



DOCTRINE WITHOUT THE MACHINERY

What Is Sin? A Mirror, Not a Measuring Stick

Every religious tribe has a list of sins, and sooner or later the list stops being a mirror and becomes a measuring stick for everybody else. Anchored in Romans 2:1 (NLT), where Paul finishes his own list and turns to face his readers, this piece traces sin back to the heart, sits with a Pharisee who prayed by reciting his checklist, and asks what it means to look in the mirror first. With Scripture, honest questions, and prayer prompts.



For everyone who wanders and feels far from home.

*For the ones who left when the noise got too loud, and the ones still
sitting in the back row wondering if they belong.*

*For the solo believer, the doubter, the tired, and the ones who feel
alone in a crowded church.*

**You are not lost. You are on your way home.
You are not the only one. This is for you.**

About Faith Over Factions

Faith Over Factions is a place for the spiritually homeless: people who still love Jesus but can't find Him in the noise of institutional religion or partisan faith. Everything here is free. No email address, no paywall, no algorithm deciding what you see.

You'll find reflections, portraits of Christians who resisted when it cost them something, devotionals for unsteady days, and a private Faith Journal for the questions you're not ready to say out loud. We don't take sides in the culture war. We take Jesus at His word and try to follow Him with honesty, humility, and a lot of grace for the stumbling.

Pull up a chair. You're welcome here.

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What Is Sin? A Mirror, Not a Measuring Stick

There was a time when I thought understanding sin meant learning the list.

You know the list. Every religious tribe has one. Some items are biblical. Some are cultural. Some are inherited from whatever church tradition formed us. Some are political. Some are simply the things the people making the list happen not to struggle with.

And once the list is assembled, something subtle happens. It stops being a tool for self-examination and becomes a measuring stick for everybody else.

That is where I began to lose interest in the machinery.

I am not interested in being a gatekeeper with a checklist in one hand and my own self-righteous ego in the other. My life became considerably simpler when I realized that was never my job. I do not need to decide who qualifies as righteous enough, clean enough, orthodox enough, moral enough, or acceptable enough to stand before God. I do not need to spend my life identifying sinners.

Scripture already settled that question. We all qualify.

Paul writes, "everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard" (Romans 3:23, NLT). John is even more direct: "If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth" (1 John 1:8, NLT).

That includes the person sitting in the pew and the person standing behind the pulpit. It includes the person carrying the protest sign and the person we have been trained to fear.

And it includes me.

The more seriously I take Scripture, the less useful the religious checklist becomes.

So what is sin? Here is the short answer the rest of this article unpacks. In the Bible, sin is a disorder of the human heart, a turning away from love of God and love of neighbor, that shows up in what we do, what we desire, what we excuse, and the good

we refuse to do. Scripture names specific sins. It never reduces sin to a list, and it never hands anyone a list for measuring everybody else.

What Does the Bible Mean by Sin?

The Bible does not use one word for sin. It uses several, and each one shows a different side of the same problem. Psalm 51 puts three of them side by side when David prays, "blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin" (Psalm 51:1-2, NLT).

1. **Missing the mark.** The most common Hebrew word (*chata*) and its Greek counterpart (*hamartia*) carry the picture of falling short of a target. The same Hebrew verb describes the slingers of Benjamin who "could sling a rock and hit a target within a hairsbreadth without missing" (Judges 20:16, NLT). Sin is aiming at the wrong thing, or aiming and falling short.
2. **Rebellion.** The Hebrew *pesha*, often translated transgression, describes a willful break in relationship. It is not a clerical error. It is turning your back.
3. **Twistedness.** The Hebrew *avon*, usually translated iniquity or guilt, carries the idea of something bent out of shape. It names what sin does to the person over time.
4. **Lawlessness.** John writes, "Everyone who sins is breaking God's law, for all sin is contrary to the law of God" (1 John 3:4, NLT).

None of these words describes a checklist. Every one of them describes a direction.

That last one deserves attention, because it is the verse a checklist defender will reach for first. Sin really is lawlessness. But Jesus told us what the law hangs on: "The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40, NLT), love for God and love for neighbor. Paul says the same thing: "Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God's law" (Romans 13:10, NLT). Breaking God's law is never less than breaking love. It is usually a great deal more than breaking a rule.

Sin Is Bigger Than the List

The Bible certainly names particular sins. It condemns violence, greed, exploitation, deceit, sexual wrongdoing, oppression, pride, hatred, injustice, idolatry, and many other destructive behaviors.

