

October 2017

Frank W. Nelte

### **WHAT IS SIN?**

We are familiar with James 5:14-16 regarding the sick being anointed. In this context of anointing, James made a very interesting statement. After a minister has prayed for and anointed the sick person, James said the following:

And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and **if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.** (James 5:15)

What did James mean by saying that the anointed person's "sins" would be forgiven? **What is sin?** And **what is forgiven?** And **why** did James say "if he has committed sins"? Isn't it a given that we all sin, and that all of us need to have sins forgiven?

**Ask your friends in any of the Church of God groups to explain James 5:15 to you. Ask them to tell you what sin is. Ask them if they accept 1 John 3:4. Here is this verse.**

Whosoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for **sin is the transgression of the law.** (1 John 3:4)

With this definition of sin at hand, ask your friends in the Church how 1 John 3:4 applies to James 5:15. Then ask your friends an interesting question: **can something that does not break or reject any law of God still be sin?** Or is it impossible for something that doesn't break any laws to somehow be sin?

**How do we establish whether or not something is sin? Do we look at that something (actions, speech, conduct, behavior, evil thoughts, etc.) and then evaluate it against all of God's laws to see whether or not it breaks or violates any of those laws? And if we cannot find any law of God that is being violated must we then conclude that therefore sin is not involved?**

Let's go back to James 5:15, where James tells us that when a sick person is anointed then "if he has committed sins they shall be forgiven him". So here are some questions to ask your friends:

- 1) Does anointing forgive sins of **adultery**?
- 2) Does anointing forgive sins of **lying, stealing and coveting**?
- 3) Does anointing forgive sins of **idolatry and taking God's name in vain**?
- 4) Does anointing forgive sins of **Sabbath-breaking**?
- 5) Does anointing forgive sins of breaking **any of the 10 commandments**?

The obvious, inescapable answer to all of these questions is "**no**"!

There is no way that any of these sins (idolatry, adultery, Sabbath-breaking, etc.) will be forgiven when a sick person is anointed! **The purpose of anointing is not to forgive sins.** You cannot get anointed to remove sins of adultery or stealing or lying. And we all obviously know this.

But these things are all "transgressions of the law" as per 1 John 3:4, which means they are all

indisputably sins. Now if these particular "transgressions of the law" are not forgiven when the sick person is anointed, then the question arises:

Are **any** "transgressions of the law" actually forgiven when a sick person is anointed? Are **any** of the sins that are identified by 1 John 3:4 actually forgiven when someone is anointed?

To state the answer to these questions very plainly:

**Anointing never forgives any sin that is identified by 1 John 3:4, not one!**

There is only one way that any sins that are identified by 1 John 3:4 will be forgiven by God. And that one and only way is **for the sinner to repent**, to totally change his way of thinking regarding obedience to God and regarding those sins that are identified by 1 John 3:4.

Now **asking for anointing** when we are sick **is not repentance** regarding any sins that are identified by 1 John 3:4. Asking for anointing comes from a desire for relief from pain and suffering due to sickness or disease or injuries. But asking for anointing is not motivated by a desire to repent of coveting and lusting and lying and gossiping and stealing, etc., is it?

Asking for anointing is asking for mercy in circumstances of suffering. But that desire for mercy and for help has nothing to do with repentance. In fact, very, very few people who ask for anointing because of sickness or disease would even remotely examine themselves for **gossiping** or for **slandering** or for **covetousness**.

But those are some of the kinds of thought processes (i.e. examining ourselves for these things) which would strongly imply an attitude of repentance. But such thoughts of examining ourselves for covetousness and gossiping, etc. are seldom present when people request anointing.

The most some of the people who seek anointing might get to doing is that they ask themselves: **I wonder what I did wrong or foolishly** to bring this affliction upon myself? And that is a **very good start**, looking at ourselves to where we might be the cause of our own health problems.

But that "good start" is not the whole picture as far as real repentance is concerned. With real repentance we don't compartmentalize our problems. Repentance doesn't restrict itself to examining one specific area, that one specific area being a focus on finding the cause of our health problem. A focus on finding causes for our health problems is very good, but that is only a part of the whole picture when we are talking about real repentance.

If we are talking about real repentance, then no area of our lives is off limits. If we are talking about real repentance then we examine every single area of our lives, **no matter how unrelated that area may appear to be to the health problem** with which we are dealing. But only very few of the people who request anointing will take this approach.

Yes, there are no doubt some or even many people who are truly repentant when they ask for anointing for a health problem. They have examined themselves, and their attitudes towards God and towards fellow man are already fine. And they have honestly tried to identify the real cause of their health problem, with a determination to in future not repeat conduct or diet, etc. that led to their health issue. They have examined themselves not only for: am I eating the wrong things or am I doing things that are bad for my health? They have **also** examined themselves for: **am I thinking the wrong thoughts**, and are there things that I am doing wrong **in my conduct with other people**? They really do have a repentant attitude.

They do this as a part of their regular way of life. They always function this way. For them this process of examining themselves is not something they only start doing when they are sick and in need of healing. They do this all the time, because they are truly repentant.

So when someone has such a truly repentant attitude when they ask for anointing, **then** any sins that are identified by 1 John 3:4 are **also** forgiven by God at that time.

