

# On Sin, Betrayal, and Relationships

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It is a fact of life that to achieve closeness and unity with a partner, both members of a relationship must go through discomfort along the way. As two people, say in a marriage, get to know each other more and more, they encounter points of friction and rough edges. If both partners are truly committed, they work through those disagreements, they compromise, each adjusts slightly, and they move forward having achieved more unity along the way. Closeness with another human being also corresponds to vulnerability with them, which carries high risk. Some of the deepest pain and trauma we experience as human beings comes from heartbreak—when, through betrayal or just the course of life, a close relationship has to be severed and the risk of pain comes to fruition. Thus the ultimate goal of closeness with another being comes at the unavoidable cost of suffering. If we want closeness with another person, we must be willing to pay the price.

The same is true of our relationships with the Divine. God, being perfect, desires us to be one with Him. Within the framework of Christianity, Jesus came as the Great Reconciler, paying the price of our sins so that we could be one with God. His sacrifice, aptly named the *atonement*, literally means the at-one-ment. The sacrifice that brings us to perfect unity with God—one day.

I want to talk about sin in the context of relationships, because sin has always puzzled me. It's never clearly defined in the scriptures. The scriptures give some sense that sin is a kind of action against God. It's an offense to Him. We can commit sin through disobeying His commandments. Sin seems to include immoral behavior, but the moral code of Christianity is not defined in a set of laws. In fact, Jesus *specifically abolished the law* in such a way that living morally cannot be reduced to living a set of rigid commandments and doing so perfectly. On the contrary, God sends His Spirit to guide us, and we go along developing a sense of morality along the way.

But along with that sense of vagueness comes the problem that it's hard to know when you've committed a sin. Especially when things are morally ambiguous, where it's hard to know what's right and what's wrong, knowing that you, say, need to repent, or that you've committed a sin, is not a straightforward thing. This is evidenced by the fact that Christian sects disagree over what constitutes

a sin and what does not. This is something that I have had to grapple with intensely as I've tried to reconcile my sexuality with my sect of Christianity.

Within Christianity, we say that Jesus “was perfect.” In my particular sect of Christianity (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), we say that He was the only perfect man to ever walk the Earth, and that he *had* to be perfect in order to effect His atoning sacrifice. This has always interested me, and stumped me, because the canon doesn't actually say explicitly that Jesus was perfect. It also doesn't say anything about His need to be perfect in order to effect the atonement. The need for perfection is not obvious to me at all.

What puzzles me most of all, though, is why Jesus had to suffer at all. Why is it that sin requires suffering? I don't believe that morality and sin are built into the fabric of the universe in such a way that God is bound by those laws and someone must suffer if sin is committed, so He sent His Son to take on that suffering for us. That doesn't make any sense to me. It feels like a cosmic cop-out of “I don't understand this, therefore I probably can't understand it, so it must just be this unknowable thing about the universe.” Surely it is not built into the fabric of the universe that if you have sex an hour before your wedding ceremony, someone must suffer for it, but if you wait an hour and have sex afterward, no one need suffer. Furthermore, I think the idea that Jesus had to pay for our sins and that each time I commit sin I should be conscious of the fact that I inflicted pain on Jesus is unhealthy and a scare tactic to get people to live in line with Christianity.

What I want to posit here is a radically different approach to the ideas of sin and repentance that only put the suffering, and Jesus' atoning sacrifice, into context, but help us to form a healthy relationship with commandments and the Christian life in general. They also help us do what Jesus did, and stop focusing on specific commandments and focus more on our hearts.

These thoughts are based on an idea I learned from Tim Macky, a biblical scholar and co-founder of the Bible Project. He puts sin and righteousness in the paradigm of relationships by asserting that “righteousness” should be thought of as “right relationships.” That is, to be righteous is to be reconciled (or willing to reconcile) with all others—with God, our neighbor, and ourselves. This puts into context Jesus' claim that the first commandments, on which *all commandments hang*, are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves (thus love ourselves, too). In loving someone, we nourish relationships with them, and we all grow in harmony. We resolve conflicts in the form of reconciliation—if you steal from me, you must replace that which you've stolen, and maybe offer more—to the degree that we come on the other side of the conflict and our relationship with the person we wronged, or who wronged us, is better than before the conflict.

Under this paradigm, repentance is reconciliation God. We've done wrong to

Him and we must be reconciled, through Jesus, to repair the relationship. It also involves reconciling ourselves with who we truly are and whom we want to become, thus seeing ourselves more clearly and being able to work on our weaknesses. Finally, it involves reconciling the wrongs we've committed against our neighbors so that we can repair those relationships and move forward.

Terryl Givens puts it nicely, when he says in his book *Feeding the Flock: the Foundations of Mormon Thought*, that “for Mormons, heaven is relational, not situational. It is not where you are but in what kind of relationship you find yourself that determines the degree of blessedness or perdition.” This puts into context our church's extreme focus on relationships, in particular family relationships, with the concepts of temple sealings and eternal covenant marriage.

Revisiting those three questions I asked before: (1) what is sin, and how do we know we've sinned? (2) What does it mean for Jesus to have been “perfect”? and (3) Why does sin necessarily accompany suffering?