But Scripture never allows us to reduce sin to a tidy inventory of forbidden actions. Three short verses make that impossible.

- John says, "All wicked actions are sin, but not every sin leads to death" (1 John 5:17, NLT).
- Paul writes, "If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning" (Romans 14:23, NLT).
- James goes further: "Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it" (James 4:17, NLT).

Read those together and the neat little checklist begins to collapse.

Sin can be something I do. Sin can be something I refuse to do. Sin can involve knowingly violating my own conscience, which is the situation Paul is addressing in Romans 14, where believers disagreed over [disputable matters](#). Sin can live in motive long before it appears in behavior. Sin can hide beneath respectable clothing.

And sometimes sin is not found in the thing I am shouting about at all. Sometimes it is found in the reason I am shouting.

That is uncomfortable. It is supposed to be.

The Heart Produces the Behavior

Jesus consistently moves the conversation about sin inward. In Mark, he says, "For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts" (Mark 7:21, NLT). Then he names what flows from that corrupted interior life, and his list is worth reading slowly. Sexual immorality, theft, and murder are there. So are greed, deceit, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness (Mark 7:21-22). Jesus put pride on the same list as murder. Very few religious checklists do.

But notice the direction. The behavior comes from the heart. The list is not the disease. The list is evidence of the disease.

That distinction matters. Greed does not begin with a bank account. Cruelty does not begin with a fist. Deception does not begin with a lie. Adultery does not begin in a bedroom. Hatred does not begin with violence.

These things begin deeper. They grow from disordered desire, fear, pride, contempt, insecurity, resentment, lust for control, indifference, and the endless human impulse to place ourselves at the center.

Jesus makes the same move throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

1. Murder is traced backward toward anger and contempt (Matthew 5:21-22).
2. Adultery is traced backward toward lust (Matthew 5:27-28).
3. Charity is traced backward toward motive (Matthew 6:2-4).
4. Prayer is traced backward toward motive (Matthew 6:5-6).
5. Public righteousness is traced backward toward the desire to be seen. "Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others" (Matthew 6:1, NLT).

Jesus keeps walking us backward from the visible act toward the condition of the heart. That is where the real confrontation happens.

Sin Is a Posture Before It Becomes a Performance

I have come to think of sin less as a collection of isolated violations and more as a posture of the heart. Sin is what happens when the heart bends away from love, truth, justice, mercy, humility, and trust in God. From that posture, everything else grows.

Paul makes this visible in Romans 1. The disorder begins before the catalog of behaviors appears. "Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks" (Romans 1:21, NLT). Worship becomes distorted. Desire becomes distorted. The human heart turns inward. Then behavior follows. The fruit grows from the root.

Romans 1 has become one of the most-quoted passages in the checklist tradition, so it is worth noticing what is actually on Paul's list. Envy is there. Quarreling is there. Gossip is there. So are "backstabbers" and people who are "insolent, proud, and boastful" (Romans 1:29-30, NLT).

And then Paul turns around and points at his readers.

"You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things" (Romans 2:1, NLT).

That is the move the checklist never makes. Paul builds the list and then refuses to let anyone stand outside it. The chapter break between Romans 1 and 2 was added centuries later. Paul never intended us to stop reading where we feel safest.

That means sin is not merely something we occasionally commit. It shapes the way we see. It shapes what we desire, what we justify, who we fear, and who we despise. It can even shape the religion we build.

Sin is a disorder of the heart that eventually becomes visible in what we do, what we desire, what we excuse, what we tolerate, and what we refuse to do.

That is much harder to manage than a checklist. A checklist can be completed. A heart has to be transformed.

The Checklist Has One Great Advantage

The checklist lets me examine you without examining me.

That is why it is so attractive. If I can define sin primarily as a handful of visible behaviors, especially behaviors I personally do not struggle with, then I can feel remarkably righteous.

I do not cheat on my spouse.
I do not use that drug.
I do not participate in that sexual behavior.
I do not belong to that group.
I do not believe that doctrine.
I do not vote that way.

Look how well I am doing.

Meanwhile, I can be proud. Cruel. Greedy. Vindictive. Dishonest. Tribal. Indifferent to suffering. Obsessed with status. Addicted to outrage. Unforgiving. Contemptuous. And completely unwilling to do the good I already know I should do.