But **in this situation** the anointing has nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins that amount to "transgressions of the law". The sins identified by 1 John 3:4 are not forgiven because the person asked for anointing; those sins are forgiven because the person truly repented with his or her whole being, meaning that the individuals changed the way they use their minds regarding their relationship with God. They willingly and deliberately changed their way of thinking, making this repentant way of thinking a regular part of the way they use their minds all the time.

But this is not the type of situation that James was addressing in James 5:15. James was focused on the sickness or disease from which a member of God's Church was suffering. In these verses here James was not thinking of ungodly conduct or behavior when he referred to "sin".

Real repentance was simply not the subject when James wrote James 5:14-16. James wasn't at this point thinking of sins that break any of the ten commandments.

So in plain language:

When James wrote James 5:15, he was not thinking of John's reference regarding sin in 1 John 3:4. **James was thinking of a different category of sins** than those that are addressed by 1 John 3:4.

## **DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS FOR SIN**

We all surely know that the Bible gives us several different statements that we have at times referred to as "definitions for sin". For example:

And he that doubts is damned if he eats, because *he eats* not of faith: for **whatsoever is not of faith is sin**. (Romans 14:23)

So we have said that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" is another way we can "define" sin. As I will show shortly, none of these expressions are actually "complete" definitions for the concept of sin. But for now the question is:

What does this definition "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" have to do with the definition "sin is the transgression of the law"? Looking at these two statements side by side, what do these two statements about sin have in common? Do you know?

The answer is:

**These two statements regarding sin have nothing in common! They have no common ground!**

Whether or not something is "of faith" has nothing to do with whether or not a law of God has been transgressed. This statement has to do with how a person thinks, and how their conscience works. In fact, **the law of God doesn't even feature** in the definition "whatsoever is not of faith is sin". The fact that the law is not even a consideration in this statement about sin is highly significant and this

significance is almost always overlooked.

When we can "define" sin without so much as even in any way referring to the law of God, what does that tell you about sin? Do you know?

It tells us that **the concept of sin is not limited to the law!** It tells us that **people can sin before God without breaking any law of God.** It tells us that sin is in fact independent of the law of God. Yes, the law of God can define **certain aspects** regarding sin, but **the law cannot confine or restrict the concept of sin**, let alone define it completely. The concept of sin goes way beyond the confines of the law.

I'll explain this in a moment. But let's look at another one of the definitions of sin.

Therefore **to him that knows to do good, and does *it* not, to him it is sin.** (James 4:17)

So we ask the same question:

What does this statement "to him that knows to do good, and does *it* not, to him it is sin" have to do with the statement "sin is the transgression of the law"? What do these two "definitions of sin" have in common? Do you know?

And again the answer is:

**These two statements regarding sin also have nothing in common! They have no common ground!**

Whether or not we don't do something we know "to be good" has nothing to do with whether or not a law of God has been transgressed. So again, **the law of God doesn't even feature** in the statement "to him that knows to do good, and does *it* not, to him it is sin". This significance is likewise almost always overlooked.

By the standard of James 4:17 it doesn't require any law of God to be broken for there to be sin.

Each one of these three "definitions of sin" has a different focus and perspective. One way to see this is to recognize that:

- 1 John 3:4 focuses on "**the outward man**", on what we do.
- James 4:17 and Romans 14:23 focus on "**the inward man**", on how we think. These two distinct focuses are independent of one another.

[We could also look at 1 John 5:17, which says "all unrighteousness is sin", but this is basically already covered by 1 John 3:4. So we need not discuss this particular verse in our context.]

So back to our original question:

**What is sin?**

Sin is a little bit like the 3000-year old story of **a group of blind men being allowed to touch an elephant** and then being asked to describe what an elephant is like. You probably know the story. It goes more or less like this (this is a paraphrase of the version presented in Wikipedia):

The first person touched the **trunk** and said: "this being is like a thick snake". The second blind man touched the elephant's **ear** and said: "it seems to be like some kind of fan". The third blind man touched the elephant's **leg** and said: "the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk". The next blind man placed his hand upon the elephant's **side** and said: "the elephant is a wall". The next man felt the elephant's **tail** and said: "it is like a rope". The last blind man felt the elephant's **tusk** and said: "an elephant is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear".

Each one of those blind men is only able to grasp a rather limited idea regarding what an elephant is really like. And their limited perceptions end up being **gross distortions** of the whole picture. And they may even end up arguing vehemently with the other blind men who disagree with them, when in fact none of them have the correct picture.

**But that is all too often what we in the Church of God are like when we present our personal views regarding: what is sin? We seldom see the whole picture. We are like those blind men describing different features of an elephant.**

[As an aside: This is also typical of **people who argue about prophecies** ... their particular ideas are usually like the blind man who has touched nothing other than the elephant's ear or tail or tusk. And their conclusions are almost always extremely flawed.]

The person focused on 1 John 3:4 is like the blind man touching the elephant's **trunk**. The person focused on James 4:17 is like the blind man touching the elephant's **ear**. And the person focused on Romans 14:23 is like the blind man touching the elephant's **tusk**. Each of these definitions is totally independent of and distinct from the other definitions.

To get the correct picture we not only need to consider all of these definitions, but we also need to put each one into **the correct perspective**, like correctly placing the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.

