred term for sin in its most legally precise and explicitly volitional dimension, the sin that occurs in the full knowledge that a boundary has been

established and in the deliberate decision to cross it. Paul uses parabasis most significantly in Romans 4:15 (“where there is no law, there is no transgression”) and Romans 5:14 (Adam’s sin as “transgression,” parabasis). The first usage establishes that parabasis requires the prior existence of a specific, known prohibition: transgression is only possible where a boundary has been drawn. The second usage applies the term to the paradigm case of all human sin, Adam’s deliberate crossing of the one boundary that God had established in the garden.

The significance of parabasis for the doctrine of sin is its emphasis on the knowing, volitional character of the sin it describes. Parabasis is not the sin of ignorance or weakness, it is the sin of one who knew the boundary, understood the prohibition, and chose to cross it anyway. This corresponds to the distinction that the Mosaic law drew between unintentional sin (covered by the sin offerings of Leviticus 4–5) and “high-handed” sin, the sin committed “with a high hand,” in full knowledge and willful defiance of the divine command (Numbers 15:30–31, for which no sin offering was prescribed). The distinction is not merely procedural; it reflects the biblical recognition that the gravity of sin is significantly affected by the degree of knowledge and willfulness with which it is committed. Adam’s parabasis was the paradigm of knowing, willful transgression, and as the federal head of the race, his sin carries its covenantal weight precisely because it was a genuine, fully voluntary, fully knowing act of defiance.

In the contemporary context, the concept of parabasis is directly relevant to the pastoral challenge of engaging with those who claim that their sin is not “really” sin because they did not know better, or because they were acting according to their nature, or because the cultural context made it seem acceptable. Scripture’s vocabulary of transgression is an answer to every such claim: where God has drawn a boundary and communicated it, through Scripture, through conscience, through the natural law written on the heart, through the accumulated testimony of the church’s moral tradition, the crossing of that boundary is parabasis, regardless of the cultural climate, the individual’s subjective sense of propriety, or the degree to which the transgression has become normalized in the surrounding society.

III. Sin as Missing the Mark and as Rebellion

Hamartia, Hamartanein, and Peshā

A. Hamartia: Missing the Mark of God’s Glory

The word group built on the Greek root *hamart-*, the noun *hamartia* (sin), the verb *hamartanein* (to sin), and the adjective *hamartolos* (sinful, sinner), constitutes the most extensive and versatile vocabulary of sin in the New Testament. The root meaning of “missing the mark” was a common Greek metaphor drawn from archery: the *hamartanein* was the shot that failed to reach its target. In the biblical usage, the target is the standard established by the holy character and revealed will of God, the standard that Paul summarizes as “the glory of God” in Romans 3:23 (“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”).

The mark-missing metaphor is theologically rich in ways that the English “sin” does not always capture. It establishes that sin is defined in relation to a standard, there is no “missing the mark” without a mark to miss. The mark, for Paul, is the glory of God: the perfect righteousness, holiness, and moral excellence that God’s own character embodies and that the image-bearing creature was designed to reflect. To fall short of this glory is not merely to fail to achieve a high standard; it is to fail to fulfill the purpose for which human beings were made. The creature was designed to glorify God by reflecting His character in every dimension of creaturely life, in thought, desire, word, and deed, and sin is the consistent, universal, comprehensive failure to do so. Every human being, in every moment of every day, falls short of this standard; and the aggregate of that falling-short is what Paul calls *hamartia*.

The significance of the mark-missing metaphor for the doctrine of total depravity is also considerable. If the mark is the glory of God, perfect, holy, comprehensive conformity to the divine standard in every dimension of life, then the missing of that mark is not a matter of degree but of category. The person who misses the target by a millimeter and the person who misses it by a mile have both missed it, and both shots are equally failures from

the perspective of the standard they were meant to hit. This is precisely Paul's point in Romans 3:23: there is no distinction, all have fallen short of the glory of God, not some more catastrophically than others but all categorically, all completely, all equally in need of the righteousness that only God can provide.

B. *Pesha*: Sin as Political and Relational Rebellion

The Hebrew *pesha* is the most explicitly relational and political term in the Old Testament vocabulary of sin. It describes sin not primarily as the violation of an impersonal standard but as the deliberate insurrection of a subject against a sovereign, the willful defection of a creature from its allegiance to the Creator. Isaiah 1:2 employs *pesha* in the most viscerally painful way: "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me" (NASB 1995). The parent-child relationship intensifies the betrayal: this is not the rebellion of strangers but of those who have been formed, nurtured, and sustained by the One against whom they have risen. God is not merely the Lawgiver whose commands have been violated; He is the Father whose love has been spurned.

David's penitential psalm employs the full range of Old Testament sin vocabulary, including *pesha*: "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions [*pesha*]" (Psalm 51:1, NASB 1995). The use of *pesha* alongside *hattath* (sin) and *avon* (iniquity) in the opening verses of Psalm 51 is not redundant but cumulative: each term contributes a distinct dimension to the comprehensive acknowledgment of the moral reality of what David has done. He has missed the mark (*hattath*), he has become twisted and guilty (*avon*), and he has risen in deliberate rebellion against the God who made him, called him, and sustained him (*pesha*). The fullness of the confession corresponds to the fullness of the sin.

The pastoral significance of *pesha* is particularly acute in a cultural context that has largely replaced moral and relational categories with psychological ones. The person who understands his sin as *pesha*, as rebellion against a God who has loved him, provided for him, and revealed His will to him, is in a fundamentally different posture than the person who understands it as a dysfunction to be managed or a symptom to be treated. The penitence that *pesha* produces is not the distress of a patient discovering a diagnosis but the grief of a child who has betrayed a parent, the broken-hearted recognition that one has responded to love with defiance and to grace with ingratitude. And it is precisely this grief, the godly sorrow that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 7:10 as producing repentance without regret, that is the immediate antecedent of genuine saving faith.

"Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand."