Scripture gives me no basis for calling that righteousness. None.

The Pharisee Had a Checklist

Luke tells us exactly who Jesus was talking to when he told this story. He told it "to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else" (Luke 18:9, NLT).

Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. The other was a tax collector. The Pharisee prayed:

"I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don't cheat, I don't sin, and I don't commit adultery. I certainly am not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income" (Luke 18:11-12, NLT).

There it is. The machinery. He literally recites his list.

The Pharisee had a moral inventory. He could identify wrong behavior. He could compare himself with people who behaved differently. And by comparison, he looked pretty good.

The tax collector would not even lift his eyes. He beat his chest and said, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner" (Luke 18:13, NLT). Jesus says that man, not the Pharisee, "returned home justified before God" (Luke 18:14, NLT).

The problem was not that the Pharisee believed sin existed. The problem was what he had done with that knowledge. He had turned morality into comparison. He had turned spiritual life into hierarchy. He had turned another human being into a prop for his own righteousness.

Thank God I am not like that man.

How much religion has been built on some version of that sentence?

Thank God I am not like those people.

Thank God I am not gay.

Thank God I am not divorced.

Thank God I am not addicted.

Thank God I am not liberal.

Thank God I am not conservative.

Thank God I am not Catholic.

Thank God I am not evangelical.

Thank God I am not Muslim.

Thank God I am not an atheist.

Thank God I am not one of them.

The names change. The machinery does not.

The Mirror Was Never Meant to Become a Weapon

The purpose of understanding sin was never to give me a better checklist for examining my neighbor. It was to give me a mirror for examining my own heart.

And mirrors are harder than weapons. Weapons let me stand at a distance. Mirrors do not.

A mirror asks what anger is doing inside me.
A mirror asks what fear is doing inside me.
A mirror asks why I need another person to be beneath me.
A mirror asks why someone else's failure makes me feel morally secure.
A mirror asks whether I secretly enjoy condemnation.
A mirror asks whether I have confused outrage with righteousness.
A mirror asks whether I love mercy when I am not the one who needs it.

That kind of examination leaves very little room for superiority. And maybe that is the point.

Nobody Gets to Stand Outside the Problem

Once sin is understood as a disorder of the human heart, nobody gets to pretend they stand outside it.

The fundamentalist preacher does not. The progressive activist does not. The theologian does not. The skeptic does not. The sexually conservative believer does not. The sexually permissive believer does not. The rich do not. The poor do not. The person condemning society does not. The person condemning religion does not.

And the guy writing this reflection certainly does not.

That matters because it changes the way we understand grace. Grace is not something righteous people distribute to sinners. Grace is something drowning people tell other drowning people they have found.

That is a very different posture. One produces hierarchy. The other produces humility. One produces gatekeepers. The other produces witnesses.

One says, "Get your life together and maybe God will accept you."

The other says, "Come see what mercy has done for me."

Naming Evil Is Not the Same as Becoming a Gatekeeper

None of this requires pretending evil is not evil. That is an important distinction.

We can name cruelty, abuse, exploitation, greed, corruption, sexual wrongdoing, violence, deception, oppression, and hatred. Jesus did not avoid moral language. The prophets certainly did not.

Scripture even gives believers a responsibility toward one another. Paul told the Corinthians, "It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning" (1 Corinthians 5:12, NLT). Notice both halves. The outsider is God's business. Within the community of faith, we owe each other honesty. But look at how Paul says that honesty should be carried out:

"Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself" (Galatians 6:1, NLT).

Gently. Humbly. Aware of your own vulnerability. That is correction as mercy, not a gate with a guard.

There is a profound difference between naming what destroys people and appointing ourselves guardians of God's border. I can say that something is destructive without declaring myself superior to the person trapped inside it. I can oppose injustice without pretending there is no injustice in me. I can tell the truth about wrongdoing while remembering that I remain dependent on mercy myself.

That is humility. And humility is not moral weakness. It is moral clarity without self-exaltation.

The Most Dangerous Sin May Be the One I Cannot See

Jesus repeatedly warns religious people about blindness. Not physical blindness. Moral blindness. After healing a man born blind, he told the Pharisees, "If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty". "But you remain guilty because you claim you can see" (John 9:41, NLT).

The horrifying possibility is not merely that I might sin. The horrifying possibility is that I might sin while believing I am defending righteousness.

