

SMALL-GROUP CURRICULUM

RESPECTABLE
SINS

CONFRONTING THE SINS
WE TOLERATE

JERRY BRIDGES
DISCUSSION GUIDE BY STEPHEN SORENSON

NAVPRESS 
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Preface

“**H**e that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (John 8:7, KJV). Though many scholars today question whether the well-known account of the woman accused of adultery actually belongs in the gospel of John, the expression has become a part of our wider culture, along with a similar one: “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matthew 7:1, KJV).

This book, as the title announces, is about sin — not the obvious sins of our culture but the subtle sins of believers, the target audience of this book. So let me say up front that I am not without the sins addressed in this book. In fact, you will find that I sometimes use my own sad experiences as examples of some of these sins.

The motivation for this book stems from a growing conviction that those of us whom I call conservative evangelicals may have become so preoccupied with some of the major sins of society around us that we have lost sight of the need to deal with our own more “refined” or subtle sins.

While seeking to address these “respectable” sins, however, I also want this to be a book of hope. We are never to wallow hopelessly in our sins. Rather, we are to believe the gospel through which God has dealt with both the guilt of our sin and its dominion over us.

The gospel, though, is only for sinners, for those who recognize their need of it. Many Christians think of the gospel as only for unbelievers. Once we trust in Christ, so the thinking goes, we no longer need the gospel. But, as I seek to bring out in this book, the gospel is a vital gift from God not only for our salvation but also to enable us to deal with the ongoing activity of sin in our lives. So we still need the gospel every day.

This book by no means covers all the possible subtle sins we face. A number of friends in Christian ministry looked over a lengthy list of sins I had compiled and helped me reduce it to a manageable list of the more common ones. To those friends I express my deepest thanks for their suggestions.

Three other people deserve special acknowledgment. Don Simpson, who is not only my editor but a close personal friend, has been very helpful. Dr. Bob Bevington, with whom I have just collaborated on another book, also read the manuscript and made helpful suggestions. Mrs. Jessie Newton transferred my handwritten manuscript to a computer composition so that it could be submitted to NavPress. This is the third manuscript Jessie has typed for me. Finally, there are an unknown number of people who have supported this project in prayer. Thanks to all of you for your part in this book.

And above all, to God be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

Before You Begin

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Some years ago a book was published with the title *I'm OK, You're OK*. In contrast to that book title, the attitude of many Christians seems to be "I'm OK and You're Not." That is, we seem to be good at seeing other people's sins but not our own. We see and bemoan the flagrant sins of our culture, and we're even quick to point out the sins of our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we are often blind to the more subtle sins we tolerate in our own lives — those I call "respectable" sins.

You and I may actually be doing quite well when it comes to avoiding the more overt sins. But what about the more subtle ones — the "respectable" sins that can still hinder our walks with God and harm our relationships with others? God has made clear in His Word that He is as dishonored and displeased by our anxiety, unthankfulness, frustration, selfishness, impatience, and discontentment as He is by the overt sins we're so proud to avoid.

In an effort to help us face and deal with these "subtle" sins, I have written *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*. I commend this resource to you as invaluable not only for small-group interaction but also for your own personal study and growth in Christ.

Through experience I have found that we often need more than to merely have our own sins — even the "respectable" ones that we tend to minimize — pointed out to us. We need encouragement and hope, and these come only through the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ encourages us in our personal struggles with sin because it assures us that in our standing with God, He has already forgiven our sins through the death of His Son on the cross. The gospel gives us hope because it also promises to us the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to deal with our sins. We need both assurances. We cannot effectively deal with the expressions of our subtle sins until we know they are forgiven. And we cannot effectively deal with our sins apart from the help of the Holy Spirit.

As you use this guide, you will find that I emphasize both of these gospel truths. So do not approach this study with the fear that it will only reveal sin and leave you to wallow in it. Rather, you will find both hope in the gospel and practical suggestions for dealing with your sins. And lest you think that I have written from the perspective of "I'm OK and You're Not," let me assure you that I must deal with many of these sins

myself. So together let's confront the subtle sins we tolerate in our lives and implement God's wonderful plan for redemption and victory.

Jerry Bridges

ABOUT THE STUDY

The study questions included in this book serve three important purposes: (1) a road map to enable the group facilitator — the section at the back of the book called “Help for Group Leaders” gives practical suggestions about how to lead a group through this study; (2) a reading and application guide for the group member; and (3) a discussion guide to enhance the group-interaction experience.

You'll be prompted to read specific chapters of the book before each group session. The quality of your personal reading and preparation will help to ensure quality interaction when you get together to discuss what you have read. As you read *Respectable Sins*, keep pen in hand and feel free to underline passages or put stars or question marks in the margins, noting any principles or insights that stand out to you.