Isaiah 1:2–3, NASB 1995

IV. Sin as Debt, Iniquity, and Unrighteousness

Opheilema, Avon, and Adikia

A. *Opheilema*: Sin as Unpaid Moral Debt

The metaphor of debt is one of the richest and most pastorally potent in the entire biblical vocabulary of sin. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray for the forgiveness of their "debts" (*opheilēmata*, Matthew 6:12), He was employing a metaphor that frames the entire moral relationship between creature and Creator in terms of obligation and liability: human beings owe perfect obedience to God as a debt of love and gratitude, and every failure to render that perfect obedience incurs a moral liability that stands against them in the divine accounting. The debt metaphor captures several dimensions of sin that other terms do not foreground as directly.

First, the debt metaphor establishes that sin has an objective character independent of the sinner's subjective perception of it. A person may not feel guilty for a sin they have committed; the absence of the feeling of guilt does not eliminate the objective moral liability. The debt exists regardless of whether the debtor acknowledges it, just as a financial debt continues to accrue interest regardless of whether the debtor thinks about it. This is

pastorally significant because it establishes that the suppression of guilt, through rationalization, habituation, or the progressive searing of the conscience, does not eliminate the underlying moral liability but merely obscures it from the sinner's own awareness. The divine tribunal operates according to truth (Romans 2:2), not according to the sinner's self-assessment.

Second, the debt metaphor establishes the legal and transactional character of the atonement. When Jesus speaks of His life as a "ransom" (*lutron*, Matthew 20:28), when Paul describes the cancellation of the "certificate of debt" (*cheirógraphon*, Colossians 2:14) through the cross, when he declares that Christ became "a curse for us" to redeem us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13), the underlying metaphor is the payment of a debt by a substitute. The debt of perfect obedience that the creature owed and could not pay, the debt of punishment that sin incurred and the creature could not bear, has been paid by the One who owed no debt of His own, and the payment was made at the cross. The forgiveness of sin is the forgiveness of debt: a specific, objective, legally defined liability has been satisfied, and the debtor is released from the obligation that had been standing against him.

B. *Avon: Sin as Iniquity and Constitutional Distortion*

The Hebrew *avon*, translated "iniquity" in most English versions, adds a crucial dimension to the biblical picture of sin that the more forensic terms do not capture as directly: the sense of sin as a twisting, distortion, or perversion of the moral self. If *pasha* describes the relational and political character of sin (rebellion against a sovereign), and *hattath* describes the behavioral dimension (missing the mark), *avon* describes the constitutional dimension: the warping of the sinner's own moral being that sin produces and that the sinner carries as a condition as well as a liability.

Isaiah's use of *avon* in the great Servant Song of Isaiah 53 captures the atonement's answer to this dimension of sin with unforgettable power: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity [*avon*] of us all to fall on Him" (Isaiah 53:6, NASB 1995). The iniquity that is laid upon the Servant is not merely the guilt of specific transgressions but the *avon*, the twisted, distorted, morally bent condition, of the entire sinful race. The atoning Servant bears not merely the penalty of specific acts but the full weight of the constitutional distortion that sin has introduced into human nature. This is why the cross addresses not merely legal guilt but moral corruption: the One who was "wounded for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5) has borne the full reality of what sin is in all its dimensions.

The breadth of *avon*'s meaning, encompassing both the sinful act and the guilt and punishment it incurs, is illustrated with particular force in Genesis 4:13, where Cain cries out: "My punishment [*avon*] is too great to bear!" The same word that describes the iniquity of the act describes the punishment that flows from it, reflecting the biblical understanding that sin and its consequences are not merely causally related but organically united: the punishment of sin is the expression of what sin is, the bringing to light of the full weight of the moral reality that has been committed. Cain's *avon* is both the wickedness of his act and the exile and restlessness that its consequences produce, a unity that prefigures the eschatological judgment in which sin's full consequence will be fully expressed.

C. *Adikia: Sin as Moral Unrighteousness*

The Greek *adikia*, unrighteousness, moral wrongness, approaches sin from the angle of conformity to the standard of God's own righteousness. Where *dikaiousunē* (righteousness) describes the condition of conformity to the divine standard, *adikia* describes its opposite: the condition of one whose life does not conform to that standard, who does not render to God what is due, does not render to others what is due, and whose entire moral condition is characterized by the failure to be what the Creator designed the creature to be. Paul's great announcement in Romans 1:17, that in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed", is immediately followed by the announcement in 1:18 of the wrath directed against "all ungodliness and unrighteousness": the gospel of righteousness is the specific answer to the universal condition of unrighteousness.

The pastoral significance of *adikia* is that it frames sin not merely as a legal liability (debt) or a relational betrayal (rebellion) but as an ontological condition: the condition of a person who simply is not what God created him to be, who fails to embody the righteousness that God designed the image-bearer to reflect. This ontological dimension of sin requires an ontological remedy: not merely the forgiveness of specific transgressions but the transformation of the person, the renewal of the image that sin has distorted, the creation of a new humanity that reflects the righteousness of Christ rather than the *adikia* of Adam. Paul's description of regeneration as the renewal of the image of God "in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24, NASB 1995) is the specific answer to the condition of *adikia*: the image that sin has distorted is being restored, in the progressive work of sanctification, to the righteousness that is its proper character.

V. Sin as Unbelief and the Westminster Definition

Apistia and the Full Scope of the Moral Standard

A. *Whatever Is Not from Faith Is Sin: Romans 14:23*

Of all the terms in the biblical vocabulary of sin, perhaps none is more far-reaching in its implications than the concept of unbelief as the root and essence of sin. Paul's declaration in Romans 14:23, "whatever is not from faith is sin" (NASB 1995), is one of the most sweeping statements in the entire New Testament. In context, Paul is addressing the question of whether it is permissible to eat meat that has been offered to idols, and he is establishing that the moral quality of an action is determined not merely by its external conformity to a rule but by the orientation of the heart from which it proceeds. An action performed without the orientation of faith toward God, without the acknowledgment that God is the ultimate authority in whose sight and for whose glory all actions are performed, is sin, regardless of its external compliance with moral norms.

