

Christian Doctrine

by Shirley C. Guthrie

Chapter Eleven

“Why Don’t You Just Be Yourself?”

The Doctrine of Sin

Introduction

Guthrie titles this chapter with a question, and it is worth sitting with before we go any further: “Why don’t you just be yourself?” It sounds like the kind of thing a friend says to put you at ease. But Guthrie means it as the sharpest possible definition of sin. To sin is precisely the failure to be ourselves — to be the human beings God made us and called us to be.

That is not how we usually talk about sin. We tend to picture it as a list of forbidden things, a set of rules we broke, a tally God keeps. Guthrie wants to dismantle that picture entirely. Sin, he argues, is not first of all about rule-breaking. It is about a broken relationship, and about the strange human tendency to refuse the very life that would make us whole. This chapter is Guthrie’s attempt to help us take sin with complete seriousness — and, at the same time, to refuse to let it have the last word.

Sin Is Not What We Usually Think

The Question Behind the Doctrine

Most of us learned about sin as a problem of behavior — things we did that we shouldn’t have, things we should have done and didn’t. Guthrie does not deny that sin shows up in our actions. But he insists that if we start with the list of bad deeds, we will never understand what sin actually is. The deeds are symptoms. The disease lies deeper.

In the previous chapter Guthrie described what it means to be human in the image of God: life received from God and lived for God in thankful dependence; life lived with and for our neighbors in openness and mutual help; a life that becomes most fully itself precisely in that double relationship. Sin is what happens when we walk away from that. It is the refusal to be that kind of creature.

Sin is not the breaking of an arbitrary rule imposed on us from the outside. It is the refusal to be the human beings God made us to be. To sin is not to express our true selves — it is to deny them.

Sin as Broken Relationship

If our humanity is fundamentally relational — a matter of how we stand toward God and toward one another — then sin is fundamentally relational too. Guthrie

reframes the whole question. The issue is not mainly what we have done, but who we have become and how we stand toward the God who made us and the people he gave us.

Sin is not first of all a list of bad deeds. It is a broken relationship — with God, with our neighbors, and finally with ourselves. Every particular sin is a symptom of that deeper rupture.

This is why Guthrie can say that sin is finally a refusal of love — both an unwillingness to love and an unwillingness to let ourselves be loved. It is the closing of a door God keeps trying to open.

The Three Faces of Sin

Guthrie does not give us a long catalog. Instead he names three basic forms that sin takes — and the surprising thing about his list is how respectable the last two can look from the outside.

Sin as Disobedience

The first and most obvious form is disobedience. But Guthrie immediately complicates our picture of it. Disobedience is not simply doing forbidden things or skipping the Ten Commandments. It is the withholding of ourselves. And here is the unsettling part: we can keep the rules scrupulously and still be in rebellion. If we obey God the way we strike a bargain — carefully, even religiously, but in order to get something out of him rather than because we love and trust him — we have turned our relationship with God into a business deal. That, too, is disobedience.

Disobedience is not merely doing forbidden things. It is the withholding of ourselves. We can keep every commandment and still be in rebellion — if we obey God the way we strike a bargain, to get something out of him rather than to love and trust him.

Sin as Sensuality

The second form is the one we most often think of when we hear the word “sin” — the misuse of our bodies, appetites, and the physical goods of life. But Guthrie warns against a moralism that simply counts physical pleasures and pronounces them dangerous. Sensuality as sin is not a problem of the body as such; the body is good, part of God’s good creation. The real question is always relational: who are these people, and what do their appetites and their use of physical things have to do with their relationship to God and to their neighbors?

We will never understand the sin we call sensuality by counting physical pleasures. We have to ask who these people are, and what their bodies and appetites have to do with their relationship to God and to one another.

Sin as the Desire to Be Good

The third form is the one Guthrie considers most dangerous — and the one religious people are most likely to miss in themselves. It is the desire to be good. Not the desire to do evil, but the determination to be righteous on our own terms, to know what is good and to achieve it by ourselves, so that we no longer have to learn from God each day what goodness is or depend on his help to live it. This is

the sin hiding underneath much of our religion. It looks like devotion. It is actually a quiet declaration of independence.

The most dangerous sin is not the desire to be bad but the desire to be good — good by ourselves, righteous on our own terms, so that we no longer have to learn from God every morning what goodness is.

How Deep It Goes

Total Depravity Doesn't Mean What It Sounds Like

As heirs of the Reformed tradition, we inherit Calvin's formula of "total depravity," and the phrase sounds far grimmer than what Guthrie says it means. It does not mean that human beings are as bad as they could possibly be. It does not mean we never do anything genuinely good, or that people cannot work together to make real improvements in the world. It means something more honest and more humbling: there is no part of us — not our minds, not our best intentions, not even our religion — that is untouched by our turning away from God. We are never quite what we long to be: never wholly free of self-interest, never wholeheartedly free for God and our neighbors. We are, in Guthrie's phrase, never simply "cured."

