

3 AREN'T MOST PEOPLE BASICALLY GOOD?

IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:

- Can human beings perform enough good works to merit heaven?
 - Have all people sinned against God?
 - What is sin?
 - Where did sin come from?
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GOOD WORKS

I imagine that most of you who are reading this book are trying to live a good life. What I mean is, you have a conscience that is active and reminds you of your need to avoid evil behavior. You know that there is a morality in the universe that transcends mere cultural and societal morays. When you step over the line and commit an evil deed, you feel bad and want to make things right. You might attribute your lifestyle to a good religious upbringing, loving and wise parents, a somewhat sheltered and protected childhood, self-discipline, or any combination of the above.

Do the following examples describe you? If you find a purse or wallet on the street, you do not automatically remove the money inside and keep it for yourself. Instead, you try to locate the owner and return the lost item to him or her because deep down you know it is the right thing to do. You make an effort to be friendly and kind to your neighbors and people you work with even though sometimes you may despise them. You are even kind to animals. You have given money to charity. When an attractive member of the opposite sex walks by, you normally resist the urge to lust.

When confronted by selfish desires, you often restrain them. You try to avoid unnecessary gossip even though a juicy morsel of it is hard to

resist. You try not to use profanity very often. You would never think of taking dangerous drugs into your body. You have never robbed a bank or killed another human being. You work hard at your job and try to be truthful even though every once in a while a small lie may slip out. After all, nobody is perfect.

In short, you would describe yourself as a very good person, maybe even a role model. You believe in the inherent goodness of humanity—even if most people do not meet up to your standards. You hold to the opinion that if people were just educated correctly and exposed to the right religious and moral norms, they would generally do what is right. You may think that humanity is slowly evolving into something even better. You anticipate that someday people will transform this world into a truly wonderful place where pride, greed, war, and cruelty are sad relics of a more violent past.

A SHATTERED WORLD

While all sane individuals would certainly approve of a society of good people, unfortunately the abundance of laws, police, judges, courtrooms, lawyers, jails, and prisons testify that something is wrong with humanity—and you and me in particular. This world is not as it should be. The good that people expect or at least hope to see in themselves and others is shattered by the reality of vice and malevolence. Although acts of human kindness and love at times can be found even in the darkest and foulest places on earth, humanity is gripped by a dark inner force that pulls it downward. We call this the problem of evil.

All Have Sinned

The Bible addresses this problem very clearly. Remember, we have already seen that the Bible is a reliable testimony of God's view of things. The apostle John writes, "Every kind of wickedness is sin" (1 John 5:17). Isaiah, the prophet who predicted Jesus Christ's virgin birth, declares, "We had all gone astray like sheep, each taking his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). That includes even the very best among us. The apostle Paul states, "For though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not

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want—that is what I do” (Romans 7:19). Is it not a bit shocking that a famous early church leader like St. Paul admitted to having evil urges? He also tells us, “All have sinned and lack God’s glory” (Romans 3:23).

Even the best of us must acknowledge that we have sinned against God. Sin is falling short of God’s commands or transgressing the laws of God. While we may not have broken all the holy commandments, even if we transgress in just one area, we are justifiably considered “sinners.” Read what the apostle James writes: “You see, anyone who keeps the whole of the Law but trips up on a single point, is still guilty of breaking it all” (James 2:10).

Let me try to show you what this means. Imagine you are placed in a shiny new steel cage. A chain is lowered from a tall construction crane and attached to the top of the cage. The crane then hoists you seventy-five feet into the air. How would you feel? Safe? Insecure? You know, if just one of the links in the chain snapped, you would be in big trouble. In the same way, if we break even one of God’s commands—if we lie, if we steal, if we covet, if we disobey our parents, if we take the Lord’s name in vain—we become a sinner needing mercy and grace. Furthermore, once we have broken a command, there is no way we can save ourselves.

