

CATECHISM

Foundations of the Faith

What Is Sin?

Key Idea:

Sin is disobeying or not conforming to God's law perfectly.

Key Text:

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. (1 John 3:4 ESV)

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20 ESV)

Key Points:

- **Sin is defined by God's law — not by human feelings, cultural standards, or personal opinion.** Our culture constantly redefines sin to suit its own preferences — reducing it, relocating it, or replacing it with new categories of moral wrongdoing unrooted in God's character. The catechism's answer (drawn from Scripture) cuts through that confusion: "Sin is disobeying or not conforming to God's law perfectly." God's law reflects His own character — perfect in holiness, love, and integrity without a trace of sin — which is why it and not culture or conscience is the authoritative standard. Romans 3:20 makes the function of the law clear: it gives "knowledge of sin." The law is the diagnostic instrument God has given to the world, and it is infallible where our intuitions are not.
- **The law is written on every human heart — but that conscience can be seared and silenced, which is why God gave us His written law.** Romans 2:14–15 tells us that even Gentiles who did not have the written law show the work of the law written on their hearts — their consciences bear witness to it. But the conscience is not a reliable guide on its own. Repeated sin, self-deception, and cultural pressure can sear the conscience so thoroughly that it begins to excuse rather than accuse sinful behavior. This is why God gave His written law: it stands outside us as an objective standard, immune to our rationalizations, capable of cutting through even the most fortified defenses we build around our sin.
- **Sin includes both commission and omission, both external action and internal desire.** The catechism's word "disobeying" covers both directions of transgression: doing

what God forbids, and failing to do what God commands. The old Anglican confession captures this well: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” But “not conforming” goes further still: Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount shows that the law reaches to internal attitudes and desires, not merely outward actions. Anger is addressed alongside murder (Matt. 5:21–22); lust alongside adultery (Matt. 5:27–30). Furthermore, Ephesians 4:28 shows that the thief must not only stop stealing but must positively work and give — because God is not a thief but a giver. Conforming to the law means imitating the character behind it.

- **To break God’s law even once is to be guilty of all of it — because sin is not merely rule-breaking but cosmic treason against God’s own character.** James 2:10–11 makes this startling claim: to fail at one point of the law is to become guilty of all of it, because the law is not a collection of arbitrary rules but a unified expression of God’s character. To break it anywhere is to violate the Lawgiver Himself. This is why the catechism adds the word “perfectly” — nothing short of complete conformity to God’s law avoids sin. Sin is therefore not a minor infraction to be weighed against one’s good deeds; it is cosmic treason, an offense against the very character of God. This is precisely why we need not just law but Gospel.
- **The law diagnoses sin but cannot cure it — only the Gospel can lead us to Christ, who alone has kept God’s law perfectly and offers His righteousness to us as a gift.** Romans 3:19–22 sets out the law-Gospel relationship with precision: the law stops every mouth, holds the whole world accountable to God, and reveals sin — but it does not justify. Righteousness comes not from the law but through the Gospel: the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe. If a church proclaims only law, it produces Pharisees or despair — people who either try harder or give up. Only the Gospel — the stunning news that God offers the perfect righteousness of Christ as a gift, received by faith alone — can stir up saving faith in the hearts of sinners and draw them away from their own efforts to Christ, the only One who has obeyed perfectly.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret opened with a recent article that encouraged people to use the word “sin” — but then redefined it to mean something the Bible does not mean. Where do you see our culture redefining sin today? What words or categories is it replacing the biblical concept with? Why does this matter so much?
- The catechism Q12 defines sin as: “Sin is disobeying or not conforming to God’s law perfectly.” Before you heard this teaching, how would you have defined sin? How does the catechism’s definition sharpen, expand, or correct your prior understanding?
- Romans 2:14–15 says the law is written on the hearts of all people, which is why conscience reacts to sin. But the teaching noted that conscience can be seared so that it excuses sin rather than convicting of it. Have you seen that happen — in your own life or in the culture? What does that reveal about why God gave us His written law?

- The teaching distinguished between sins of commission (doing what God forbids) and sins of omission (not doing what God commands). The Anglican confession puts it memorably: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” Which of these two directions do you find it harder to take seriously? Why is omission so easy to overlook?
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows that the law addresses not only external actions but internal desires — anger alongside murder, lust alongside adultery. How does that interior dimension of God’s law change the way you assess your own obedience? Are there internal attitudes you have treated as spiritually neutral that this teaching puts in a different light?
- The teaching used Ephesians 4:28 to show that conforming to God’s law is not just about stopping sinful behavior but about positively imitating God’s character: the thief must not only stop stealing but must work hard and give generously, because God is a giver. Can you think of other areas where the positive requirement of the law goes beyond simply stopping a sin?
- James 2:10–11 says that to fail at one point of the law is to become guilty of all of it. The teaching called sin “cosmic treason” — not just rule-breaking but an offense against God’s own character. How does that framing change the weight you give to what our culture considers minor or private sins? Does it feel true to you, or does it feel like an overstatement?
- Bret noted that we are all experts at self-deception and self-justification — and that only God’s law can crash through our defenses to reveal sin accurately. Where have you most recently experienced the law doing that work in your own life — exposing something you had managed to rationalize or overlook?
- The teaching argued that a church must preach both the law and the Gospel — the law alone produces Pharisees or despair, while the Gospel alone without law is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” that produces a shallow, sin-softening Christianity. How have you experienced the right balance of law and Gospel in your own spiritual formation? What happens when either one is missing?

For Further Study:

- Read Romans 3:9–26 in full as the passage that most completely sets out the law’s diagnostic function and the Gospel’s saving power in a single sustained argument. Note how Paul moves from the universal indictment of sin (vv. 9–20) to the righteousness of God through faith in Christ (vv. 21–26).
- For Jesus’ own teaching on the interior reach of God’s law, read Matthew 5:17–48 (the Sermon on the Mount antitheses) carefully. Note that Jesus is not contradicting the law but fulfilling and deepening it — showing what perfect conformity actually requires.
- Watch this week’s episode of [After Hours](#) (available on Tuesday) for a discussion of “Original Sin and My Sin” — the effect of Adam’s fall upon each of us, and how we deepen that fall by our own choice.

- For the catechism questions referenced in the teaching, review Q12 (What is sin?) and Q13 (How do you come to learn of your sin and guilt?) in the church's [catechism](#). Consider memorizing these with your family this week as a way of internalizing the definition. You can also view the [study edition of the catechism](#) for further biblical texts and resources to study these concepts more deeply.
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [sin](#); [law and gospel](#); [holiness](#); and [the catechism](#).