None of these definitions is wrong, and I don't mean to imply that. But neither do any of them cover the whole picture. There is far more to the concept of sin than just looking at "the trunk, the ear, and the tusk".

## **A NEW DEFINITION FOR SIN**

**None of these "definitions for sin" cover the whole picture regarding "what is sin?". Transgressions of God's laws are most assuredly sins, even as the trunk is assuredly a significant part of an elephant. But even when no laws of God are being transgressed, then neglecting to do the good we understand we should or could do is also sin, even as the elephant's ear is assuredly also a significant part of the elephant. And likewise, even when transgression of any laws of God is not at stake, violating our consciences is also sin, even as the tusks are likewise a significant part of an elephant.**

So let me give you a new, non-biblical definition for sin, which I believe covers "the whole elephant". Then I will show that this new definition was in fact already presented by the Apostle John in a slightly different way. Are you ready for the real definition for sin?

**Sin is anything and everything that God doesn't want around for all future eternity! Sin refers to things God doesn't like and doesn't want in His environment.**

The primary concern is not whether or not something breaks any law of God. The primary concern really

is: if God doesn't like something and doesn't want it around, then it is sin!

All of the things that break God's laws are **obviously** things that God doesn't want around. They are obviously sins. God has given laws to spell out that God will not put up with any violations of the principles presented in those laws. Those principles express **the only way of thinking** that God will accept in His presence for all future eternity.

But understand this:

God has given **laws that cover the principles** of interpersonal relationships which God desires to see applied between all members of the ultimate Family of God, and also amongst all the angelic spirit beings.

**But the laws which God has enacted don't cover every single little aspect of an individual's existence.**

God's laws address what we may or may not do or must do. But **God's laws don't address what we are like as individuals!** God's laws don't address personal attributes and traits that God doesn't really like, **even if all of God's laws are observed.**

For example, God's laws don't address an individual's personality. We have the freedom to express ourselves as we choose to do. But it should be clear that **God is not prepared to have certain types of personalities in His presence** for all future eternity! Had you considered that?

In the course of your life you have surely come into contact with certain people whom you just didn't like, right? That's happened to all of us. On our human level, that didn't mean that the people we didn't want to be around were necessarily bad people. Some of them may even have been better people than we are, but we just felt uncomfortable around them and preferred not to be with them. You surely know the feeling.

The same principle is also true for God! **There are certain types of personalities which God is not prepared to have around.**

For example:

It doesn't break the ten commandments to be fearful. But under no circumstances is God prepared to put up with fearful individuals in His presence! And so **"the fearful" are before God guilty of sin**, even without breaking any of the ten commandments; and they will be thrown into the lake of fire! That's what Revelation 21:8 tells us. In fact, the fearful are listed first, ahead of murderers, whoremongers and sorcerers.

Think about that!

The fearful **haven't sinned according to 1 John 3:4**, and **yet they are sinners**, and God most certainly doesn't want them around for all future eternity. So therefore they will be burned up.

Sin is anything and everything that God doesn't like and doesn't want around for future eternity!

There are other personality traits that also don't necessarily break any of God's laws, but they too are traits with which God is simply not prepared to co-exist. Here are some examples:

God is not going to have individuals who are hesitant and insecure and **double-minded** in His Family,

because such individuals are "unstable" (see James 1:8). In addition, God is not prepared to have anyone with a **constantly critical attitude** in His Family, because a critical attitude is an expression of how Satan thinks and reasons. Also, God is not going to have anyone in His Family who is not in full control of his or her own feelings. Think of these things the next time you are in the presence of someone with a constantly critical attitude ... you are in the presence of someone who thinks the same way that Satan thinks.

God will not have people in His Family **whose obedience is not whole-hearted**, who do only what is required of them. Furthermore, God will not have anyone who is a scobberlotcher in His Family, because God hates laziness. And there will be no gobermouch in God's kingdom because such people invariably mess up other people's lives.

Furthermore, consider Jesus Christ's statement regarding: "does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? **I don't think so**" (see Luke 17:9). Keep in mind that we are here talking about someone who has done everything he was commanded to do, someone who didn't break any laws. But now notice Jesus Christ's next statement:

So likewise you, when you shall have **done all those things which are commanded** you, say, **We are unprofitable servants**: we have done that which was our duty to do. (Luke 17:10)

Understand that **individuals who have not broken any laws may still be "unprofitable" in God's view**. They may be "unprofitable" because of other things that have nothing to do with "transgressing the law". And "unprofitable servants" will not be around for future eternity.

**The point is: God will not have individuals in His Family who may well be compliant with all of God's laws, but who nevertheless have certain negative or undesirable character traits or attributes.**

**Before God all unpleasant characteristics are sin, even when those characteristics don't break any of the ten commandments (i.e. characteristics that are unpleasant to God).**

God is not going to put up with any unpleasant characteristics from anyone. That's not something God needs in His environment. And so the fearful, who from our perspective may in many cases well be the most harmless souls of all, are at the top of the list for those who will be in the lake of fire.

How do I know that God considers all undesirable characteristics to be sin? That's easy when you understand the principles underlying Jesus Christ's words.