After you've read the assigned chapters, you'll respond to the study questions following them. These will help you process some of the key points you've just read. Some questions ask you to look up and respond to selected Bible passages. We strongly encourage you to engage fully with these personal-study opportunities, but if your time is limited and you're able to read only the book chapters before group time, you can come back to the “Think It Through” section later.

At the end of each session you'll find a page titled “Take It to Heart.” This page is for you to journal your personal reflections, action points, and prayers in response to the week's reading and discussion. Following the group discussion, find a place of solitude, quiet your heart before God, and then write your responses to the guided Personal Reflection, Personal Action Points, and Personal Prayer prompts we've provided for you. You may find that these journaling exercises are the most meaningful to you of the entire study-and-discussion experience.

We know you're going to enjoy the book and grow in your faith as you sit at the feet of one of the world's most beloved authors and Bible teachers. May God richly bless you, and your group, as you read and discover His blessings together.

The Editors

Facing Up to the Truth

BEFORE GATHERING: Read the following portion of *Respectable Sins*. In the margins, record observations, illustrations, or questions that come to mind as you read. Then answer the “Think It Through” study questions that follow the reading.

Chapter One: Ordinary Saints

Notes and Observations

The church at Corinth was all messed up, both theologically and morally. They were proud and fractious; they tolerated gross immorality, sued each other in court, flaunted their freedom in Christ, abused the observance of the Lord’s Supper, misunderstood the purpose of spiritual gifts, and were confused about the future resurrection of believers. Yet when writing to them, Paul addressed them as “saints” (2 Corinthians 1:1) or as those “called to be saints” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

The popular meaning of words often changes over time, based on their common usage. So today we wouldn’t think of those messed-up Corinthians as saints. We might call them worldly, carnal, or immature, but certainly not saints. In the Roman Catholic tradition, sainthood is conferred posthumously on Christians of exceptionally outstanding character and achievement. I write these words a few months after the death of the greatly admired Pope John Paul II, and already there is a widespread popular sentiment to canonize him as a saint.

Apparently, over the course of church history, most of the original apostles, including Paul, came to be called saints. My grandfather was a member of St. Paul’s Methodist Church. In our city we have St. John’s Baptist Church. A Presbyterian friend of mine pastors St. Andrew’s Chapel. I have preached in

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St. Thomas's Anglican Church. Even Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace Judas, gets into the act with St. Matthias's Church in Sydney, Australia. And, of course, standing above them all in eminence is St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

Today, outside the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the word *saint* is seldom used. But when it is, it is most often used to describe a person (usually elderly) of unusually godly character. Someone might say, "If there ever was a saint, it is my grandmother." Upon hearing such a statement, we immediately picture a kind, gracious woman who regularly reads her Bible and prays and who is known for her good deeds toward others.

How then could the apostle Paul address the messed-up believers at Corinth as saints? In fact, this form of address seems to be a favorite of Paul's. He uses it in several of his letters and frequently refers to believers as saints (see, for example, Romans 1:7; 16:15; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; 4:21-22; and Colossians 1:2). How could Paul refer to *ordinary believers*, even the problem-plagued ones at Corinth, as saints?

The answer lies in the meaning of the word as it is used in the Bible. The Greek word for saint is *hagios*, and it refers not to one's character but to a state of being. Its literal meaning is "one who is separated unto God." In this sense, every believer — even the most ordinary and the most immature — is a saint. The actual wording of Paul's address in 1 Corinthians is to "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1:2). Here again, we may be surprised with Paul's use of the word *sanctified*, a word we usually associate with holy living. But the words *sanctified* and *saint* both come from the same Greek word family. A saint is simply someone who is sanctified. Although it sounds awkward in English, we could literally rewrite Paul's words as "to those separated in Christ Jesus, called to be separated ones."

Separated for what? A better question is, *Separated for whom?* And the answer is, "for God." Every true believer has been separated or set apart by God for God. Paul, in one place, described

our Lord Jesus Christ as the One who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works (see Titus 2:14). And in I Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul says to us, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.” Together, these two passages help us understand the biblical meaning of saint. It is someone whom Christ bought with His own blood on the cross and has separated unto Himself to be His own possession.

What does it mean to be separated, or set apart? A good analogy is to be found at the U.S. Air Force Academy near our home. Entering first-year cadets are treated vastly different from the way freshman entering public or private universities are treated. From the time they get off the bus at the Academy grounds and throughout their first year, they are subjected to extremely rigorous discipline designed to transform them from easygoing American teenagers into well-disciplined cadets preparing to become military officers. Although this discipline is progressively relaxed as the cadets pass through their four years, it is never completely removed. Even as seniors, they are still subjected to demanding academic and behavioral requirements.

Why is there this difference between the Academy and a typical university? These young men and women have been in a real sense “set apart” by the U.S. government to become Air Force officers. It costs our government over \$300,000 to educate and train each cadet over a four-year period. So the Academy doesn’t exist to prepare young people to be schoolteachers or Wall Street bankers. It exists for one purpose: to prepare officers for the U.S. Air Force. And the cadets are “set apart” for that purpose.

