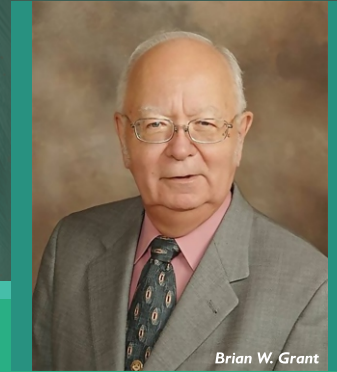


SIN & FORGIVENESS



Brian W. Grant

“It’s just the way I am” can sabotage our awareness of the possibility of being some other way”

Paul declares in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” and we see evidence of that truth all around us. We find it in our awareness of our own pride, greed, and lust. We find it in the news, with wars, human trafficking, drug addiction, murder, and indifference to the fate of the poor. We see it in the tragedies that befall our neighbors.

But what is it? How does it operate? How can we be free of it? How can we minimize the damage it does?

Paul Tillich wrote of sin as 'Fact' and sin as 'Act'. To speak of sin as fact is a reminder that we are all immersed in structures and processes that distort God's image in us. We were trained to be sexist, racist, greedy, and exploitative by the rewards our societies offer for those attitudes. Sin as act are those events where we knowingly, and unknowingly, implement, through our own decisions, the harm those structures impose.

From a psychological perspective, we internalize our parents' views of right and wrong, just as they took on the views of their parents and their broader society. Sometimes that borrowing sets us on the right path, but often we find ourselves blindly loyal to perspectives that may have represented God's will for our parents and grandparents, but are totally toxic to the needs of today's neighbors. When our present lives impair the neighbors' access to abundant life, we are in sin, even if we're doing exactly what our parents would have wanted us to do. We inherit structures, some are gracious, some are sinful, and our acceptance or challenge of them is the measure of the depth of our own sinfulness.

Our minds, those ambiguous gifts of God's creation, are clever at hiding our opportunities for choice about these basic stances toward life. “It’s just the way I am” can sabotage our awareness of the possibility of being some other way. But we can be alerted to other options in many ways: our own nocturnal dreams, a phrase in a sermon, a therapist's observation, a spouse's complaint, an insight during prayer or meditation. Once we notice, we have freedom and responsibility that had been unavailable.

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” Paul writes (2 Cor. 3:17) When we identify a choice-point about a habitual sin, a new life

becomes possible, and great is the rejoicing in heaven.

Faith suggests that God is always seeking to make us aware of our sin, not to frighten or humiliate us, but so we might move closer to Godself. We are, through grace, helped to see how our choices have separated us from God. That awareness makes repentance possible, and repentance usually leads to a burst of hope that we can, right now, live more abundantly with God and neighbor. Guilt falls away, replaced by the experience of closer relationships, human and divine.

“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) The Scriptures tell us that God longs for companionship with us. Our sinfulness interferes with the joy of God and denies us the joy of full connection to Godself and one another. When we feel our own repentance, and experience the surprising joy of a cleaner life, there's a harvest of unexpected feelings: the grief over the harm we've done is mixed and softened by the discovery of different possible ways to live and the reality of greater intimacy with those we love.

Jesus empowers this reconciliation in a miraculous range of ways. He showed us courage, selflessness, faithfulness, and commitment that we can imitate. In His willingness to risk an agonizing death by challenging the Roman rulers of Palestine, He led humanity into a closer fellowship with God. He stood with the prophets in making God's will clearer to us stiff-necked people. His courage and sacrifice grew out of His confidence that the God of the Hebrew people loved Him and loved all of us, and that His life could bring that certainty to the world. He founded a community that carried God's love and grace through the centuries, and still points the way to our salvation.

**By: Brian W. Grant, PhD, HSPP
Clergy, Clinical Psychologist**