Jesus Christ said: **"I and My Father are one"** (John 10:30). They are two individuals who have the same type of character. They both like the same things, and They both dislike the same things. Personality traits that God the Father dislikes are also disliked by Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ doesn't have any trait or attribute or characteristic that God the Father personally doesn't like, but is willing to put up with for the sake of peace. That's not how things work in God's presence.

God the Father and Jesus Christ don't disagree on anything. That's what it means for Them to be "one"! They always see 100% eye-to-eye. Each One of Them likes everything about the Other One, without any reservations. In mind and spirit and character and attitude and likes and dislikes They are "one".

They have always had that type of relationship between Themselves. God the Father is in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is in God the Father ... that's what Jesus Christ said in John 17:21.

When God the Father and Jesus Christ then determined to create the Family of God, one of the conditions was that every single member of that Family would also have the identical character and personality, which would enable every member of that Family to then also be "one" with both God the Father and with Jesus Christ.

When Christ said "I in them" (John 17:23), He was saying that true Christians would have the same character and personality that He has. And when Christ said "that they also may be one in Us" (John 17:21), He was saying that true believers will have the same type of personality and character that God has, that true believers will be **100% compatible** with God the Father and with Jesus Christ in both their way of thinking and also in their personality.

Different personalities can never be "**one**".

God does not accept into His presence individuals who are sarcastic or cynical or critical or competitive or selfish or quarrelsome or argumentative or manipulative or arrogant or deceptive or grouchy or lazy, etc. These things don't necessarily break any of the ten commandments, but they are strictly undesirable in the presence of God. And **being undesirable in the presence of God means that they are sin.**

Sin is anything and everything that God doesn't like.

You might recall a parallel in the Persian Empire, where people were not allowed to be sad or grouchy in the presence of the king, without some kind of valid reason for their obvious emotion or attitude. So when Nehemiah at the Persian king's court heard how badly things were going back in Jerusalem, he was sad in the presence of the king. When the king then asked Nehemiah (paraphrased) "why are you sad?", Nehemiah was "very sore afraid" (Nehemiah 2:2). Nehemiah realized that his sad face could have resulted in the death penalty for him.

God was obviously with Nehemiah in that situation. But the point is: in ancient times certain kings did not tolerate certain attitudes or emotions in their presence.

And that is also what God is like: **God will not tolerate any undesirable attitude or character trait or emotion in His presence.** Any character trait or attitude that God does not like would prevent such an individual from becoming "one" with God.

## **WHAT "SIN" REALLY MEANS**

We have been so hooked on the statement "sin is the transgression of the law" that **it has blinded us to the real meaning of the word "sin"**. It has blinded us even when we have looked up the literal meanings of the Hebrew words and the Greek words for "sin".

The main Old Testament Hebrew word for "**sin**" literally means: **to miss the target!** It applied to an archer shooting an arrow. You already know this, right? But here is the point where "blindness" enters the picture:

**For an archer "to miss the target" he was trying to hit does not involve any guilt! And neither is missing the target an issue of morality or integrity!**

From his own point of view the archer really tried his best to hit the target, but he missed it. He didn't have anger or resentment towards God or any wrong attitude ... he just missed the target, even with his



best effort.

### **And missing the target always amounts to "sinning"!**

That's what God means by "sinning": God means "not achieving 100%". And this is something that writers of all the books of the Bible understood. And in different contexts the writers had **different categories of "missing the mark"** in mind.

**Our greatest problem in this regard is that we have very rigidly imposed our own one meaning on the word "sin", without regard for how God has used the word throughout the Bible. To us the word "sin" means "the transgression of the law", and that's all there is to it, as far as we are concerned! To paraphrase an old song, "that's our story, and we're sticking to it".**

That's very unfortunate. And our western languages haven't exactly been helpful in this matter.

In the English language the word "sin" **always** implies a moral guilt. To us "sin" **always** implies that some law must have been broken. To us "sin" is not a possibility if no law has been broken.

To be quite blunt:

There are many people attending God's Church who "tolerate" or "condone" the definitions for sin found in Romans 14:23 and in James 4:17, but only on the condition that we accept 1 John 3:4 as the inflexible non-negotiable bedrock foundation for what sin (supposedly) **really** means.

Such people cannot understand that sometimes 1 John 3:4 is not involved at all, **and yet there is "sin"** based on Scriptures like Romans 14:23 and James 4:17.

Once again:

Being fearful does not represent "a transgression of the law", but being fearful is still "sin", because **fearfulness misses the target** which God desires to achieve in the sons and daughters He is creating. Being fearful is sin without being "a transgression of the law". And 1 John 3:4 does not apply to being fearful.

Now fearfulness is not the only trait or attribute that misses the target. Most of the traits we would consider to be unpleasant or undesirable to us are also going to be undesirable to God. When a rebellious mind or an argumentative mind or a selfish mind or a self-righteous mind keeps all of God's laws, then **such obedience is not acceptable to God**. Even if such minds give everything they have to the poor, and then they "give their bodies to be burned" (see 1 Corinthians 13:3) they are still "missing the target" before God, in spite of not sinning as per 1 John 3:4.

So here is a point we really need to inculcate into our understanding.