The theological implications of this principle are enormous. First, it establishes that the moral quality of a human action is not determined solely by its external conformity to a standard but by its internal orientation toward God. A person may perform an externally virtuous act, giving to the poor, telling the truth, honoring her parents, without the orientation of faith toward God, and that act, however admirable from a horizontal perspective, does not constitute genuine righteousness before God. This is the Reformed tradition's basis for the claim that the outwardly virtuous acts of the unregenerate, however genuinely beneficial to their recipients, are not meritorious before God: they are performed without the fundamental orientation of faith that genuine righteousness requires.

Second, the principle that "whatever is not from faith is sin" establishes unbelief as the root of all specific sins. If faith is the proper orientation of the creature toward God, the trust, reliance, love, and obedience that the Creator's character and commands deserve, then the absence of faith is the fundamental misorientation of the creature away from God. Every specific sin is an expression of this fundamental misorientation: the idolater who trusts a creature more than the Creator, the covetous person who trusts money more than God, the proud person who trusts in himself more than in the divine provision, and the self-righteous person who trusts in his own moral performance more than in the grace of Christ, all are expressing, in different specific forms, the same fundamental condition of unbelief that Paul identifies as the root of all that is not from faith.

Jesus identifies the work of the Holy Spirit as the conviction of the world "concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me" (John 16:9, NASB 1995). This statement from Jesus establishes that in the new covenant era, the paradigmatic form of sin is unbelief in Christ, the refusal to receive the One who is God's definitive answer to the human condition of sin. The unbeliever's fundamental problem is not any particular transgression or moral failure but the rejection of the One in whom the remedy for all transgression and moral failure is contained. And the Spirit's primary work of conviction is not the enumeration of specific sins but the driving home of this most fundamental sin, the refusal to believe in Jesus, so that the convicted sinner is driven to the very One whose rejection constituted the root of his condemnation.

B. *The Westminster Definition and the Comprehensiveness of the Moral Standard*

The Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition of sin in Question 14, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God", is the most precise and comprehensive confessional formulation of the biblical concept that the Reformed tradition has produced. The definition captures the full scope of the moral standard by identifying two distinct but equally important dimensions of sin: the failure to conform (want of conformity, sin of omission) and the active violation (transgression, sin of commission).

The category of "want of conformity", the failure to do what God's law requires, is what James has in mind in 4:17: "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin" (NASB 1995). This is the sin of omission: the failure to love, the failure to serve, the failure to speak when God's truth requires speech, the failure to act when God's justice requires action, the failure to believe with the fullness that God's grace provides. The sin of omission is perhaps the most consistently underemphasized dimension of sin in contemporary Christian culture, because it is invisible in a way that the sin of commission is not. The person who does not commit adultery, steal, or murder can easily congratulate himself on his moral record while failing, in a hundred unnoticed ways, to do the positive goods that the law of love requires. The Westminster definition closes this escape route: the absence of positive conformity to God's law is just as much sin as the presence of active transgression.

The category of "transgression", the active violation of what God's law forbids, is the more familiar dimension of sin and the one that the other terms in the biblical vocabulary most directly describe. Together, the two categories establish that the moral standard applies to the full range of human existence: not merely to behavior in its most visible forms but to thought, desire, word, and deed; not merely to the observable conduct of the outer life but to the invisible orientation of the inner life; not merely to what we do but to what we fail to do, not merely to the sins we commit but to the goodness we leave unembodied. The God of the Westminster definition is not the God of a minimal moral standard who is satisfied with the absence of gross transgression; He is the God of the Sermon on the Mount who calls His people to the perfect love of the Father ("Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Matthew 5:48) and whose law demands the entirety of the creature's heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The pastoral application of the Westminster definition is the pastoral application of the full moral standard to the full range of human life. A church formed by this definition will not be satisfied with a morality that consists of avoiding the most obvious transgressions while neglecting the positive goods that love requires; it will press toward the comprehensive conformity to the divine standard that the law commands and that only the grace of God, working through the Spirit's progressive sanctification, can produce. And it will never lose sight of the inescapable conclusion that this comprehensive standard drives home in every honest soul: we cannot achieve it. Not a single one of us, not a single day, not in a single thought, word, or action, renders to God the full conformity that His law demands. We need a Savior, not because we have committed some particularly dramatic sins but because we have never, not for a single moment, lived up to the standard of perfect love for God and neighbor that the Creator's character and commands require.

"Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 14

VI. The Godward Orientation of Sin

Why Sin Is Always Primarily Against God

A. The Vertical Dimension as the Theological Ground of Everything Else

We return, at the conclusion of this survey of the biblical vocabulary of sin, to the governing principle with which we began: sin is always, at its deepest and most fundamental level, an offense against God. This vertical orientation is not merely one feature of sin alongside others; it is the feature that gives all the other features their proper theological weight. Lawlessness is theologically serious because God is the Lawgiver. Transgression carries its full moral weight because God drew the boundary that has been crossed. Missing the mark is a moral catastrophe because God is the One who established the mark and designed the creature to hit it. Debt incurs its liability because God is the moral Creditor whose standards the creature has failed to meet. Rebellion is the worst

possible failure because the God against whom it is directed is the very One who created, sustained, and loved the rebels.

This vertical orientation has massive implications for the understanding of sin's gravity. If sin is primarily horizontal, primarily about harm to other human beings, then its gravity is determined by the degree of harm inflicted: great sins are those that cause great harm, small sins are those that cause little harm. But if sin is primarily vertical, primarily an offense against God, then the gravity of every sin is determined by the infinite worth of the One against whom it is committed. An infinite Being has been offended; an infinite moral standard has been violated; an infinite claim on the creature's obedience has been repudiated. The result is an infinite debt, a liability that no finite creature can discharge, because the payment of infinite debt requires infinite resources that no finite being possesses. This is why Paul declares in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is death", not merely inconvenience, not merely a reduced quality of life, not merely a therapeutic challenge, but death: the full, judicial, eternal consequence of an offense against an infinitely holy God.

