

“Go and sin no more”?

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QUESTION:

In your blogpost, *Missing What Mark?* you mentioned that the traditional understanding of the Greek word translated “sin” is *missing the mark*. You suggested that the *mark* in question is not moralistic perfection. Instead, you said, the mark, goal or *telos* of humanity is *union with God*. Therefore, sin is not so much law-breaking behavior, but rather, turning away from the loving care of God. Repentance, then, would essentially involve turning from alienation and returning to the Father’s house and reconciling ourselves to his loving care. If I’ve understood you, does this approach still align with the literal sense of *hamartia*?

RESPONSE:

First, yes, you’ve understood me perfectly. And simply put, my approach to *missing the mark* is within the semantic range of *hamartia* since the word does literally mean *missing the mark* or *to err*. The thing is, *hamartia* never specifies what the *mark* refers to. A recipe of original context and our preferred theology determine what *mark* we’ve missed.

As for *hamartia* or any other foreign term, we need to remember that when we translate ancient words, we aren’t using ancient dictionaries. We explore how the word is used in context—or rather, its various contexts over time, since the word may be used in different ways in different times and places.

Hamartia is complex because it has multiple uses both within the Bible and elsewhere in Greek and Roman literature. I did some further fact-checking, which itself always warrants double-checking in the primary sources. Here are the basics:

HAMARTIA IN GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

In Roman context, the word is connect to archery and can be used literally or figuratively:

To miss the target; Literally implying *slight failure (deviation) from the central target point (aim)*. The target was often so far away that the archer could not see how he had performed so the cunning Romans put a ditch in front of the target and a slave in the ditch. The slave would then look at the arrow and call out “*H’amartia*” if the arrow had missed the main target. Used in this way it implies a *shortcoming of a possibly very slight degree which has led to failure*. This leads us to: “to fail or fall short of that which is expected, to sin.” The way we translate the word today is into the word “sin.” We would say (were we the slave) “It [the shot] is a sinner.”

<https://everything2.com/title/hamartia>

Note that for the Romans, *hamartia* can be a *slight deviation* or *falling short* from the mark.

In Greek context, *hamartia* is especially used in the context of Greek tragedy (written or acted):

Primarily, an *error of judgement* which may arise from ignorance or some moral shortcoming. Discussing tragedy and the tragic hero in *Poetics*, Aristotle points out that the tragic hero ought to be a man whose misfortune comes to him, not through vice or depravity, but by some error. For example: [Oedipus](#) kills his father from impulse, and marries his mother out of ignorance. [Antigone](#) resists the law of the state from stubbornness and defiance. [Phèdre](#) is consumed by her passion for Hippolyte. (<http://members.fortunecity.es/fabianvillegas/drama/glossary-h.htm>)

Here, the term is used figuratively an error. But it's not just any deviation, as in missing a bullseye or failing to be moral. Rather, *hamartia* in Greek tragedy is both broader than the typical Christian sense of sin and often more serious.

For the Greeks, *hamartia* is broad because it doesn't just refer to moral failure or law-breaking. It can be any error, whether "knowing or unknowing, in knowledge or in ignorance" —indeed, it can include a completely innocent mistake. But it's also more serious because for the tragedians, *hamartia* marks the "fatal flaw" in a character that leads to their destruction.

The classic example of Aristotelian principles is Sophocles' [Oedipus the King](#) (ca. 428 B.C.); Shakespeare's [Othello](#) (1603-04) follows a similar pattern of pride, error, and self-destruction (though Oedipus merely mutilates himself on discovering his crimes, whereas Othello commits suicide).

Recent scholarship has suggested that the interpretation of *hamartia* as a fatal flaw is itself flawed, and that the word more properly means any disproportion in the character's makeup that leads to downfall; thus an excess of a valuable or virtuous quality can in some circumstances be seen as *hamartia*.

(<http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/LTHamartia.html>)

For more on this, as loath as I am to refer people to Wikipedia, the article there is well-written and cites outstanding scholarly source material. I'll let you dig further there. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamartia>).

In neither Roman or Greek usage does *hamartia* specify the mark narrowly. That depends on the context in which it's used.