### **We have a wrong concept regarding what constitutes sin!**

We need to recognize that God decides what constitutes sin and what does not constitute sin. We can't just jump on one little statement (like identifying the trunk of an elephant) and then conclude that this statement represents all there is to know about sin.

### **LET'S TRY TO SEE THIS FROM GOD'S POINT OF VIEW**

God the Father and Jesus Christ have a perfect relationship with one another. Neither one is ever moody, grumpy, grouchy, selfish, sarcastic, cynical, etc. towards the other one. They have a beautiful relationship. They have an unrestricted commitment towards one another, and they never ever have any of the negative characteristics in their dealings with one another, which negative characteristics are so common in our human relationships. Those negative characteristics are wrong and unacceptable before God.

So They decided to create a Family, as a way of reproducing Themselves and reproducing the relationship They have. They want their sons and daughters to have Their general **appearance** ("in their image), to be composed of the same spirit They are composed of, and also to have **the same type of minds** that They have ("in their likeness"), which will make possible the identical type of relationship that already exists between the two of Them.

But that's not all that God the Father and Jesus Christ wanted.

They also want Their sons and daughters **to think** the same way They do, **to reason** the same way They do, to have all the **same personality** traits that They have, and **to reject** all the personality traits that God the Father and Jesus Christ also reject. They want all in their Family **to like** the things They like, and **to dislike** the things They dislike.

If any potential member of Their Family does not meet any of these and similar criteria, then it will be impossible for that "potential Family member" to really become "one" with Them.

Anyone who doesn't meet all of these criteria simply wouldn't fit in with the future eternity that God has planned. These non-negotiable criteria are not restricted to "transgressions of the law". In modern terminology, individuals with certain personality traits and character attributes simply "wouldn't hit it off" with God the Father and with Jesus Christ, even if those individuals obeyed all of God's laws. **God will not have any oddballs in His Family**, oddballs that would think and reason differently from the way God the Father and Jesus Christ think and reason.

Now here is the crux which we need to understand.

In order **to identify all of the things that God does not like**, and that God is not prepared to have present in His environment, **God established the concept of sin**, the concept of missing the 100% mark.

**This is the real key to understanding the significance of, and the purpose for designating certain things as "sin"!**

"Sin" stands for everything that God does not like. And the things God does not like, i.e. sins, fall into two broad categories. **Sins in category #1** consist of certain actions, conduct and behavior that God will not accept. This category #1 revolves around **what we do or don't do**.

**Sins in category #2 consist of certain undesirable character and personality attributes that people may have. Certain attributes are simply not acceptable to God. For example, God accepts humility, and God rejects every attribute that is in any way the opposite of humility. This category of sins revolves around what we are like as individuals.**

And so:

**Some of the things God doesn't like are identified by 1 John 3:4. God very forcefully dislikes it when we break any of His laws. So one aspect of sin can be defined as "sin is the transgression**

**of the law" (or "sin is lawlessness" for that matter). This statement regarding sin is one particular focus of the Apostle John in his first letter.**

In addition, **other things that God doesn't like** are identified by Romans 14:23. God really doesn't like a mind that is insecure. When people do things about which they actually have doubts, then that is something God doesn't like and doesn't want around. **God doesn't like it when a mind doesn't trust Him**, even as you yourself don't really like it when people who know you don't trust you. And so Hebrews 11:6 tells us that "without faith (i.e. without really trusting God) it is impossible to please God". Such people could perhaps be obeying all of God's laws (i.e. 1 John 3:4 does not enter the picture), but **if they don't have faith, then God doesn't want them around**. These two statements about the necessity of faith (i.e. Romans 14:23 and Hebrews 11:6) express one of the perspectives of the Apostle Paul. (Regarding "perspectives", think of the blind men each presenting one particular "perspective" regarding an elephant.)

Further, **still other things God doesn't like** are identified by James 4:17. God really doesn't like it when people actually know what they should do, but just don't do it. That type of attitude is **contrary to God's very Being!** So that is something which God will not accept; people with that type of attitude wouldn't really fit into the Family God is planning. This statement regarding sin represents one perspective presented by the Apostle James.

So basically we see three different apostles describing three different parts of the elephant. But with their three perspectives the picture still wasn't complete. And so here the analogy also falls short. While each of these three apostles described a particular part of "the elephant", this is not to imply that they were blind and focused only on one specific aspect of sin. The apostles themselves clearly saw "the whole elephant", and in certain places in their writings they simply described specific aspects of "the elephant", while addressing other aspects in other sections of their writings.

The problem was with us, in that we jumped on certain statements and lifted them out of the overall context. We very naively have looked for "**sin is ...**" statements, to then confidently assert: see, here you have it in black and white: sin is ... (whatever our focus may be).

That approach is naive because the Apostle John with his statement was not trying to define **all** sins. Transgressions of God's law are only one specific category of sins.

As a matter of fact, the Apostle John actually presented a statement on which I have based my definition for sin. The definition I presented earlier is:

**Sin is anything and everything that God doesn't want around for all future eternity! Sin refers to things God doesn't like and doesn't want in His environment.**

The reason most of us would not immediately recognize the Apostle John's statement as coming closest to a correct definition for sin is because John doesn't actually mention the word "sin" in this statement. So it is not a "sin is ..." statement. Let's look at what John said.