The vertical orientation of sin also has profound implications for the understanding of forgiveness. Horizontal offenses can in principle be resolved by horizontal means: the wrongdoer apologizes, makes restitution, and reconciles with the wronged party. But an offense against God cannot be resolved by any horizontal transaction, however sincere or extensive. Only God can forgive an offense against God; only God can provide the righteousness that the violation of His standard has forfeited; only God can bear the penalty that His justice requires. This is the inner logic of the entire biblical doctrine of atonement: the God who has been offended is the God who provides the remedy for the offense, in the incarnation, in the cross, in the resurrection, in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to those who believe. The atonement is possible precisely because the God who is the Judge is also the Father who loved the world and gave His Son (John 3:16), the God who is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26, NASB 1995).

B. *Sin's Vertical Orientation and the Gospel's Vertical Provision*

Every dimension of sin in the biblical vocabulary corresponds to a specific dimension of the gospel's provision. Sin as missing the mark (*hamartia*), falling short of the glory of God, corresponds to the gospel's provision of the imputed righteousness of Christ, by which the sinner who cannot achieve the divine standard has it credited to his account through faith (Romans 4:5–6; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Sin as lawlessness (*anomia*) corresponds to the gospel's provision of the Spirit who writes the law on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27) and produces the willing obedience that lawlessness denied. Sin as transgression (*parabasis*) corresponds to the gospel's provision of Christ who fulfilled all the requirements of the law on behalf of His people (Matthew 5:17; Galatians 4:4–5). Sin as rebellion (*peshā*) corresponds to the gospel's provision of reconciliation, the restoration of the broken relationship between the rebellious creature and the offended Creator (Romans 5:10–11; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19). Sin as debt (*opheilema*) corresponds to the gospel's provision of redemption, the payment of the debt by the Substitute, the cancellation of the certificate of debt at the cross (Colossians 2:13–14). Sin as iniquity (*avon*) and unrighteousness (*adikia*) corresponds to the gospel's provision of sanctification, the progressive transformation of the distorted, unrighteous self into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

This correspondence between the vocabulary of sin and the vocabulary of salvation is not accidental. It is the structural logic of the entire biblical canon: the Bible's account of the human condition is organized around the creation, fall, and redemption structure, in which every dimension of the fall's damage is specifically and comprehensively addressed by the redemption's provision. The student who has worked carefully through the biblical vocabulary of sin and who now reads the New Testament's account of the gospel will find in every soteriological declaration the specific answer to a specific diagnostic term: justification for guilt, reconciliation for alienation, redemption for bondage, regeneration for death, and adoption for orphanhood. The gospel is not a generic spiritual uplift; it is the specific, multi-dimensional, term-by-term, category-by-category answer to the specific, multi-dimensional, term-by-term condition of fallen humanity that the biblical vocabulary of sin describes.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”

Romans 3:23–25, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Hamartia (ἁμαρτία)	The primary Greek word for sin in the New Testament, occurring over 170 times. Its root meaning is “missing the mark”, falling short of the standard that God’s own holy character and revealed law establish. In Paul’s usage, hamartia describes both the condition of sin (the inherited corruption and moral slavery that characterizes unregenerate humanity, especially in Romans 5–8) and specific acts of sin that flow from that condition. In John’s usage, hamartia is closely associated with lawlessness (anomia, 1 John 3:4) and encompasses the entire domain of the creature’s violation of the Creator’s standard. The cognate verb <i>hamartanein</i> (to sin) occurs in Romans 3:23 in the aorist tense (<i>pantes hemarton</i> , “all sinned”) pointing to the corporate, definitive sinning of the race in Adam, as well as in James 5:16 and 1 John 1:10 describing ongoing personal acts of sin in the life of the believer.
Anomia (ἀνομία)	Lawlessness; the willful rejection or transgression of the law of God. The Apostle John provides the most direct biblical definition of sin in terms of anomia: “Sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4, NASB 1995). The prefix a- is privative (negating) and nomos means law; anomia therefore describes the condition of being without law in the moral sense, not merely the ignorance of law but the willful disregard of it. In Matthew 7:23, Jesus declares to those who claimed to work miracles in His name, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” In 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 7, 8, the “man of lawlessness” and the “mystery of lawlessness” describe the ultimate expression of sin as the complete, defiant, organized rejection of divine authority. Anomia captures the essentially rebellious character of sin: not merely failure but defiance.
Parabasis (παράβασις)	Transgression; literally, a stepping across or stepping over a boundary. Used in Romans 4:15 (“where there is no law, there is no transgression”), Romans 5:14 (Adam’s “transgression” as the paradigm case), Galatians 3:19 (the law was added “because of transgressions”), and Hebrews 2:2 and 9:15. Parabasis implies the pre-existence of a clear, known boundary or prohibition, and the deliberate act of crossing it. It is therefore the appropriate term for sin in its explicitly volitional, knowing, and legally defined dimension, the sin that is not the product of ignorance or weakness but the deliberate violation of a known command. Adam’s sin is paradigmatically parabasis because he transgressed an explicit, specific divine command that he had received directly from God.
Pesha (פֶּשַׁע)	The primary Hebrew word for rebellion or transgression, occurring over ninety times in the Old Testament. Pesha describes sin in its most explicitly political and relational dimension: not merely the violation of an impersonal law but the deliberate insurrection of a vassal against a sovereign, a subject against a king, a creature against the Creator. It is used of the rebellions of nations against kings (1 Kings 12:19), of Israel against God (Isaiah 1:2; 48:8; 59:12–13), and of individuals in their most willful defiance of the divine authority (Psalm 51:1, 3, where David confesses his “transgressions”). Isaiah’s diagnosis of the human condition in Isaiah 1:2 employs <i>pesha</i> with devastating effect: “Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me.” The parent-child language intensifies the relational betrayal that <i>pesha</i> implies: this is not the rebellion of strangers but of those who owe their very existence to the One against whom they have risen.
Avon (עֲוֹן)	Iniquity; crookedness; the Hebrew term that describes sin as a twisting or perversion of what ought to be straight, a fundamental disorder or distortion of the moral self. Avon is used alongside <i>pesha</i> and <i>hattath</i> (the most common Hebrew word for sin, related to missing the mark) in many of the richest biblical confessions of sin, including Psalm 51:2 (“wash me thoroughly from my iniquity”) and Isaiah 53:5–6 (“He was crushed for our iniquities”). The breadth of meaning in <i>avon</i> encompasses both the sinful act itself and its guilt (the legal liability incurred by the act), and in many contexts it explicitly includes the punishment that the iniquity incurs (Genesis 4:13, where Cain says “My punishment [<i>avon</i>] is too great to