HAMARTIA IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

If we accept the Greco-Roman usage of *hamartia* as a deviation, mistake or fatal flaw that causes failure, those definitions help but do not cover the full range of biblical uses for "sin." Nor is the Bible univocal in identifying what the *mark* is. For that, we need to observe how the word is used in the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which the New Testament

often cites) and across the New Testament. This allows us a perspective ranging from the Jewish world of the Hebrew Scriptures to the early church of the first century and beyond. What we discover is a surprising range of uses, more than this article could cover.

For our purposes, I will survey some of the major samples from across the Bible. I am surprised by what we find there:

In the Old or First Testament, we learn something about *hamartia*/sin from:

- a. **The first “sin”** – The first recorded sin (*hamartia*) in the Bible is Cain’s murder of Abel. The word is not used for Adam and Eve’s fall until the New Testament.

I am familiar with the usual translations of Genesis 4:7, where God says, “If you [Cain] do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, **sin** is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

In this case, the ***hamartia* is personified** (as we’ll see in Paul’s epistle to the Romans) and is stalking Cain, ready to pounce if he acts on his jealousy of Abel. But in the LXX, where *hamartia* is first used, the ancient Rabbis translated verse 7 quite differently:

“Hast thou not sinned if thou hast brought it [his offering] rightly, but not rightly divided it? be still, to thee shall be his [Abel’s?] submission, and thou shalt rule over him.” It sounds here like the sin was *missing the mark* already when he wrongly dividing his offering. And the second half of the verse sounds like God may be reassuring Cain that if he holds his temper (“be still”), Abel will submit to him as firstborn.

So, the sin could be either a problem with the offering itself (see below re: sin and offerings) or it could be his disastrous choice to kill his brother. The *mark* he’s missing could be either right worship (“Love God”) or right treatment of others (“love your brother”).

- b. **“Sin offerings”**

In the Torah, the LXX of Leviticus, Exodus and Numbers use *hamartia* for ‘sin’ and *hamartias* for ‘sin offerings.’ (See especially the rules laid out in Leviticus 4-5, Exodus 29-30). The *sin offerings* prescribed give us a sense of how Jews understood sin and why a sin offering might be needed. Sin could include:

- *Moral sins*, such as breaking one of the Ten Commandments;
- *Law-breaking*, which included intentionally or unintentionally violating one of the many injunctions of the legal code, including eating or touching anything prescribed as unclean or contaminated (e.g. by disease or death). Thus, even dietary or hygiene errors are ‘sin’ and required a ‘sin offering.’

- Take the Gospel instance of the woman with the issue of blood touching Jesus. Her 'uncleanness' had rendered **Jesus unclean, and as a 'sinner,'** he would have needed to pass through a ritual cleansing. This would be especially true of any defilement by contact with dead things (remember, Jesus went from the woman directly to Jairus' house where he touched and raised the dead girl).
- In that regard, on the Day of Atonement, the priests even needed to bring sin-offerings to cleanse the temple of the 'dust of death' they had tracked in from life in this world cursed by death.
- Note that in all these cases, the main concern is one's relationship to the temple and its 'holiness code.' Under the law, 'sin' would include anything that disqualifies tabernacle/temple access. Eunuchs (by accident or choice), couples of forbidden (mixed) marriages and their descendants (to 10 generations), and those with particular foreign blood (Moabites, Amalakites), etc. were all excluded—so too, anyone who was disabled or too poor to bring an offering.
- The *mark* in this case is much broader than moral perfection; it's holiness defined by temple purity—the impossible problem of remaining unstained by every defilement of one's ritual cleanness.

c. **David's *hamartia***

- King David will identify himself with a very limited range of *hamartia*, more in line with the hero's flaws of Greek tragedy. The stories of David's life certainly recount his character issues and failures, and his Psalms serve as a remarkable expression of what he considered sin and what he didn't count. For example, he didn't seem too troubled by polygamy, greed, deception or hatred, and he was a regular practitioner of vengeance and violence.
- Yet when he proposed the construction of the temple, God forbade it because of the excess of bloodshed in his history (**1 Chronicles 28:2-3**)—including acts of violence God allegedly sanctioned or commanded! But the issue isn't primarily the harm done to the people, but again, the way death was seen to defile the spotless temple. Apparently, David had perpetrated too many acts of death-dealing to be covered by sin offerings.
- **Psalm 51** – David's most famous sin is when he took Bathsheba and covered it up by setting up the death of her husband. In this case, the *hamartia* is connected to the royal scandal, which Nathan the prophet identified as covetousness and theft of Uriah's wife as well as the subsequent murder. Here, *missing the mark* is David's

tragic flaw. Perhaps the *mark* he misses is his responsibility to be a just/righteous king.