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because **we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.** (1 John 3:22)

It should be self-evident that God does not answer the prayers of people that God doesn't actually like.

Now John shows that there are two specific areas that God examines when it comes to answering our prayers. And it is not enough to meet only the first of these two requirements.

Receiving from God answers to our prayerful requests has **two requirements**:

1) We most certainly must keep all of God's commandments. That is the focus John had presented earlier in this chapter in verse 4 (i.e. 1 John 3:4). If we don't keep God's commandments, then we are sinning. But there is more to not sinning than just keeping all of God's commandments.

2) We absolutely and without reservation also have to do "those things" that are pleasing in God's sight. With this statement John was referring to our character and our personality! **John was referring to how our minds work!** John was referring to our motivation for obeying God.

If we are lazy, critical, cynical, sarcastic, proud, faithless, fearful, etc., then we are assuredly not pleasing God.

The first part of John's statement refers to our actions, conduct and behavior; it refers to everything we do. The second part of John's statement refers to **the motivation** for everything we do. And that motivation is the result of our character and personality. Lazy people have different motivations than diligent people. Faith-filled people have different motivations than faithless people. Proud people have different motivations than humble people. These things are based on how our minds work. **Our motivations are of the highest importance.**

And so it is impossible for right conduct coming from a wrong motivation to ever please God!

1 John 3:22 presents the details for establishing a correct definition for sin, because **this verse clearly identifies the two great areas that make up the complete concept of sin.** If we in our character and personality do not become the way that is pleasing to God, then no amount of commandment-keeping will get us anywhere. To be acceptable to God we need to strive to become "one" with God in our outward actions and conduct (i.e. what we do), and also to become "one" with God after "the inward man" which needs to be renewed day by day (see 2 Corinthians 4:16).

**Renewing "the inward man" involves changing our personality and our character to constantly become more and more like God's character and God's personality. And if our "inward man" is not renewed, then we very obviously miss the target that God has established for us. In God's Family the children are to express the character and the personality of the Father, to enable them to become "one" with the Father.**

Let's consider something else God revealed in the last book of the New Testament. Consider this:

Most people would probably not on their own accord conclude that "the fearful" are just as bad off before God as adulterers and idolaters. Mostly **the fearful strike us as harmless** and in need of reassurance. We commonly feel sorry for people who are fearful, right? So lumping them together with whoremongers and with murderers can seem to be pretty harsh. And we forget **how many very bad decisions are made every single day around the world**, because the people making those decisions are motivated by fear.

The Book of Revelation concludes God's revelations to mankind for this present age. So God restated certain information that Jesus Christ had briefly mentioned during His ministry, information that now needed to be repeated.

As far as understanding what constitutes sin is concerned, the picture still needed to be rounded out. And so God Himself (i.e. "He that sat upon the throne" ... Revelation 21:5) spelled out in Revelation 21:8 **another category of things God doesn't like**, though, as I have indicated, Christ had already briefly mentioned this category in a parable.

Notice how God presented this in the Book of Revelation.

God included "the fearful" and "the unbelieving" in a group of the worst and most perverse transgressors of God's laws (i.e. murderers, sorcerers, idolaters, etc.). See Revelation 21:8. Every member of God's Church obviously already knew that murderers, sorcerers, idolaters, etc. will be punished by God, with the lake of fire being the ultimate punishment.

What God was really revealing in this verse is that in the sight of God "the fearful" and "the unbelieving" are just as unacceptable to God as the worst possible transgressors of God's laws. **That was additional revelation** to the three statements regarding sin we have already looked at, presented by three different apostles.

The statement about idolaters, murderers, sorcerers, adulterers, etc. focuses on **what these individuals actually do**; it focuses on their vile actions. The expressions "the fearful" and "the unbelieving", on the other hand, tell us nothing about what those individuals actually do. Instead these terms focus on **what these individuals are actually like**. It focuses on particular **undesirable traits**, rather than on undesirable actions.

This is something most of us might not have concluded on our own, that **certain traits also constitute sin**. Therefore God revealed that certain attributes (e.g. fearfulness and faithlessness) are also unacceptable to God ... independent of whether or not God's laws are obeyed.

Now understand something:

By giving us these two attributes (fearfulness and faithlessness), God was revealing that **other attributes also fall into this same category** of being unacceptable to God. These two attributes in Revelation 21:8 should tell us that, in addition to the three statements for sin we have already examined, **all negative traits are likewise not acceptable to God**, and therefore they constitute sin. Negative characteristics clearly miss the target for what God desires to achieve. God simply doesn't want cynical, sarcastic, proud, vain, arrogant people around Him.

This ties in with what Jesus Christ had said earlier in the parable of the talents. You know this parable. The servant who had received only one talent had not used that talent at all; he had hidden it in the earth (Matthew 25:18). Notice what this servant said to Jesus Christ:

**And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the earth: lo, there you have that which is yours. (Matthew 25:25)**

Which of the ten commandments had this man broken? None are implied. The main problem was that **this man was fearful!** The motivation for his actions was the real problem with this "servant". And all those who are motivated by fear end up in the lake of fire. The attributes of fear and love are mutually exclusive. As John explained, "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).

So notice Jesus Christ's response.