Term	Definition
	bear”). The pervasiveness of <i>avon</i> across the Old Testament’s vocabulary of sin reflects the biblical insistence that sin is not merely a behavioral failure but a constitutional distortion of the person who commits it.
Adikia (ἀδικία)	Unrighteousness; moral wrongness; the failure to conform to the standard of God’s own righteousness. Paul uses <i>adikia</i> in Romans 1:18 as the second term (alongside <i>anosios</i> , ungodliness) in his description of what God’s wrath is directed against: “all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” In 1 John 1:9, <i>adikia</i> is what God cleanses when He forgives: “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The term’s root meaning, the negation of <i>dikē</i> (justice, rightness), establishes that sin is not merely a deviation from social norms but a violation of the objective moral standard that God’s own character establishes. Adikia is the condition of the person who does not render to God, to others, and to himself what is rightfully due, who lives in a condition of chronic moral debt that only the righteousness of Christ can address.
Opheilema (ὀφείλημα)	Debt; a moral obligation owed that has not been discharged. Jesus uses the language of moral debt in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:12: “And forgive us our debts [<i>opheilēmata</i>], as we also have forgiven our debtors.” The debt metaphor is significant because it frames sin as a moral obligation that has been incurred but not discharged, a liability that stands against the sinner in the divine moral ledger. This framing has direct implications for the understanding of forgiveness (the cancellation of debt, Colossians 2:14), justification (the crediting of righteousness to the debtor’s account, Romans 4:5–6), and atonement (the payment of the debt by a substitute, Matthew 20:28). The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35) employs the debt metaphor with great theological sophistication: the servant who has been forgiven an incomprehensibly large debt (ten thousand talents) refuses to forgive a trivially small debt (one hundred denarii), and the parable’s judgment upon him is the judgment upon all who have received the gospel’s cancellation of infinite moral debt and refuse to extend proportional forgiveness to those who have wronged them.
Apistia (ἀπιστία)	Unbelief; the failure to trust God, to take His word as the final and sufficient authority, to rest in His character as wholly good and wholly reliable. In the biblical understanding, unbelief is not merely an intellectual deficiency but the root sin from which all specific sins grow, the fundamental disposition of the fallen heart toward God that expresses itself in every specific act of disobedience. Jesus identifies the work of the Spirit as the conviction of the world “concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me” (John 16:9, NASB 1995), making unbelief in Christ the paradigmatic form of sin in the new covenant era. Paul declares in Romans 14:23 that “whatever is not from faith is sin”, a sweeping principle establishing that the moral quality of any human action is determined by its relationship to faith in God: any action performed without the orientation of faith toward God is sin, regardless of its external conformity to moral standards. This principle grounds the Reformed tradition’s insistence that even the outwardly virtuous acts of the unregenerate are not genuinely meritorious before God.
Hattath (חַטָּאת)	The most frequently used Hebrew word for sin, occurring over 280 times in the Old Testament in its noun and verb forms. Related to the same root concept as the Greek <i>hamartia</i> (“missing the mark”), <i>hattath</i> encompasses both the specific act of sin and the guilt or punishment that follows from it. The term is used comprehensively: of sins against God (Exodus 10:16; Psalm 51:4), sins against other people (Genesis 20:9), and the entire condition of sinfulness that requires atonement (Leviticus 4–5, where the <i>hattath</i> offering, the “sin offering”, is prescribed for various categories of unintentional sin). The breadth of <i>hattath</i> ’s usage across the Old Testament reflects the comprehensive scope of the biblical doctrine of sin: it is not a narrow category reserved for egregious moral failures but the description of any and every deviation from the standard of the holy God who has revealed His will.

Term	Definition
Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 14	Question 14 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) provides the most precise and compact definition of sin in the Reformed confessional tradition: “What is sin? Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” This definition identifies two dimensions of sin with equal precision. “Want of conformity” (deficiency, lack of correspondence) covers sins of omission, the failure to do what God’s law requires. “Transgression” covers sins of commission, the active doing of what God’s law forbids. Together, these two dimensions establish that sin is not merely a matter of doing wrong things but equally a matter of failing to do right things, that the moral standard applies not only to what we do but to what we leave undone, not only to our actions but to our attitudes, desires, words, and the entire orientation of the heart. The definition is grounded in James 4:17 (“to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin”) and in Jesus’ summary of the law in terms of active love for God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40).

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the biblical vocabulary of sin is not an ancient curiosity but the most precise and comprehensive account of the human moral condition available in any literature or any discipline of human inquiry. The rich, multi-dimensional vocabulary that the Old and New Testaments employ, missing the mark, transgression, rebellion, iniquity, debt, unbelief, lawlessness, unrighteousness, is not the redundant repetition of a single simple idea but the deliberate, Spirit-inspired mapping of a complex, multi-faceted reality from multiple angles of observation. To know this vocabulary is to know the human condition with a precision and depth that no psychological, sociological, or philosophical framework can match, because this vocabulary was given by the One who made the human beings it describes and who alone has the moral authority to name what they have done.