In a way similar to a young person entering the Air Force Academy, every new believer has been set apart by God, separated unto God to be transformed into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ. In this sense, every believer is a saint — a person separated from his old sinful way of life and set apart by God to increasingly glorify God as his life is transformed.

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In the biblical sense of the term, sainthood is not a status of achievement and character but a state of being — an entirely new condition of life brought about by the Spirit of God. Paul describes it as “[turning] from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18) and again as having been “delivered . . . from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13).

We don’t become saints by our actions. We are made saints by the immediate supernatural action of the Holy Spirit alone who works this change deep within our inner being so that we do, in fact, become new creations in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). This change of state is described prophetically in Ezekiel 36:26: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone [a dead, unresponsive heart] from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh [a living, responsive heart].”

It would be nice if we could end the story here, because the last two paragraphs might suggest a saint is someone who no longer sins. Alas, we all know that is not true. Rather, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that nearly every waking hour, we sin in thought, word, or deed. Even our best deeds are stained with impure (mixed) motives and imperfect performance. And who of us can ever begin to say, “I have loved my neighbor as myself”? And of course, the messed-up Corinthian church stands as Exhibit A that we saints can be quite sinful in our attitudes and actions.

Why is this true? Why is there a disconnect between what God has seemingly promised and what we experience in our daily lives? The answer is found in such Scriptures as Galatians 5:17, which says, “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

The guerrilla warfare between the flesh and the Spirit described in Galatians 5:17 is fought daily in the heart of every Christian. That is why, for instance, Peter urges us “to abstain

from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). So although 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Ezekiel 36:26 speak of a decisive change that always occurs in the heart of every new believer, the outworking of that change is not instantaneous and absolute. Instead it is progressive over time and never complete in this life. However, the awareness of this internal struggle with sin should never be used as an excuse for sinful behavior. Rather, we should always keep in mind that we are saints called to live a life that is set apart for God.

So Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthian church by addressing them as “those sanctified [set apart by God] in Christ Jesus, called to be saints [set-apart ones].” Then he spends the remainder of his letter *vigorously exhorting them to act like saints*. In one sense, Paul’s letter could be summarized in this statement: “You are saints. Now act like saints!” Sometimes that idea is expressed more succinctly as, “Be what you are.” That is, be in your behavior what you are in your state of being. So although the word *saint* basically describes our new state of being as people separated unto God, it carries with it the idea of responsibility to live as saints in our daily lives.

When I was serving as an officer in the U.S. Navy some fifty years ago, there was an expression: “conduct unbecoming an officer.” That expression covered anything from minor offenses resulting in a reprimand to major ones requiring a court martial. But the expression was more than a description of aberrant behavior; it was a statement that the conduct was inconsistent with that expected of a military officer. The officer so described had failed to live up to his responsibility to act as an officer should act.

Perhaps we might do well to adopt a similar expression for believers: “conduct unbecoming a saint.” Such an expression would pull us up short, wouldn’t it? When we gossip or become impatient or get angry, we could remind ourselves that our conduct is unbecoming a saint. We are, in principle, if not in degree, acting like the Corinthians. We are living inconsistently with our calling.

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The Bible has a word for conduct unbecoming a saint. It is *sin*. And just as “conduct unbecoming an officer” covers a wide range of misconduct, so the word *sin* covers a wide range of misbehavior. It covers everything from gossip to adultery, from impatience to murder. Obviously, there are degrees of seriousness of sin. But in the final analysis, sin is sin. It is conduct unbecoming a saint.

One of our problems, however, is that we neither think of ourselves as saints — with our new state’s concurrent responsibility to live as saints — nor do we think of such actions as our gossip and impatience as sin. Sin is what people outside our Christian communities do. We can readily identify sin in the immoral or unethical conduct of people in society at large. But we often fail to see it in what I call the “acceptable sins of the saints.” In effect, we, like society at large, live in denial of our sin. So now let’s move on to talk about sin and our frequent denial of it in our lives.

Chapter Two: The Disappearance of Sin

In his 1973 book *Whatever Became of Sin?* psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote,

The very word, “sin,” which seems to have disappeared, was once a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. . . . But the word went away. It has almost disappeared — the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn’t anyone sin anymore? Doesn’t anyone believe in sin?