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Two Ways to Commit Sin

There are basically two ways we can commit sin: (1) failing to do what God commands and (2) doing something God forbids. Sin can be committed in word, deed, or even thought. We can seem to be conforming to what God wants on the outside but actually rebelling on the inside! The story is told of a man with a strong-willed ten-year-old son. As they were about to drive to a store, the father told his son to sit down and fasten his seat belt. The child ignored the request and was jumping around in the backseat. The father repeated his instructions, this time with more sternness. Still the boy continued his antics in the backseat. Finally, the father threatened punishment if his son refused to comply. Recognizing that he was perilously close to having a painful experience, the youngster sat down and buckled up. However, he wanted to let his father know exactly how he felt and added the following comment: “Daddy, I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m still jumping around on the inside.”

The Bible tells us that nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight, so all our sins are visible to the Lord. Have you ever thought how God must feel being constantly exposed to humanity's sins? It must be very sad! If you or I see or hear something that offends us or is too awful to bear, we close our eyes or cover our ears. If it is on television or the radio, we simply shut the device off. God, on the other hand, observes all the wickedness in the world in one huge, penetrating, all-knowing, unceasing glance. You and I could not bear it.

Sin's Origin

You might be asking where sin and evil in general came from. The Bible teaches that a beautiful and mighty angel named Lucifer and a third of the angelic beings in heaven rebelled completely against God. Pride appears to be the main source of Lucifer's revolt. You see, the Lord created the angels and humankind with free will. He did not want robots inhabiting heaven or earth but thinking and feeling creatures capable of making free choices. Although powerful, Lucifer and his forces were no match for an omnipotent God. Their sin justifiably had serious consequences, and they lost their place in heaven. Some of the sinful angels were immediately consigned to a place of eternal separation from God called hell. Lucifer, twisted and warped by evil, exists now as the malevolent being we know as Satan. He rules over the rebellious angels not immediately consigned to hell and who now inhabit the world as demons.

Satan and his demons have one principal goal: to thwart the purposes of God. Satan deceived Adam and Eve into rebelling against God too. This brought sin into the human race. In their original state, Adam and Eve were able not to sin. After they rebelled, they were not able not to sin. This is what it means to have a sinful nature. Because Adam and Eve were the progenitors of the human race, they passed onto all their descendants—you and me included—a sinful nature. Given time, everybody sins. It might be a lie or stealing or taking God's name in vain, dishonoring our parents, or any number things.

The Bible teaches that this sin in us alienates us from God. Though we have physical life, we walk in spiritual death. In other words, our relationship with our Creator is broken, and we ourselves cannot repair it. Notice what the apostle Paul tells us: "And you were dead, through the crimes and sins which used to make up your way of life" (Ephesians 2:1).

Even if you consider yourself to be a good person, the truth is that you too have erred and stand condemned as a sinner. Your sins might not be as obvious to the world as those of a notorious terrorist, rapist, gang member, or bank robber. But what about pride in your own good works? The Bible says that our own efforts at goodness are actually like filthy rags in God's sight (Isaiah 64:6). What about impure sexual thoughts? Jesus taught that even if a man lusts after a woman only in his heart, in God's sight it is as though he has committed the physical act of adultery (Matthew 5:28). What about feelings of hatred for another person? The Scriptures teach us that, in God's sight, hatred for a fellow human is equivalent to murder (1 John 3:15).

The Slippery Slope Into Sin

Poor Decisions

Some of you reading this book once tried to live a good life but failed miserably. Please understand—I do not write this to condemn you. I too have made many mistakes and need God's forgiveness. At some point in your life, perhaps against your better judgment and the advice of people who tried to warn you, you decided to just give in to the wants and desires of your mind and body. Sadly, you discovered that you were on a very slippery slope.