His lord answered and said unto him, *you wicked and slothful* servant, you knew that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: (Matthew 25:26)

**Slothful means lazy! The man was a scobberlotcher. And right here Jesus Christ is showing that God does not like laziness, and that being lazy leads to the lake of fire. And this servant is "wicked" because he was fearful and lazy. Being lazy reaps the same reward as being a murderer. Does that seem harsh?**

Continuing with Jesus Christ's words:

And cast you the unprofitable servant into **outer darkness**: there shall be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. (Matthew 25:30)

"Outer darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" are references to the lake of fire. Here is "a servant" (i.e. someone who had been in God's Church) for whom no "transgressions of the law" are implied, and whose main negative attributes are being fearful and being lazy ... and he ends up in the lake of fire. This means that in God's sight he is "a sinner"; he is someone whom God doesn't want around.

Understand that "transgressions of the law" are not the issue in the parable of the talents. No law-breaking is implied. 1 John 3:4 is not the issue with this "unprofitable servant".

Can we understand that some sins don't involve the transgression of any laws?

Characteristics like fearfulness, faithlessness, laziness, pride, etc. are sins **because God doesn't like them**, because they are contrary to God's way of living, and God will never coexist with such characteristics. Therefore they will be destroyed in the lake of fire along with all "transgressors of the law". In the ideal and perfect world that God will create there is simply no place for any negative characteristics or emotions.

Nothing and no one that "defiles" has a place in the new heaven and new earth (see Revelation 21:27).

**All negative character traits** "defile" an environment in that they make things unpleasant for others, and therefore such traits will be blotted out in the lake of fire. Laziness, for example, makes things unpleasant for the people who are diligent; faithlessness makes things unpleasant for those who have faith; pride and arrogance make things unpleasant for people who are humble, etc.

Sin is anything and everything that God doesn't like! The things God doesn't like clearly "miss the target" for what God intends to achieve.

## **SINS WITHOUT A MORAL GUILT**

Can we understand that there are different categories of sins? There are sins that involve transgressing God's laws, and there are sins that don't involve transgressing any laws. Some sins don't actually involve what people do or don't do; those sins only involve what individuals are like!

For example, God absolutely hates **all forms of pride** (Proverbs 6:16-19; Proverbs 16:5; etc.). So a proud person is a sinner even without breaking any of the ten commandments. It's not what the proud person does that God hates; it is **what the proud person is like as an individual** that God really hates. Pride is an expression of Satan's personality.

Mr. Armstrong in his own way understood this. And that is why he would always say that the goal of a Christian life is to develop godly, holy, righteous character. In this Mr. Armstrong was correct. And obviously, there is no place for fearfulness and faithlessness and laziness and pride, etc. in godly character.

One conclusion we should draw from Mr. Armstrong's focus on developing godly character is that every other type of character really misses the target regarding what God desires to achieve. In other words, **every other form of character is sin**. So everyone who has not developed godly, holy, righteous

character is a sinner, independent of whether they observe all of God's laws or whether they transgress God's laws.

Mr. Armstrong also understood that there are "spiritual sins" and that there are "physical sins". By "physical sins" Mr. Armstrong really meant "sins that don't involve a moral guilt", sins that only involve certain physical conduct. In other words, Mr. Armstrong understood that **we can miss the target in spiritual ways and we can miss the target in physical ways.**

However, as I have tried to show here, "sins without any moral guilt" can be divided into **two distinct groups**. One group of "sins without a moral guilt" leads to the lake of fire, while the other group of "sins without a moral guilt" does not lead to the lake of fire.

**Group #1: Sins without a moral guilt that do lead to the lake of fire are character traits and personality traits that are simply unacceptable to God, and which God is not prepared to have around for all future eternity. They are "without moral guilt" because they don't involve any breaking of any of God's laws. These are individuals who just didn't turn out right, somewhat like a vessel of clay that "was marred in the hand of the potter" (see Jeremiah 18:3-4). Their character attributes are not what God wants. Attributes like fearfulness, faithlessness, pride, laziness, etc. are examples of unacceptable traits we have already looked at.**

It is important to understand that these unacceptable traits are fully under the control of these individuals themselves. **They are not helpless pawns** who are controlled by these negative traits. No, these negative traits are under their own control! They have the power to reject these traits and to change! In other words, we don't have to be sarcastic, cynical, proud, etc.; we can decide to change because it is within our own power to change.

But Satan doesn't want people to change, because ultimately all of these negative traits are a reflection of all of Satan's own character and personality traits. And so Satan wants such people to believe that they can't change, that their character disposition is simply the hand they were dealt. And such people want God and us to accept them as they are, warts and all (I'm speaking character-wise, not physically). Such people need to understand that God has given them the power to change, the power to grow and to overcome.

**Group #2: Sins without a moral guilt that do not lead to the lake of fire are what Mr. Armstrong thought of as "physical sins", and I accept the term "physical sins", meaning "physical ways of missing the target God has set before us".**

They involve missing the target in physical ways, regarding activities we might engage in (e.g. conduct that led to accidents and health problems), and the things we eat and drink (e.g. eating and drinking things that may make us sick). They may involve carelessness or thoughtlessness, which then led to accidents and injuries, or they may involve the innocent ingestion of things that damage our health and well-being. Or they may involve ignorance, or even exposure to health hazards, like exposure to people with contagious diseases, exposure to air pollution, to water pollution, to violent attacks by criminals, etc. **In many of these cases** the cause for missing the target (i.e. the cause for sin) lies not with the sick person but with someone else ... and the sick person is simply the one who bears the consequences of something other people have done.