We must also believe that the Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition of sin, "any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God", is not a legalistic reduction of the full-orbed biblical doctrine but its most precise and economical distillation. The definition is comprehensive (covering both omission and commission), precise (identifying the law of God as the standard), and pastorally essential (establishing that the moral standard applies to the full range of human existence, not merely to the most obvious transgressions). A congregation that has been thoroughly formed by this definition has been given the tools to apply the moral standard of Scripture to every dimension of personal, family, ecclesial, and social life, and therefore the tools to understand, with appropriate depth and precision, why the grace of the gospel is not merely helpful but absolutely, unconditionally necessary.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The survey of the biblical vocabulary of sin should produce in the believing heart a deepened, more multidimensional, more personally searching awareness of the full reality of one's own sinfulness before God. The person who has understood sin as lawlessness (*anomia*) will feel the affront to the divine authority of her own settled patterns of disobedience. The person who has understood sin as rebellion (*peshā*) will feel the relational betrayal involved in his own preference for his own will over the will of the Father who has loved him. The person who has understood sin as iniquity (*avon*) will feel the weight of the constitutional distortion in her own nature that produces the specific sins she commits. And the person who has understood sin as unbelief will recognize, perhaps more clearly than any of the other terms makes possible, the root from which all his specific sins grow: the failure to trust God with the full confidence and rest that His character and His grace deserve.

Desire, above all, the honest and Spirit-illuminated self-knowledge that this vocabulary is designed to produce, not for the purpose of morbid introspection or paralyzing guilt but for the purpose of driving the soul to the specific, corresponding provisions of the gospel. Every term in the biblical vocabulary of sin points forward to a corresponding term in the gospel's vocabulary of salvation; to know what you are is to know specifically what you need; and to know specifically what you need is to receive with appropriate gratitude and wonder the specific provision that the God of the gospel has freely made. The vocabulary of sin is not the end of the conversation; it is the preparation for the most important conversation of all: the conversation between the sinner who has been shown precisely what she is and the Savior who is precisely what she needs.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Create a personal glossary of the biblical terms for sin studied in this lesson: *hamartia*, *anomia*, *parabasis*, *peshā*, *avon*, *adikia*, *opheilema*, *apistia*, *hattath*. For each term, write the definition in your own words, identify the primary biblical reference(s) for that term, and then write a one-sentence description of how that specific dimension of sin manifests most recognizably in your own life. This exercise transforms a lexical study into a personal examination of conscience, the precise kind of self-knowledge that the Spirit uses to produce the specific repentance and the specific reception of grace that each dimension of sin requires.

- Read Psalm 51 in its entirety with fresh attention to the vocabulary of sin. Identify every distinct sin-word David uses in the psalm: *pesha* (transgressions), *hattath* (sin), *avon* (iniquity). Note how David moves through these terms without treating them as synonyms, each one adds a distinct dimension to the comprehensive acknowledgment of what he has done. Then identify the corresponding provisions of divine grace that David appeals to for each dimension: lovingkindness (*hesed*) for the relational betrayal of *pesha*, cleansing and washing for the moral pollution of *hattath*, the creation of a clean heart for the constitutional distortion of *avon*. Psalm 51 is the most complete model of the correspondence between the vocabulary of sin and the vocabulary of grace in all of Scripture.
- Memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition of sin (Q. 14) and its supporting texts: James 4:17 (sin of omission) and 1 John 3:4 (sin as lawlessness). Then apply the definition to a specific area of your own life where the sin of omission, the failure to do what you know the law of love requires, is more characteristic of your struggle than the sin of commission. The sin of omission is consistently the more invisible and more socially acceptable form of sin, and the Westminster definition's inclusion of "want of conformity" is the specific theological instrument designed to surface it.
- Study Romans 14:23 ("whatever is not from faith is sin") in its broader context of Romans 14:1–23. Paul is applying the principle of faith to the specific question of Christian liberty and conscience in matters that Scripture does not specifically address. What does this principle imply about the full range of Christian life beyond the specific context Paul addresses? Are there areas of your life, professional decisions, relational patterns, recreational habits, financial commitments, that you have not been conducting with the conscious, explicit orientation of faith toward God that verse 23 describes as the alternative to sin? What would it mean to bring every area of your life under the explicit governance of the faith-orientation that Paul describes?
- In your preaching or teaching, practice explicitly connecting the specific term for sin you are addressing to the specific provision of the gospel that addresses it. If you are preaching on hamartia (missing the mark), connect it to the imputed righteousness of Christ that gives the sinner what he could never achieve. If you are preaching on *pesha* (rebellion), connect it to the reconciliation that Christ has accomplished, the restoration of the broken covenant relationship. If you are preaching on *opheilema* (debt), connect it to the redemption that Christ has secured, the payment of the infinite debt at the infinite cost of the cross. The specificity of the connection between sin and salvation is not pedantry; it is the essential pastoral work of ensuring that the gospel is proclaimed as the specific answer to the specific human condition, rather than as a generic spiritual resource for people who need a bit of improvement.

Key Texts: 1 John 3:4; Romans 3:23; 14:23; Psalm 51:1–4; James 4:17; Matthew 6:12; Isaiah 53:5–6; Genesis 4:13; Isaiah 1:2; John 16:9; Romans 6:23; Ephesians 4:24