Each day, you may find yourself sliding deeper and deeper into behaviors that you once thought only really bad people practiced. You have been in and out of many immoral sexual relationships. You find that alcohol or nicotine or some other kind of substance has become a dominant force in your life—a chain from which you cannot break free. You have lied so many times that it's hard now for you to simply speak the truth. Profanity and obscene language color your once thoughtful words. Perhaps you have given into violent urges and have physically harmed others. You have alienated people that loved or still do love you because of your obsessive desire to have it your way. What once brought a sense of shame and guilt now seems to have no effect on you.

Still, you may say, "I may be bad, but there are people far worse than me!" Or you might assume that there is no way out of your lifestyle. "It's too late for me to change!" The good news, dear reader, is that although you cannot find strength to change, Christ can change you!

Stolen Virtue

You may be someone who encountered an unexpected situation that has led to great heartache. You faced a dilemma of monumental proportions and made a quick choice, thinking it was the right thing to do. However, now you are ashamed of it and haunted by it. You have regretted it for years. You know now that you acted unwisely, and you feel that what goodness or virtue you might have had was stolen from you.

I remember talking to a man who had served as a soldier and found himself thousands of miles from home in a foreign land. It was a bloody conflict with much guerrilla activity. One day on patrol, he and his comrades were confronted by a group of local women and children who came rushing upon them. In another time and place, the soldiers would have thought nothing of it or even stopped to converse with them, perhaps offering some food supplies. However, in this war women and even children were sometimes strapped with lethal explosives. The man and his companions had only seconds to decide what to do.

The man confessed that he and the other soldiers felt their lives were in danger, opened fire, and killed them all. So much for trying to live a good life. How do you bounce back from such an experience? For years the man was unable to sleep soundly and constantly rehearsed in his mind the awful events that claimed his innocence. He felt that nothing could ever remove his shame and remorse.

Consider a young lady from West Africa, raised in a traditional home. She reaches her eighteenth year and has high hopes that someday she will marry, raise a family, and make something of her life. But for now, her family has needs. Her parents barely earn enough to provide food and clothing for her younger brothers and sisters. They encourage her to find work. One day a friend tells her about employment opportunities in Europe. She discovers that a certain man will pay her way to a European country if she will only agree to work for him for a year or so. "What a deal!" she thinks. As soon as she repays him, she can start to save and send money home. How proud her father and mother will be of her. Without thoroughly investigating the background of the individual making the generous offer, she contacts him and signs a contract of sorts.

All the arrangements are made, and soon the date arrives for her departure to Europe. It is a big day, and her family gathers to wish her well. Upon arriving in Europe, she is taken from the airport to an old dilapidated

apartment building where other young women from several countries are housed. The neighborhood is dirty and unkempt. This is not the Europe she dreamed of. Then she is repeatedly raped, threatened with injury or death if she tries to escape, and forced to sell sexual favors to men on the street to earn her living. She is terrified at first but eventually goes about her duties with little protest, realizing that she is trapped. She feels dirty, abused, like a slave, and no end is in sight. Her virtue has been stolen. Now she finds herself experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and other forms of “entertainment.” Her parents wonder why she does not write or call.

Final Assessment

One of the most important biblical truths is that humanity is tainted and warped by sin. People who try hard to do what is right and genuinely make an effort to improve the lot of others may resent that assessment of humankind. But the reality is that all of us have sinned against God. Because of sin, we hurt ourselves and others.

Our wrongdoing also creates a huge debt that we can never possibly pay. Sin affects us at every level, but its most devastating effect is that it separates us from God. That means the consequences of sin are felt not only now in this world but also potentially in the age to come. I hope you will continue to read, because in chapter four we will talk more about the subject of life after death.

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Questions for individual or group study:

1. *Do you remember when it dawned on you that the world is far from an ideal place? How did you feel?*
2. *Think about the following statement from the chapter: "Even the best of us must acknowledge that we have sinned against God." Do you agree with the author? If so, why? If not, why?*
3. *Have you or do you know somebody who has become trapped in a sin that holds a tight grip?*
4. *How do you think God feels about the problem of evil in the world?*