To reinforce his observations, Dr. Menninger noted that in the presidential proclamation for the annual National Day of

Prayer, the last time the word *sin* was mentioned was in President Eisenhower's proclamation in 1953 — and those words were borrowed from a call to national prayer by Abraham Lincoln in 1863! So, as Dr. Menninger observed, “as a nation, we officially ceased ‘sinning’ some twenty [now over fifty] years ago.”¹

Karl Menninger is by no means alone in his assessment. Author Peter Barnes, in an article titled “What! Me? A Sinner?” wrote,

In twentieth century England, C. S. Lewis noted that, “The barrier I have met is the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin.” And in 2001, New Testament scholar D. A. Carson commented that the most frustrating aspect of doing evangelism in universities is the fact that students generally have no idea of sin. “They know *how to sin* well enough, but they have no idea of what constitutes sin.”²

These statements only confirm what seems clear to many observers: The whole idea of sin has virtually disappeared from our culture.

Unfortunately, the idea of sin is all but disappearing from many churches as well. Sociologist Marsha Witten analyzed forty-seven taped sermons on the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-32) preached by Baptist and Presbyterian ministers. In her book *All Is Forgiven*, she wrote,

How does the idea of sin fare in the sermons under study here? We should not be surprised to find that communicating notions of sin poses difficulties for many of the pastors. . . . As we have seen here, a closer examination of the sermons suggests the many ways in which the concept of “sin” has been accommodated to fit secular sensibilities. For while some traditional images of sin are retained in this speech, the language

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frequently cushions the listeners from their impact, as it employs a variety of softening rhetorical devices.³

Ms. Witten concluded her chapter on the pastors' treatment of sin with this observation: "In this context, talk about sin appears more to be setting implicit boundaries to separate insiders who are beyond reach of evaluation from outsiders who are targets for it, than to be articulating theological insights into the depravity of human nature."⁴

So we see that the entire concept of sin has virtually disappeared from our American culture at large and has been softened, even within many of our churches, to accommodate modern sensibilities. Indeed, strong biblical words for sin have been excised from our vocabulary. People no longer commit adultery; instead they have an affair. Corporate executives do not steal; they commit fraud.

But what about our conservative, evangelical churches? Has the idea of sin all but disappeared from us also? No, it has not disappeared, but it has, in many instances, been *deflected* to those outside our circles who commit flagrant sins such as abortion, homosexuality, and murder, or the notorious white-collar crimes of high-level corporate executives. It's easy for us to condemn those obvious sins while virtually ignoring our own sins of gossip, pride, envy, bitterness, and lust, or even our lack of those gracious qualities that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23).

A pastor invited the men in his church to join him in a prayer meeting. Rather than praying about the spiritual needs of the church as he expected, all of the men without exception prayed about the sins of the culture, primarily abortion and homosexuality. Finally, the pastor, dismayed over the apparent self-righteousness of the men, closed the prayer meeting with the well-known prayer of the tax collector, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

The attitude toward sin reflected in the prayers of those

men seems all too prevalent within our conservative, evangelical circles. Of course, this is a broad-brush observation, and there are many happy exceptions. But on the whole, we appear to be more concerned about the sins of society than we are the sins of the saints. In fact, we often indulge in what I call the “respectable” or even “acceptable” sins without any sense of sin. Our gossip or unkind words about a brother or sister in Christ roll easily off our tongues without any awareness of wrongdoing. We harbor hurts over wrongs long past without any effort to forgive as God has forgiven us. We look down our religious noses at “sinners” in society without any sense of a humble “there but for the grace of God go I” spirit.

We were incensed, and rightfully so, when a major denomination ordained a practicing homosexual as a bishop. Why do we not also mourn over our selfishness, our critical spirit, our impatience, and our anger? It’s easy to let ourselves off the hook by saying, these sins are not as bad as the flagrant ones of society. But God has not given us the authority to establish values for different sins. Instead, He says through James, “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for [is guilty of] all of it” (2:10). That Scripture is difficult for us to understand because we think in terms of individual laws and their respective penalties. But God’s law is seamless. The Bible speaks not of God’s *laws*, as if many of them, but of God’s *law* as a single whole. When a person commits murder, he breaks God’s law. When a Christian lets corrupting speech (that is, speech which tends to tear down another person) come out of his mouth (see Ephesians 4:29), he breaks God’s law.

In chapter 1 I acknowledged that some sins are more serious than others. I would rather be guilty of a lustful look than of adultery. Yet Jesus said that with that lustful look, I have actually committed adultery in my heart. I would rather be angry at someone than to murder that person. Yet Jesus said that whoever murders and whoever is angry with his brother are both liable to judgment (see Matthew 5:21-22). The truth is,

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all sin is serious because all sin is a breaking of God's law.

The apostle John wrote, "Sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). All sin, even sin that seems so minor in our eyes, is lawlessness. It is not just the breaking of a single command; it is a complete disregard for the law of God, a deliberate rejection of His moral will in favor of fulfilling one's own desires. In our human values of civil laws, we draw a huge distinction between an otherwise "law-abiding citizen" who gets an occasional traffic ticket and a person who lives a "lawless" life in contempt and utter disregard for all laws. But the Bible does not seem to make that distinction. Rather, it simply says sin — that is, all sin without distinction — is lawlessness.