Total depravity does not mean human beings are as bad as they could be, or that they never do anything good. It means there is no part of us — not our minds, not our best intentions, not even our religion — that is not touched by our turning away from God.

The Death That Matters Most

Scripture connects sin and death, and Guthrie presses us to hear that connection rightly. The death sin brings is not mainly the death of the body. It is the death of what is human and humane in us — the slow dying of love, the erosion of compassion, the loss of what Paul called "the life that really is life." A person can be perfectly alive by every medical measure and be dying in exactly the way Guthrie means.

The death that sin brings is not mainly the death of the body. It is the death of what is human and humane in us — the slow dying of love, the loss of the life that is really life.

Taking Sin Seriously — But Not Too Seriously

Here Guthrie offers one of the most pastorally important sentences in the whole book: we must take sin very seriously, but not too seriously. Both halves matter. To take sin too lightly is to lie about ourselves and to cheapen the grace that meets us. But to take it too seriously — to treat it as the deepest truth about who we are, or as a power that finally rivals God — is its own kind of unbelief.

Guthrie reminds us that even the Apostles' Creed mentions sin only once — in the line where we confess our faith in the forgiveness of sins. Sin is never "the main thing" in Christian doctrine. It is real, it is serious, and it is already on its way to being undone.

We must take sin seriously, but not too seriously. Sin is real, but it is not the deepest truth about us, and it is not stronger than God. The whole point of naming it is to turn at once to the One who has already dealt with it.

Sin and the Christian Life

Naming Sin in Order to Be Free of It

Why dwell on any of this? Not so that we can wallow, and not so that we can become expert at self-accusation. Guthrie is clear: the point of recognizing that we have a problem is to recognize that there is a remedy. We name the disease because there is a cure. The chapter on sin exists only to send us to the chapters that follow it — the chapters on redemption, on Jesus Christ, on the God who comes for sinners and refuses to leave us in our self-chosen exile.

An Honest Church Is a Hopeful Church

A church that understands sin the way Guthrie describes it can afford to be honest — about itself, about its members, about the world — because its hope does not rest on pretending. We do not have to perform our goodness or hide our failures, because the gospel was never addressed to people at their best. It was addressed to people exactly like us. To confess sin rightly is, finally, an act of hope: it is to admit there is something wrong and to trust that God has already begun to set it right.

That is where Guthrie leaves us at the end of Chapter Eleven — not with a heavy conscience, but with a question that turns out to be good news. Why don't you just be yourself? Because we cannot, on our own. And because the God who made us has come, in Jesus Christ, to give us back the selves we lost.

Christian Doctrine — Chapter Eleven

Discussion Questions

Read through these questions before Wednesday if you can. There are no right answers to perform here — just honest thinking about who we are before God. Write your initial thoughts and bring them with you.

On What Sin Actually Is

1. Guthrie defines sin as the refusal to “be ourselves” — to be the human beings God made us to be. How is that different from the picture of sin you grew up with? Does it make sin feel more serious, or less, or just different?
2. Guthrie says sin is finally a broken relationship, not a list of bad deeds. Where in your own life do you notice the relationship — with God or with others — mattering more than the rulebook?

On the Three Faces of Sin

3. Guthrie says we can keep the rules scrupulously and still be in rebellion if we are only bargaining with God. Have you ever caught yourself obeying God in

order to get something from him? What would it look like to obey out of trust instead?

4. The sin Guthrie calls most dangerous is the desire to be good on our own terms — the kind that hides inside our religion. Why do you think religious people are especially prone to miss this one? Where might it be hiding in you?

On How Deep It Goes

5. Guthrie insists “total depravity” does not mean we are as bad as we could be, or that we never do good — it means no part of us is untouched by our turning from God. Does that distinction change how the doctrine lands for you?
6. Guthrie describes a death that is not the death of the body but the dying of love and compassion in us. Where do you see that kind of slow dying — in the world, in the church, or in your own heart?

On Sin and the Christian Life

7. Guthrie says we should take sin seriously but not too seriously — because it is real, but it is not the deepest truth about us and it is not stronger than God. Which half of that do you find harder to believe, and why?
8. Guthrie says the whole point of naming sin is to turn at once to the remedy. Where is San Pedro being called to be more honest about sin — and more confident about grace? Where are you personally being called to do the same?

Prepared by Pastor Bryan Stamper | San Pedro Presbyterian Church | San Antonio, TX