**This is the group or category of sins that James had in mind when he wrote James 5:15.**

## **ANOTHER LOOK AT JAMES 5:15**

The point James was making in this verse is this:

For every health problem we experience there is always a cause. And **that cause is sin**. We experience health problems because in one way or another we have missed the target regarding how God wants us to look after the health He has given us.

When I say that the cause of health problems is sin, then I mean the category of sin that is both without moral guilt and also without leading to the lake of fire. For any sin in this category that has caused us a health problem there are always two possible options:

- **Either we ourselves** did something to cause the problem.
- **Or somebody else** did something to cause this problem for us.

Irrespective of who is responsible for the cause of the health problem, the cause is a form of sin. And sins need to be paid for, **even when no moral guilt is involved**.

Think of good health like holding a delicate crystal vase in your hands. Becoming sick or injured is like dropping that vase onto a stone floor. It will break into pieces. It makes no difference whether you dropped it deliberately or carelessly, or whether it accidentally slipped out of your hands, or whether somebody forcefully opened your hands to force you to drop it. The end result is always the same: the vase will shatter into pieces. And **somebody has to pay to have that vase replaced**. In analogy, somebody has to pay for our health to be restored, irrespective of what the cause for the health problem may have been.

That's what all sins are like!

Somebody has to pay to remove all sins, sins that involve a moral guilt and also sins that don't involve a moral guilt. When all is said and done, whatever sins are left and have not been paid for by Jesus Christ, those sins will be thrown into the lake of fire together with the individuals who were responsible for those sins (i.e. if those individuals are still unrepentant).

For **sins that carry a moral guilt**, but which do not constitute the unpardonable sin, Jesus Christ paid the penalty with His life, by shedding **His blood**. For **sins that don't carry a moral guilt** and also don't lead to the lake of fire, Jesus Christ also paid the penalty, in this case by allowing **His body** to be broken for these sins, i.e. by the stripes He received. These are the sins that lead to sicknesses and diseases and pain and suffering.

Speaking specifically to members of God's Church, James was showing that sicknesses are a consequence of sins. And James was making provision for the two possible causes of the sins that resulted in the health problem. James said:

**If the sick person himself is responsible for the sins that caused the sickness (i.e. sins with no moral guilt involved, and not leading to the lake of fire), then "they shall be forgiven him".**

On the other hand, **if** somebody else was responsible for the sins that caused the sickness, **then** the sick person himself did not need to have these sins forgiven. **No forgiveness would be needed** to receive healing from God. Rather, the guilt would remain with some other person who was responsible for causing the sickness. In most of these cases those sins will only be forgiven after the responsible person has come up in the second resurrection and been confronted by Jesus Christ with his guilty past.

So James included the conditional statement "**if** he has committed sins" because sometimes that is



indeed the case. But in many other cases the sick person has not been responsible for the health problem that came upon him.

However, sins that can be identified as "transgressions of the law" are not forgiven when someone is anointed. They are only forgiven upon real repentance.

### **WHAT ABOUT "THE WAGES OF SIN"?**

By now some people will be asking about Romans 6:23.

For **the wages of sin is death**; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

People easily assume that this means that the wages of "**all sins**" is death. But that is not what Paul was saying. Paul was saying that death is "the wage" for the category of sins he was speaking about in the context of Romans 6. And "the category of sins" that Paul had in mind in that context was sins that involve a moral guilt before God. And Paul's statement is correct.

While it is not needed, we could equally correctly say that "**the wage for all bad character traits is death**", because God will not have any members in His Family who will have bad character traits like pride, fearfulness, wrath and laziness, etc.

But the point really is that death is **not** the wage **for all sins**! And so the Apostle John wrote "if a man see his brother sin **a sin which is not unto death**, he shall ask ..." (1 John 5:16). In the next verse John said "**there is a sin not unto death**" (1 John 5:17). The Apostle John was right.

One group of sins which are "not unto death" are sins that are committed ignorantly, like unintentionally dropping that delicate crystal vase. Sins not unto death are sins that don't carry a moral guilt, and neither are they character traits that are offensive to God. Keep in mind that "falling short" or "missing the target" is in many cases not a moral issue. In other cases "falling short" obviously is a moral issue, and then a moral guilt is incurred.

So to conclude:

It is a mistake for us to restrict our understanding of sin to 1 John 3:4. There are sins that are not "transgressions of the law", like laziness, fearfulness, pride, faithlessness, etc. What God has shown us in Revelation 21:8 is that **bad character attributes are, if anything, even more serious than bad, lawless actions**, because those character attributes provide the foundation for all lawless actions. That is why God placed the bad character attributes at the top of the list of those who will be destroyed in the lake of fire.

Thus I suggest that from now on you consider the main definition for sin to be something like: "sin is anything and everything that God doesn't like, and that God does not want around for future eternity". Think of 1 John 3:22. Under this umbrella statement the other three statements regarding sin can then be seen in their correct perspectives.

Frank W Nelte