In Greek culture, *sin* originally meant to "miss the mark," that is, to miss the center of the target. Therefore sin was considered a miscalculation or failure to achieve. There is some truth in that idea even today as, for example, when a person is genuinely repentant over some sinful behavior and is earnestly seeking to overcome it but still fails frequently. He wants to hit the bull's-eye every time, but he can't seem to pull it off. Usually, however, our sinful actions stem not from a failure to achieve but from an inner urge to fulfill our own desires. As James wrote, "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (1:14). We gossip or lust because of the sinful pleasure we get out of it. At that time, the lure of that momentary pleasure is stronger than our desire to please God.

Sin is sin. Even those sins that I call "the acceptable sins of the saints" — those sins that we tolerate in our lives — are serious in God's eyes. Our religious pride, our critical attitudes, our unkind speech about others, our impatience and anger, even our anxiety (see Philippians 4:6); all of these are serious in the sight of God.

The apostle Paul, in stressing the need to seek justification by faith in Christ alone, quoted from the Old Testament, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them" (Galatians 3:10). That is

a perfectly exacting standard of obedience. In academic terms, that means a 99 on a final exam is a failing grade. It means that a misplaced comma in an otherwise fine term paper would garner an F. Now, happily, Paul goes on to assure us that Christ has “redeemed us [that is, all who trust in Him as their redeemer] from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). But the fact still remains that the seemingly minor sins we tolerate in our lives do indeed deserve the curse of God.

Yes, the whole idea of sin may have disappeared from our culture. It may have been softened in many of our churches so as not to make the audiences uncomfortable. And, sad to say, the concept of sin among many conservative Christians has been essentially *redefined* to cover only the obviously gross sins of our society. The result, then, is that for many morally upright believers, the awareness of personal sin has effectively disappeared from their consciences. But it has not disappeared from the sight of God. Rather, all sin, both the so-called respectable sins of the saints, which we too often tolerate, and the flagrant sins of society, which we are quick to condemn, are a disregard for the law of God and are reprehensible in His sight. Both deserve the curse of God.

If this observation seems too harsh and too sweeping an indictment of believers, let me hasten to say that there are many godly, humble people who are happy exceptions. In fact, the paradox is that those whose lives most reflect the fruit of the Spirit are usually those who are most keenly aware of and groan inwardly over these so-called acceptable sins in their own lives. But there is also a vast multitude who are quite judgmental toward the grosser sins of society but who seem proudly unaware of their own personal sins. And a lot of us live somewhere in between. But the point is, all of our sin, wherever we may be on the spectrum of personal awareness of it in our lives, is reprehensible in the sight of God and deserving of His judgment.

Admittedly, I have painted a rather dark picture, both of

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society as a whole and of our conservative, evangelical community. But God has not forsaken us. For those who are true believers, God is still our heavenly Father, and He is at work among us to call us to repentance and renewal. Part of His calling is to lead us to the place where we do see the sins we tolerate in our own lives so that we will experience the repentance and renewal we need. It is my prayer that God will be pleased to use this book as one means to that end. And so for one more chapter, we will dig deeper into the sinfulness of our “respectable” sins.

Chapter Three: The Malignancy of Sin

Cancer! It’s a dreaded word, a word that often invokes a sense of despair and sometimes even hopelessness. For me, cancer was always something that happened in other families. But in 1987, it came to our family when my wife was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. I remember my reaction: This can’t be happening to us. But it had, and seventeen months later, my wife died after a debilitating and even humiliating illness.

Another term for cancer is malignancy. Medically, the word *malignant* describes a tumor of potentially unlimited growth that expands locally into adjoining tissue by invasion and systemically by metastasizing into other areas of the body. Left alone, a malignancy tends to infiltrate and metastasize throughout the entire body and will eventually cause death. No wonder *cancer* and *malignant* are such dreaded words.

Sin is a spiritual and moral malignancy. Left unchecked, it can spread throughout our entire inner being and contaminate every area of our lives. Even worse, it often will “metastasize”

from us into the lives of other believers around us. None of us lives on a spiritual or social island. Our attitudes, words, and actions, and oftentimes even our private unspoken thoughts, tend to have an effect on those around us.

Paul must have had this concept in mind when he wrote, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29). Our speech, whether it is about others or to others, tends to tear down or build up. It either corrupts the minds of our hearers, or it gives grace to them. Such is the power of our words. If I gossip, I both tear down another person and corrupt the mind of my listener. If I complain about the difficult circumstances of my life, I impugn the sovereignty and goodness of God and tempt my listener to do the same. In this way, my sin “metastasizes” into the heart of another person.