Oddly, in his confession (see Psalm 51), he reflects on “the sin in which his mother conceived him.” Some have taken this as proof-text evidence confirming Augustine’s notion that every human inherits Adam’s guilt via conception. Others have suggested David himself was the child of adultery—after all, Jesse doesn’t initially include him when he brings his sons before Samuel. David seems to treat his conception or birth as the fruit of a sinful act. Why?

It’s also strange that David says to God, “Against you ONLY I have sinned.” What about Uriah? Or Bathsheba? Or the baby they have together? All we can say for sure is that David believed his sin had dishonored God directly—perhaps he saw it as a violation of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7), which was specifically about David’s throne, a son and the royal line that would flow from him.

We could write volumes on this, but **In the Christian New Testament**, sin also includes multiple referents. I will just touch on three highpoints.

a. Romans: Sin personified

- I find it fascinating that Paul sees sin as both something we all do and something alien to us. On the one hand, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23)—and there is his *mark*! For Paul in Romans, the *mark* or *aim* of our lives is the *glory of God* (whatever that means).
- But he also personifies *hamartia* as something internal but alien—a slave-driver (6:20) whose wages are death (6:23). Sin is a saboteur, driving us to fail and then punishing us with death.
- Then in chapter 7, he goes further, “It is no longer I who does it [fails to obey the Law) but sin that dwells in me.” Here it sounds like sin is a destructive zombie virus that has crept inside and (i) taken advantage of the commandment (ii) to deceive him and (iii) thereby kill him (7:11). It’s a fascinating take. Do we get to say, “It wasn’t me—it was sin that did it to me”? And at what point do we say, “You are what you do?” In Romans 8, he will thank God that in Christ, we’re freed from that slavery and can walk freely in the life-giving Spirit of God.
- Overall, Paul’s letter hints that the *mark* we’re aiming at is not really *keeping the Law perfectly*, but rather ***faith in or faithfulness to the faithfulness to Jesus***. We were steamrolled by the Sin-Law recipe but the *aim* from the beginning of the Abrahamic faith was *complete trust in the faithfulness of God*.

b. 1 John

- In John’s first epistle, we have another dilemma. He seems to say that those who claim not to sin are liars (1 John 1:8-10), but also, that no Christian continues to sin (3:6-9). What gives? Which is it John?
- I’m not writing this to solve that apparent contradiction. But as with Romans, an overview of 1 John helps us identify the *mark* he has in mind. For John, the *mark* includes a few components around what it is to be “in the truth,” but the major goal across the epistle is *loving God by loving others—our brothers and sisters*. Those who love, know God, for God is love.

c. **John 8** – “Go and sin no more.”

- Having reviewed all that, I need to come to my point—Christ’s statement to the woman caught in adultery: “Go and sin no more.”

Reading John 8 through Genesis 2-3 and the Prodigal Sons

Throughout Scripture, we see “sin” identified in a variety of ways, including moral failure, law-breaking, poor spiritual hygiene, character flaws, a fatal disease and a sinister slave-driver. And where sin (*hamartia*) is defined as “missing the mark,” Scripture implies the *mark* we’re aiming at may be morality, holiness, faith and faithfulness, love of God and each other, or the glory of God.

In my blog post, [Sin? Missing what mark?](#) I suggested another *mark*: our **love union with God**—or **RE-union** (reconciliation) with God. In that case, to “sin” is to turn away from God’s love. Yes, some of those other biblically-defined marks *may* play into that, but let’s focus on three stories:

Genesis 2 – 3

In the Garden of Eden (Paradise), Adam and Eve walked in perfect communion with God. Theirs was the intended love-union we were all to enjoy. And then we read of their “fall.” Although the story doesn’t use the term for ‘sin,’ we read about how they turned from that union, marked by love and trust, to autonomy, self-will and as a result, shame and alienation. **Their sin does not separate God from them**, for he continues to pursue them, all the way out of the garden and ultimately tracks them through the Cross to retrieve them from the depths of *hades*. **But their sin does alienate them from God**, for their new, fallen instinct is to see God as one from whom they must hide in shame. In failing to trust and obey God, and by turning from God’s face to go their own way, they missed the *mark* of that once-perfect love-union.