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, how would you have defined sin if someone had asked you? Would your definition have captured all the dimensions that the lesson's survey of the biblical vocabulary reveals? Which term or concept in the lesson's survey was most new to you, and which was most personally confronting when applied to your own life and condition?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read 1 John 3:4 in its context of 1 John 3:1–10. John makes the equation “sin is lawlessness.” What are the implications of this equation for the understanding of what sin is, in particular, what does it establish about the essentially relational and authoritative character of sin? How does the surrounding context of 1 John 3:1–10 develop the relationship between the definition of sin as lawlessness and the incompatibility of genuine faith with the practice of sin? What is the distinction John draws between the one who abides in Christ and the one who practices sin?
3. Read Psalm 51:1–5 carefully and identify every distinct word for sin that David uses in these opening verses. What is the specific nuance or emphasis of each term? Then identify every resource or attribute of God that David appeals to as the ground of his confidence in being forgiven: lovingkindness (*hesed*), compassion, the capacity to blot out, wash, and cleanse. How does the correspondence between the specific sin-vocabulary and the specific grace-vocabulary structure the argument of the psalm? What does the structure reveal about the relationship between the depth of honest self-knowledge about sin and the depth of genuine confidence in grace?
4. Read Romans 3:23 alongside Romans 3:21–26. What are the two grammatical tenses in verse 23 (the aorist of “sinned” and the present of “fall short”), and what does each tense contribute to the verse's theological meaning? How does the phrase “fall short of the glory of God” define the standard against which all human beings are measured? And how does the “being justified as a gift” of verse 24 function as the specific gospel answer to the “all have sinned” of verse 23?
5. Read James 4:17 and Romans 14:23 side by side. What aspect of the moral standard does each verse address that is often neglected in popular treatments of sin? What specific situations or contexts in the life of the believer does each verse most directly address? How do these two verses together establish that the moral standard is comprehensive, applying to what we do and fail to do, to what is done with faith and what is done without it?
6. Read Isaiah 53:4–6 and identify every distinct term for sin in the passage: transgression, iniquity, sin, going astray. For each term, identify the specific dimension of human sin that it describes. Then identify the specific atoning action that the Servant performs in relation to each: wounded, crushed, chastised, striped, bore. How does the multi-term structure of Isaiah 53:4–6 reflect the principle that the gospel's atoning provision is specifically designed to address each distinct dimension of what sin is?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that the vertical orientation of sin, its character as fundamentally an offense against God rather than primarily against other human beings, is the foundational theological truth that gives all the other dimensions of sin their proper weight and that determines the nature of the remedy the gospel must provide. Evaluate this claim. Is the vertical orientation of sin explicitly stated in Psalm 51:4, or is it an inference from the verse's broader context? What are the specific doctrinal and pastoral consequences of understanding sin as primarily horizontal rather than primarily vertical? And what are the specific consequences for the doctrine of atonement?
8. The Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition of sin as “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” has been criticized by some as too legal or forensic, as defining sin in terms of law rather

than in terms of relationship. Evaluate this critique. Is the law-based definition of sin theologically adequate, or does it need to be supplemented by relational and ontological categories? How does the lesson's survey of the biblical vocabulary (which includes relational terms like *pesha* and constitutional terms like *avon* alongside the more legal terms) bear on this question? Can a definition of sin in terms of law adequately capture the relational and ontological dimensions that *pesha* and *avon* describe?

9. Paul's declaration in Romans 14:23 that "whatever is not from faith is sin" has been applied by the Reformed tradition to establish that the outwardly virtuous acts of the unregenerate are not genuinely meritorious before God. Evaluate this application. Is it a legitimate extension of the principle Paul establishes in the specific context of Romans 14, or does it go beyond the text's intended scope? What are the theological and pastoral implications of this application for the way the church engages with the moral achievements of those outside the faith?
10. The lesson establishes a structural correspondence between each term in the biblical vocabulary of sin and a specific provision of the gospel: hamartia corresponds to imputed righteousness, anomia to the Spirit's law-writing, parabasis to Christ's fulfillment of the law, *pesha* to reconciliation, *opheilema* to redemption, *avon* and *adikia* to sanctification. Is this correspondence explicitly argued in the biblical text, or is it a theological inference drawn from the canonical structure? How would you argue for this correspondence from specific biblical texts? And what are the practical implications for preaching and pastoral care if the correspondence holds?
11. The lesson argues that the reduction of sin's vocabulary to the therapeutic categories of dysfunction, brokenness, and mistakes represents a theological impoverishment that makes the gospel less precisely addressed and therefore less urgently received. Evaluate this argument. Is the therapeutic vocabulary entirely inadequate to describe the human condition, or does it capture some dimensions of the biblical picture that the legal vocabulary misses? What would a vocabulary that genuinely integrates the biblical richness of the sin vocabulary (including relational, ontological, and legal dimensions) with appropriate engagement with the human experience of suffering and woundedness look like in practice?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. Working through the eight primary terms in the biblical vocabulary of sin, hamartia, anomia, parabasis, *pesha*, *avon*, *adikia*, *opheilema*, *apistia*, which three of these most directly describe the primary forms that sin takes in your own experience? For each of the three you identify, write a specific, honest description of how that form of sin manifests in your own life, and then identify the specific gospel provision that addresses it. This is not an academic exercise; it is the precise kind of Spirit-led self-examination that is the foundation of genuine repentance and genuine faith.
13. The Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition establishes that sin includes "want of conformity", sins of omission, as fully as it includes "transgression." Identify three specific areas of your own life where the sin of omission, the failure to do what love requires, what God commands, what your specific calling demands, is more characteristic of your spiritual struggle than the sin of commission. How has the cultural and ecclesial context you inhabit tended to treat these omissions: as minor shortcomings to be gradually improved upon, or as the genuine moral failures before God that the Westminster definition names them? What difference does it make to name them explicitly as sin?
14. The lesson notes that *pesha*, sin as rebellion against a loving sovereign, produces a fundamentally different quality of penitence than the more impersonal vocabulary of law-violation: not merely the distress of a defendant before a judge but the grief of a child who has betrayed a parent. How does the relational character of *pesha* shape the way you understand and experience your own repentance? Is your penitence primarily legal (a concern about consequences, a desire to escape penalty), primarily therapeutic (a concern about the damage sin has done to your psychological wellbeing), or primarily relational (a grief over the betrayal of the God who has loved you)? What would it mean for repentance to be shaped primarily by the relational dimension that *pesha* describes?