Sin, however, is much more than wrong actions, unkind words, or even those evil thoughts that we never express. Sin is a principle or moral force in our heart, our inner being. Our sinful actions, words, and thoughts are simply expressions of the principle of sin residing within us, even in those of us whose hearts have been renewed. The apostle Paul calls this principle the *flesh* (or *sinful nature* in some Bible translations). This principle, called the flesh, is such a reality that Paul sometimes personifies it (see, for example, Romans 7:8-11; Galatians 5:17).

Now, here is the unvarnished truth that we need to lay to heart. Even though our hearts have been renewed, even though we have been freed from the absolute dominion of sin, even though God’s Holy Spirit dwells within our bodies, this principle of sin still lurks within us and wages war against our souls. It is the failure to recognize the awful reality of this truth that provides the fertile soil in which our “respectable” or “acceptable” sins grow and flourish.

We who are believers tend to evaluate our character and conduct relative to the moral culture in which we live. Since we

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usually live at a higher moral standard than society at large, it is easy for us to feel good about ourselves and to assume that God feels that way also. We fail to reckon with the reality of sin still dwelling within us.

One of the common truths about cancer is that it can often grow undetected until it reaches a crisis stage or even a stage that is terminal. When my wife visited her doctor on June 19, 1987, she had no idea there was a malignant tumor growing in her abdominal area. And even her capable physicians who successfully treated the tumor failed to detect that it had already metastasized into her lymph system. In fact, the word *deceitful*, which is a moral term, can be used to describe the way cancer often seems to operate. It seems to have been successfully treated; but unexpectedly, it reappears somewhere else in the body.

The way cancer operates is a good analogy of the way sin, especially so-called acceptable or refined sin, operates in our lives. As I mentioned in the preface, another good descriptive term is *subtle sins*. The word *subtle* has a wide variety of meanings, some positive, as in “the subtle shades of blue in a painting.” But often it has a strong negative connotation to mean wily, crafty, insidious, or treacherous. That is the sense of the word in the expression *subtle sins*. The acceptable sins are subtle in the sense that they deceive us into thinking they are not so bad, or not thinking of them as sins, or even worse, not even thinking about them at all! Yes, some of our refined sins are so subtle that we commit them without even thinking about them, either at the time or afterward. We often live in unconscious denial of our “acceptable” sins.

We present-day believers have, to some extent, been influenced by the “feel good about myself” philosophy of our times. By contrast, believers in the Puritan era of the seventeenth century had a different view of themselves. They feared the reality of sin still dwelling in them. I have in my library four books on sin by pastors of that era. Here are their titles:

The Sinfulness of Sin

The Mischief of Sin

The Anatomy of Secret Sins

The Evil of Evils or The Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin

These pastors all saw sin for what it actually is: a diabolical force within us. Ralph Venning, the author of *The Sinfulness of Sin*, uses especially colorful (in the negative sense) words to describe sin. Over the space of only a few pages, he says that sin is vile, ugly, odious, malignant, pestilent, pernicious, hideous, spiteful, poisonous, virulent, villainous, abominable, and deadly.

Take a few moments to ponder those words so as to get the full impact of them. Those words describe not just the scandalous sins of society but also the respectable sins we tolerate in our own lives. Think of such tolerated sins as impatience, pride, resentment, frustration, and self-pity. Do they seem odious and pernicious to you? They really are. To tolerate those sins in our spiritual lives is as dangerous as to tolerate cancer in our bodies. Seemingly small sins can lead to more serious ones. Lustful looks often lead to pornography addiction and perhaps even adultery. Murder often has its genesis in anger, which grows into bitterness, then to hatred, and finally the murder.

About this time, you may be tempted to throw this book across the room. You didn't pick it up to be condemned or to have your subtle sins exposed. So far everything in this book seems dark and dismal. You want to be encouraged, not condemned. If you feel that way, I appeal to you to stay with me. We are indeed going to get to some good news later on. But for now, we've got to continue to explore the bad news. In fact, it is going to get worse. When we see how really bad the bad news is, we'll be in a better position to appreciate how really good the good news is.

So how does the already bad news get worse? So far we've looked at our sin as it affects us. We've seen its malignant tendency in both our lives and the lives of others around us. The more important issue, however, is how our sin affects God. Someone has described sin as cosmic treason. If that seems like an overstatement, consider that the word *transgression* in the Bible, as seen

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for example in Leviticus 16:21, actually means rebellion against authority—in this case, God’s authority. So when I gossip, I am rebelling against God. When I harbor resentful thoughts toward someone instead of forgiving him or her in my heart, I am rebelling against God.

In Isaiah 6:1-8, the prophet Isaiah sees a vision of God in His absolute majesty. He hears angelic beings calling out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (verse 3). Any Jew would have understood that the threefold repetition of the word *holy* is intended to convey the highest possible degree of holiness. In other words, God is said to be infinitely holy. But what does it mean to say that God is infinitely holy? Certainly it speaks of His absolute moral purity, but it means much more than that. Primarily, the word *holy*, when used of God, speaks of His infinite, transcendent majesty. It speaks of His sovereign reign over all His creation. Therefore, when we sin, when we violate the law of God in any way, be it ever so small in our eyes, we rebel against the sovereign authority and transcendent majesty of God. To put it bluntly, our sin is an assault on the majesty and sovereign rule of God. It is indeed cosmic treason.