Jesus warned his own disciples that this would happen to them: "the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing a holy service for God" (John 16:2, NLT). History is full of people who harmed others while convinced God was on their side.

Religion can intensify this danger because sacred language has enormous power. Once I convince myself that God agrees with me, almost anything can become justified.

Contempt can become discernment.

Cruelty can become courage.

Fear can become holiness.

Political tribalism can become spiritual warfare.

Control can become leadership.

Exclusion can become purity.

Hatred can become righteousness.

And suddenly I am no longer examining my heart. I am protecting my machinery.

Jesus Keeps Bringing Us Back to Love

When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he does not hand out a catalog of prohibited behavior. He says, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind" (Matthew 22:37, NLT). And then, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39, NLT).

Everything hangs there.

That does not make morality vague. It makes morality deeper. Love asks harder questions than legalism.

- Legalism asks, "Is this technically forbidden?" Love asks, "Does this bring life or destruction?"
- Legalism asks, "Can I justify this?" Love asks, "Who will be harmed?"
- Legalism asks, "Am I allowed?" Love asks, "Am I becoming more like Jesus?"

Legalism looks for the edge of the rule. Love looks toward the good of the other person.

And suddenly sin looks less like violating somebody's curated religious inventory and more like everything inside us that resists love. Pride resists love. Greed resists love. Contempt resists love. Exploitation resists love. Indifference resists love. Dishonesty resists love. Dehumanization resists love. Refusing to do the good we know to do resists love.

This is why the condition of the heart matters so much. Actions still matter. Consequences still matter. Justice still matters. Truth still matters. But the heart is where the road begins.

Maybe the Real Question Is Not "Who Is Sinning?"

Maybe the better question is, what is happening inside me?

What am I becoming?

What do I love?

What do I fear?

Who do I despise?

Where have I hardened myself?

What suffering have I learned to ignore?

What wrongdoing have I justified because it benefited my tribe?

What good do I already know I should do but continue avoiding?

Where has pride disguised itself as conviction?

Where has anger disguised itself as righteousness?

Where has fear disguised itself as discernment?

Where have I become more interested in identifying sinners than becoming more like Jesus?

Those questions scare me a lot more than somebody else's checklist. But maybe they should.

Because following Jesus was never supposed to give me better tools for controlling other people. It was supposed to change me.

And perhaps that is where the machinery finally breaks down. There is no gate to guard. There is no scoreboard to maintain. There is no spiritual caste system to preserve. There is only a human heart desperately in need of grace.

Mine first.

And from that place, perhaps I can finally look at another person without needing to decide whether they are beneath me. Perhaps I can simply tell the truth, and live the answer the prophet gave to people who thought God wanted more religious performance:

"the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NLT).

And follow Jesus.

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Check-In Questions and Prayer Prompts

Take these slowly. Write in the *Faith Journal* or on the lines below. What matters is that each question gets an honest answer somewhere.

1 What was on the list you learned, and what was conveniently missing from it?

Write down the sins your church or family talked about most. Then write the ones from Mark 7:21-22 that rarely came up: pride, envy, slander, foolishness. Notice which list you're more comfortable being measured by.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Lord, I've been grading myself on the easy questions. Show me the ones I've been skipping."

2 Whose failures make you feel a little safer about your own standing?

Name the person or group. Be honest about what the comparison gives you. The Pharisee got something out of it too.

PRAYER PROMPT

"God, I've said 'at least I'm not like them' more times than I can count. Forgive me. I'm the one standing here needing mercy."

3 What good do you already know you should do, and keep putting off?

James 4:17 calls that sin too. Pick one thing. Write down what's stopping you, and when you could actually do it.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Father, I know what You've been nudging me toward. I'm tired of stalling. Give me enough courage for today's piece of it."

4 Where has anger, fear, or pride been passing itself off as conviction?

Think about the last issue that got you heated. Ask the mirror's questions: what was fear doing in me, and did I enjoy the condemnation a little?

PRAYER PROMPT

"Search me, God, because I can't see this one on my own. If I've been calling my contempt discernment, tell me. And be gentle about it."

5 Who needs to hear what mercy has done for you?

Think of someone who feels too far gone for God. What would it look like to talk with them as a fellow sinner instead of a gatekeeper?

PRAYER PROMPT

"Jesus, You found me when I wasn't looking good. Let me be that honest with somebody else this week."

A Blessing for the Road

May the God who sees the wanderer find you wherever you are tonight.