15. The principle of Romans 14:23, “whatever is not from faith is sin”, implies that the orientation of the heart from which an action proceeds is morally determinative, not merely the external conformity of the action to a standard. Identify a specific area of your life, professional activity, relational pattern, financial decision, creative pursuit, that you have been conducting with competence and external propriety but without the conscious, explicit orientation of faith toward God that verse 23 describes. What would it mean to bring that area of your life explicitly under the governance of faith: to do it consciously in God’s presence, for God’s glory, in dependence on God’s provision, and in conformity to God’s revealed will?
16. The lesson concludes with the principle that every term in the biblical vocabulary of sin has a corresponding provision in the gospel’s vocabulary of salvation. In your own experience of the gospel, which of these correspondences has been most clearly grasped and most deeply received? Which has been least clearly grasped, in the sense that you have understood the sin-vocabulary but have not yet fully received the corresponding gospel provision with the confidence and gratitude it deserves? What specific scriptural engagement, prayerful reflection, or pastoral conversation would help you receive more fully the provision that corresponds to the dimension of sin you have most clearly understood?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's time of prayer with the full text of Psalm 51, read slowly and meditatively as the model of the specific, multi-dimensional, vocabulary-rich confession that the biblical doctrine of sin is designed to produce. Move through the psalm attentively: verse 1's three-term opening (transgressions, iniquity, sin) as the comprehensive acknowledgment of the full range of moral failure; verse 4's vertical declaration ("Against You, You only") as the foundational theological truth about sin's orientation; verse 5's confession of original corruption ("in sin my mother conceived me") as the acknowledgment that the problem precedes any specific act; verse 7's appeal for cleansing ("purify me with hyssop") as the specific request for the remedy the Mosaic sacrificial system had promised; verse 10's plea for a new heart ("Create in me a clean heart, O God") as the recognition that the problem is constitutional and requires a creative divine act rather than a behavioral adjustment; and verse 17's description of the acceptable sacrifice ("a broken and a contrite heart") as the posture that the full engagement with the biblical vocabulary of sin is designed to produce. Allow the Spirit to use David's words as His instrument for producing in your own heart the specific, vocabulary-rich, vertically oriented, graciously received acknowledgment of sin that the psalm models.

Pray in Trinitarian adoration structured by the correspondence between the vocabulary of sin and the vocabulary of salvation. Begin with the Father, the God against whom every form of sin is primarily committed, who is simultaneously the God who provided the remedy for every form of sin in the sending of His Son: the God who is "just and the justifier" (Romans 3:26), the God who has not merely overlooked sin but has addressed every dimension of it through the cross. Thank Him specifically for each of the correspondences the lesson has established: for the imputed righteousness that addresses hamartia, for the law written on the heart by the Spirit that addresses anomia, for the reconciliation that addresses *pesha*, for the redemption that addresses *opheilema*. Each of these provisions was purchased at the cost of the Son's life, and each of them should be received with the specific gratitude that corresponds to the specific dimension of the problem it has addressed. Move to the Son, who is the specific answer to every specific term in the vocabulary of sin: the One who met the mark (hamartia), fulfilled the law (nomia), paid the debt (*opheilema*), bore the iniquity (*avon*), restored the relationship (*pesha*), and became righteous for those who were unrighteous (*adikia*). The cross is not a generic act of divine beneficence; it is the specific, multi-dimensional, term-by-term answer to the specific, multi-dimensional, term-by-term vocabulary of sin. Conclude with the Spirit, who produces in the believer the specific, ongoing, vocabulary-rich engagement with sin that genuine sanctification requires: convicting of specific sins by name, driving the soul to specific provisions of grace by name, and progressively transforming the lawless, rebellious, debt-laden, mark-missing, iniquitous, unrighteous sinner into the image of the One whose perfect conformity to every dimension of the Father's standard is credited to those who believe.

Pray together in three directions. First, for theological clarity and vocabulary: that the congregation, the ministry sphere, and the personal lives represented in this study would be increasingly formed by the biblical vocabulary of sin rather than by the therapeutic vocabulary of the surrounding culture, that the words "guilty," "rebellious," "lawless," and "in debt" would be received not as harsh or antiquated but as the precise, loving, Spirit-given words that describe what has separated us from God and what the gospel has come to address. Second, for the specific people in your care who are most clearly living in one of the specific dimensions of sin that the lesson has described: the lawless one who has organized his life around the explicit rejection of divine authority, the rebellious one who has turned against the God who loved her, the unbelieving one who cannot rest in the character and promises of God. Pray for the specific provision of grace that the specific dimension of sin requires. Third, for yourself: that the vocabulary of sin would not remain a set of theological categories in your mind but would become the instrument of a deepening, Spirit-empowered, gospel-motivated, increasingly honest engagement with the reality of what you are before God, and therefore an increasingly grateful, increasingly specific, increasingly wonder-filled reception of what God in Christ has provided for every dimension of that reality.

Close with a reading of Romans 3:21–26, received now with the specific awareness of what the "all have sinned" of verse 23 actually means in light of the full vocabulary of sin that this lesson has surveyed. "For all have sinned

[hamartia] and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.” The “justified as a gift by His grace” is the specific answer to the hamartia. The “redemption” is the specific answer to the *opheilema*. The “propitiation” is the specific answer to the moral liability that *anomia*, *parabasis*, *pesha*, and *adikia* have collectively incurred. The “through faith” is the specific answer to the *apistia* that lies at the root of all other forms of sin. Every term in the passage is the targeted response of the gospel to a specific term in the vocabulary of sin, and the whole passage together is the declaration that the God who made us for His glory has provided, in the death of His Son, everything that the fully diagnosed, vocabulary-rich, vertically oriented human condition requires.

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Hebrews 4:15–16, NASB 1995

Key Texts: 1 John 3:4; Romans 3:23–25; 14:23; Psalm 51:1–17; James 4:17; Matthew 6:12; Isaiah 53:4–6; Isaiah 1:2; John 16:9; Romans 6:23; 3:26; Hebrews 4:15–16; Ephesians 4:24

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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