Let’s continue with the bad news. Remember the story of David’s sin of adultery with Bathsheba and then his arranging the death of her husband, Uriah, to try to cover up his adultery? God was displeased, to put it mildly, and sent Nathan the prophet to confront David about his sin. Here are Nathan’s words:

Why have you *despised* the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have *despised* me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. (2 Samuel 12:9-10, emphasis added)

Note the use of the word *despised* in both verses 9 and 10. In the first instance David despises the word (the law) of the Lord. In the second instance, God, speaking through Nathan, says, “You have despised me.” We see from this that sin is a despising of the law of God. But we also see that to despise God’s law is to despise Him. Now, it is easy for us to think that David’s sin truly was grievous and fail to grasp the application of Nathan’s words to ourselves. But as we have already seen, all sin, whether large or small in our eyes, is against God. Therefore, when I indulge in any of the so-called acceptable sins, I am not only despising God’s law but, at the same time, I am despising God Himself. Think about that the next time you are tempted to speak critical or unkind words about someone. Do you see why I said that our description of sin would get worse?

We’re not through yet. There’s still more bad news. In the context of exposing sin in our relationships with one another (see Ephesians 4:25-32), Paul says, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (verse 30). When we think of our sin as rebellion against God’s sovereign authority and a despising of both His law and His person, we are viewing God in His rightful role as our ruler and judge. But when we see our sin as grieving the Holy Spirit — that is, as grieving God — we are viewing God as our redeemer and Father. Our sin grieves our heavenly Father. Whether we are unkind to someone else or unforgiving when someone is unkind to us, we grieve our Father’s heart.

Not only do we grieve our heavenly Father with our sin, we also presume on His grace. Paul wrote that God has forgiven us our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (see Ephesians 1:7). Now, that is a blessed truth, but sin, in its subtle deceitfulness, will suggest to us that our unkind words and resentful thoughts don’t matter because God has forgiven them. Forgiveness, however, does not mean overlooking or tolerating our sin. God never does that. Instead, God *always* judges sin. But in our case (that is, the case of all who trust in Jesus

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as their Savior), God has judged our sin in the person of His Son. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). Shall we presume on God’s grace by tolerating in ourselves the very sin that nailed Christ to the cross?

Next consider that every sinful thought and word and deed we do is done in the presence of God. David wrote,

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.
 You search out my path and my lying down
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.
 (Psalm 139:1-4)

God knows our every thought; He hears our words before we even speak them and sees our every deed. He even searches our motives, for Paul wrote that when the Lord comes, He “will disclose the purposes [motives] of the heart” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

This means that all of our rebellion, all of our despising of God and His law, all of our grieving His Holy Spirit, all of our presuming on His grace, all of our sin, is done openly in the very presence of God. It’s as if we are acting out all of our sin before Him as He sits on His royal throne.

I referred earlier to the Puritan Ralph Venning’s book *The Sinfulness of Sin*. The title sounds somewhat like a tautology, a needless repetition. But in his title, Venning was trying to make a point, and here is his point in his own words: “On the contrary, as God is holy, all holy, only holy, altogether holy, and always holy, so sin is sinful, all sinful, only sinful, altogether sinful, and always sinful.⁵ It does not matter whether our sin is scandalous or respectable, all our sin is sinful, only sinful, and

altogether sinful. Whether it is large or small in our eyes, it is heinous in the sight of God. God forgives our sin because of the shed blood of Christ, but He does not tolerate it. Instead, every sin that we commit, even the subtle sin that we don't even think about, was laid upon Christ as He bore the curse of God in our place. And herein lies chiefly the malignancy of sin. Christ suffered because of our sins.

That, then, is the bad news about our sin, and, as you can see, it is really, really bad. How do you respond? Will you deflect it onto other people whom you see to be sinners? Do you find yourself wishing that a certain other person would read this chapter? Or does this view of our sin cause you to want to fall on your knees before God in repentance and contrition over the sins you have tolerated in your life? If the latter is true, then you are ready for the good news, and it really is really, really good.

Facing Up to the Truth

(Chapters 1, 2, and 3)

STUDY QUESTIONS

KEY VERSE: “Sin is lawlessness.” (1 John 3:4)

GET FOCUSED

Some forms of cancer grow undetected until they reach a terminal stage. Likewise, sin — especially the so-called “acceptable” or “subtle” sins — can exist in our lives, virtually undetected and dangerous. We can be deceived into believing that such sin is not all that bad, into denying that sin is really sin, and into not thinking about sin. In fact, the word *sin* has virtually disappeared from our culture — and is even avoided in some churches. Well-intentioned believers find it all too easy to focus on the blatant sins of our “evil” culture while ignoring their own, more-subtle sins — “respectable” sins.