May Christ, who never needed you to have it all together, meet you in the questions you're still carrying.

May the Spirit steady your feet when the noise gets loud, and quiet your heart when the world won't.

Go gently. Tell the truth. Love the ones in front of you.

And when you fall, and you will, may grace be the first thing you find when you get back up.

You're Always Welcome Here

If this helped, don't carry it alone. Write your answers in the [Faith Journal](#), free and private. Share this with someone who's wandering. And come find us at [faithoverfactions.com](#), on [Substack](#), [Facebook](#), [Bluesky](#), and [Instagram](#).



Faith Journal



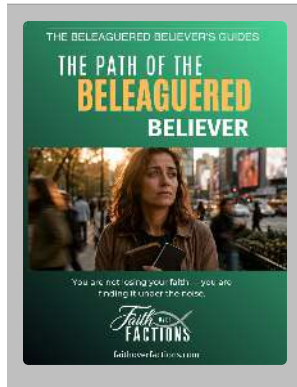
This piece online

The porch light is always on.

Take Something for the Road

You don't have to walk this alone, and you don't have to pay to keep going. Here are a few companions for the journey. The four Guides are free. No email address, no catch.

THE BELEAGUERED BELIEVER'S GUIDES

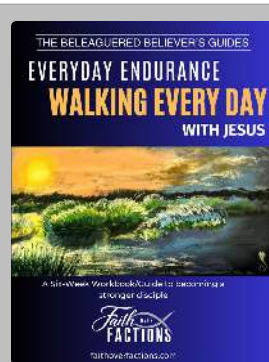


The Path of the Beleaguered Believer

"You are not losing your faith, you are finding it under the noise." For the one who keeps getting up.



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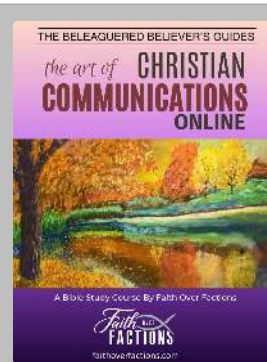


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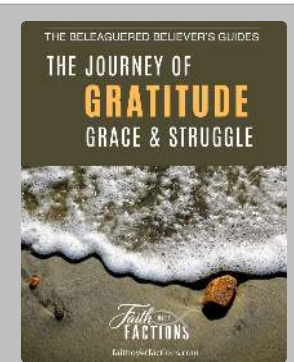


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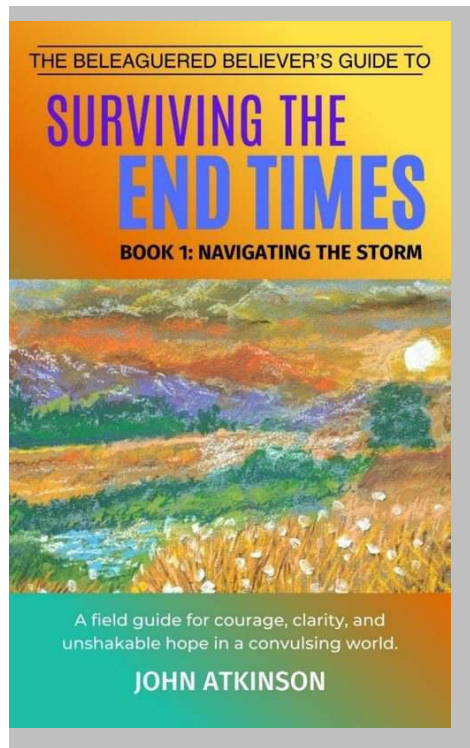
And a Quiet Place to Write It All Down

The [Faith Journal](#) is a private space for the questions in these pages, the prayers you mean, and the faith that doesn't fit neatly anymore. Write honestly. Share prayer requests only when you're ready. Free, private by default, no comment threads, no algorithm.



When You're Ready to Go Deeper

If something in these pages stirred you, you don't have to walk the rest of the way alone.



The Beleaguered Believer's Survival Guide to the End Times, Book 1: Navigating the Storm is a field guide for weary disciples trying to follow Jesus with a clear head and a steady heart while the world gets loud and cruel. It isn't a prophecy chart or a book of fear. It's teaching, reflection, and practice to help you:

- See challenges through Kingdom eyes
- Discern truth in an age of deception
- Endure hardship without losing heart
- Love fiercely when love grows cold
- Stand firm in Christ when the world convulses

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Grace and peace for the road.

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