The Prodigal Sons

In Christ's parable of the prodigal son(s), we find two sons in a similar peril. Like Adam and Eve, the younger son has left his father's house to go his own way and do his own thing. He finds himself living in the poverty of alienation, slaving in the fields with a herd of swine. He has *missed the mark* of fellowship with his loving Father. But the father never stopped loving him and the son never ceased to be his father's son. To be restored, he must return home and re-enter the joy of that parent-child union.

Likewise, the older son finds himself slaving in another field—the field of religious striving. While he seems to serve his father's interests and seems to obey his father's wishes, he has nevertheless *missed the mark*. How so? He has left the father's house and made his own alleged obedience the occasion for alienation from that love-union. He regards his father as unfair, someone to resent and the elder is every bit as enslaved self-will as his younger brother.

But the Father despises neither son. He runs to the younger son while still a long way off. And without any condemnation, he assures the older brother of his place and pleads with him to return. Henri Nouwen, in his booklet, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, says,

The harsh and bitter reproaches of the [elder] son are not met with words of judgment. There is no recrimination or accusation. The father does not defend himself or even comment on the elder son's behavior. The father moves directly beyond all evaluations to stress his intimate relationship with his son when he says: "You are with me always." The father's declaration of unqualified love eliminates any possibility that the younger son is more loved than the elder. The elder son has never left the house. The father has shared everything with him. He has made him part of his daily life, keeping nothing from him. "All I have is yours," he says. There could be no clearer statement of the father's unlimited love for his elder son. Thus the father's unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally to both sons.

John 8 – “Go and sin no more”

This brings us to the climax of the story of the woman who was caught in the act of committing adultery. As often as I share this story, I continue to ask, “Where was the man?” Why is he not also dragged in? Is he not involved in the sin? Is he part of the set-up? We know from the text that the whole scenario was a trap for Jesus, so it certainly looks like a case of entrapment for the woman as well.

Let's fast-forward through Jesus' saving acts—how he stoops beside her, scribbles in the dust and one by one, all the accusers leave. We pick up on Jesus' interaction with the woman, a conversation we only know because she would have shared it 1000 times thereafter. “The day Jesus saved me!”

“Where are your accusers?”

“They're gone m'Lord.”

“Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

Religious legalism would and has inferred, “Go and sin no more... *or I will condemn you.*”

But aside from such silliness, how should we take Jesus’ statement? If he doesn’t mean, “*Go be sinless,*” what does he mean? He must mean something!

I have normally interpreted Jesus' words this way: “*There, I’ve just completely wiped clean your record. You didn’t even repent and I forgave you. You can live as if today never happened. And you never need to go back there. I’ve given you a fresh start and a new life. What will you do with it?*”

To which I imagine her reply, “I will follow you, of course! I’ll follow you forever!”

And he smiles and says, “*Of course you will! Let me help you up.*”

That got me to thinking: what if she did it—**what if she went and sinned no more!** As in never again. What? Could she or anyone live without sin? That depends what *sin* is! That depends what *missing the mark* is. That depends what the *mark* is.

If the *mark* is moral perfection, unwavering trust, perfect obedience, ritual hygiene and untainted holiness, of course she would continue to sin because we all fall short of those marks. And in that sense, she would go on sinning.

But if the *mark* is her love-union with Christ—his embrace of unwavering love, enduring mercy and saving grace—I suspect she never left his embrace again. I could imagine her stumbling again and again but never again hiding in shame as did Adam or slaving again as did the prodigal brothers. I could imagine Jesus’ words, “*Go and sin no more,*” being for her, **not a legal demand but a creative command**, similar to “*Let there be light ... and there was light!*” The love of Christ was a light turned on in the Father’s house and he knew she would never leave the house again. Or if somehow she found herself tripping again on her own humanity, she would forever orient herself towards God’s welcome, rather than fleeing from it back into the night.

In other words, sure she could “screw up,” but from that day on, it is entirely possible she would not “fail.” She could commit particular sins, but would never return to alienation and slavery to sin.

I cannot claim this for myself. But what the story does for me is reminding me of the true *mark*—our union in Christ to God’s unfailing love.