In contrast to the feel-good-about-ourselves philosophy of our day, Puritan believers in the seventeenth century had a different view of themselves and sin. They feared the reality of sin; they saw all sin as a diabolical force living within themselves. They recognized, like the biblical writers, that *any* sin breaks God’s law.

During this session we will explore the impact of sins that Christians tend to downplay in their own lives — sins such as impatience, gossip, pride, resentment, and anger. These often become larger malignancies, cascading us into deeper sinfulness.

Yes, God sent Jesus to earth to take humankind’s sins on Himself. But as long as we believers recognize our call to glorify God and become like Jesus, we will battle sin. To live as God’s people includes facing sin — especially sin we don’t recognize or we rationalize away. That’s what this first session is all about.

THINK IT THROUGH FOR PERSONAL STUDY

I. What Is Sin?

1. Why do you think it's important for us to understand what sin is and its impact on our lives and relationships?
2. What do James 1:14-15 and 2:10-11 reveal about the root of our sinful actions? About God's law and the consequences of breaking it?
3. In Matthew 5:22,27-28, what did Jesus emphasize concerning the seriousness of sin — of breaking God's law?

II. What Happened to the Word Sin?

1. What evidence do you see that the word *sin* has virtually disappeared from our culture? That awareness of personal sin has effectively disappeared from many believers' consciences? Explain your answer.

2. What impact do you think the "softening" of language regarding sin is having on our lives? On our churches?

What's Become of Sin?

The very word, *sin*, which seems to have disappeared, was once a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. . . . But the word went away. It has almost disappeared — the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?

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*Whatever Became of Sin?*⁶

3. Why is it often easier for believers to focus on the sins of unbelievers rather than on their own personal sins?

III. “Respectable” Sins

1. List some common “respectable” sins. Why do you think we are more inclined to tolerate them?

2. In Galatians 3:10, what did the apostle Paul quote to emphasize the importance of obeying God’s law? What might this reveal about the consequences of tolerating “seemingly minor sins”?

3. Even though God always makes a decisive change in every believer’s heart, what does every believer face when he or she seeks to live in obedience to God? (See Galatians 5:17; James 1:14.)

4. Describe the choices Peter and Paul urge every true believer to make. (See Galatians 5:16; Ephesians 4:29; 1 Peter 2:11.)

IV. How Our Sin Affects God

1. Jerry writes: “When we sin we violate the law of God in any way, . . . we rebel against the sovereign authority and transcendent majesty of God. We commit ‘cosmic treason.’” It is indeed “cosmic treason.” Do you agree or disagree with the concept of “cosmic treason”? Explain.

2. How much do you think God knows about our sin? (See Psalm 139:1-4; I Corinthians 4:5.)

3. Read 2 Samuel 12:1-10, where Nathan the prophet spoke God’s words to David, who had committed adultery with Bathsheba, murdered her husband, and lived in denial of his sin. What do we learn about denial? About sin in relation to God and His law?

4. What effect does sin have on the Holy Spirit — that is, God — who lives inside each believer? (See Ephesians 4:30.)

TALK IT OVER FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why should we take our “respectable” sins seriously?
2. How might we begin to see our own sins more clearly instead of focusing so much on other people’s sins?
3. What impact do you think the “softening” of language regarding sin is having on our lives? On our churches?
4. As we realize that our sin is not only rebellion against God’s sovereign authority but a despising of both His law and His person, how might we view sin differently?
5. How might what we learned today influence what we say, do, and/or think?

GROUP PRAYER

As a group, thank God for the opportunity to gather and explore this important topic. Ask Him to help you recognize “respectable” sins and to take them seriously.



FOR NEXT TIME: Read *Respectable Sins*, chapters 4, 5, and 6, then respond to the “Think It Through” personal-study questions for session 2.

TAKE IT TO HEART A PERSONAL-GROWTH JOURNAL

Personal Reflection

During this session, what discoveries, quotations, or verses especially connected with you? Why?

What “respectable” sins might you be tolerating in your life?

In what ways might these sins be affecting your life, your relationships, and your relationship with God?

What do you think God wants you to learn from that situation?

Personal Action Point

What one insight regarding “respectable” sins would you like to begin applying to your spiritual journey this week? Write it down and commit it to the Lord.

Personal Prayer

Write a brief prayer to God about sin’s lure and impact in your life — and your desire for Him to help you stand strong in the face of temptation.

PROGRESS REPORT

What have you discovered this week about “respectable” sins?

As you have begun to apply what you learned from session 1, what new choices have you made? What challenges have you faced?

In what ways has knowing God’s view of all sin — including the more “acceptable” ones — influenced you this week?