The first is easy. Sin is an offense to our relationship with God or with others. If we break trust with another person and rob from them, we've sinned against them and against God. If we don't live according to the things we believe to be true, or that God has shown us, then we sin against God because we break confidence with Him. Sin against God is any time we damage the relationship we have with God as we strive for unity with Him. We repair those relationships through the work and suffering that it takes to achieve reconciliation with them *to the degree that our relationship improves through the process*.

The second is also easy. For Jesus to have been perfect, He had to achieve perfect unity with God. This idea is well-supported by the scriptures. In all of the recorded canon, Jesus submitted to God's will in every situation. His role as the perfect example, then, is that to be perfect (complete) we must achieve perfect (complete) unity with God.

For the third, suffering makes complete sense under this paradigm. If sin is a relational reconciliation with the aim of improving a relationship and achieving unity, then suffering must accompany sin because suffering always accompanies the path to unity with another soul. Jesus' imperative for us is to achieve unity between ourselves, God, and others. This is quite the task, and requires quite the suffering! Note also that suffering in a relationship comes from injuries caused both on purpose and by accident. The ones caused by accident are easier to repair if both members of the relationship are willing to work, while the ones caused on purpose are substantially more damaging and hurtful, and take longer to repair.

This brings me to the idea of the atonement—literally the “at-one-ment”—of Jesus. If sin is all relational, then the pain Jesus suffered was the pain of reconciliation. It was the price of unity between all mankind and God. This is,

for me, the most beautiful symbol of all Christianity. Jesus is both a symbol of God and mankind in one. As God incarnate, His suffering shows that He will always feel and accept the pain of reconciliation—He is always willing to be reconciled with us, and will never leave us because of the pain we’ve inflicted on our relationship with Him or others. As a human, Jesus shows the ultimate example, that to come to God we must *also* be willing to accept and work through the pain of unity—whether it be pain that we cause, or pain that God causes by giving us commandments that require severe adjustments. As God-and-human, Jesus shows us the path and price of unity with God by both showing that God will (indeed, already has) paid the price of unity, and showing us the path we must also walk to come to Him.

Even more beautiful, Jesus shows that He is willing to suffer despite being betrayed. He (God) is rejected by the Jewish nation, but still willingly pays the price of reconciliation with them. He also invites Judas to eat with him at the Last Supper, knowing full well that Judas would betray Him. He willingly pays the price of that reconciliation. He also goes into the suffering, knowing that Peter, the rock, the lead apostle, would betray him three times before the morning. But the most poignant of all, Jesus (as God) was willing to suffer the price of reconciliation even though none of His apostles could stay awake to watch with Him as He did it. As I said before, Jesus’ atoning suffering is, to me, the most sublimely beautiful symbol in all of Christianity.

This idea puts into context a couple scriptures. The first is John 17:3, where Jesus says, “Now this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” The second is in Matt 20:20-22, where James, John, and their mother (they are brothers) come to Jesus. Their mother pleads, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” Jesus responds, “You don’t know what you are asking, can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” This second scripture has always been strange to me—isn’t the whole point that they don’t have to because Jesus suffered? No, the point is that His suffering is a symbol and an example. To come to God *we must be willing to suffer the price of unity with Him*.

Jesus’ amazing ability to heal and comfort through His closeness and understanding shows us that the healing balm that Jesus offers is that of perfect unity. That when we hurt Him (God) through our actions to the relationship, He will feel the pain, accept it, and still be there close with us. Our relationship with God only depends on us being willing to work on it, because we have the guarantee that He will always be willing to work on it—indeed, he has already done the work necessary for it.

I’ll end here with two examples from the New Testament. The first is a parable in Matthew 22:1-14 about a king who prepared a wedding banquet with lots of guests. He sent his servant to get the guests, but they all made various excuses

as to why they could not attend the feast. In verse 5 it says that “they paid no attention and went off” (NIV). The king responds by instructing his servants to go to the streets, inviting “the *bad and the good*” (note the order), and they filled the wedding hall with guests. They would have all had to put on wedding garments that the king provided (not that they had to provide on their own account). The parable ends by the king finding and confronting one man over not wearing the wedding garment, whom he throws out.

The feast, as usual, represents the Kingdom of God. Amazingly (and counter-intuitively), in order to be a part of the Kingdom of God, people didn’t have to be the ones originally invited (the Jews). You also didn’t have to have some moral standing above a certain point—the king was happy to accept the bad as well as the good (he even says “the bad” first). The only thing you needed to do to be a part of the feast was to accept the wedding garment that the king gave you. Thus worthiness to be in the Kingdom of God is not something they earned, it’s something bestowed upon anyone who was willing to accept the invitation to come to the feast—regardless of moral standing. Having a right relationship with God doesn’t depend on us being bad or good, it depends on us being willing to accept invitations and work on the relationship (*i.e.*, put on the wedding garment), however clumsily we do so.

The second example comes from the crucifixion of Jesus as recorded in Luke 23:39-43. Jesus is crucified with a criminal on either side of him. As the three of them hang there, dying, one insulted him and said, “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” The other criminal said, “We are getting punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” Then he turned to Jesus and said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus responds to the second, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” This is one of the most poignant and consequential symbols in the entire canon for me. In my mind, the two criminals represent all of humanity. They are dying for wrongdoings they have committed (*i.e.*, damage to their relationships with God if we apply this to ourselves). They are both equally guilty. One sees Jesus in paradise, the other (presumably) does not. And the difference? One turned to Jesus, the other did not. The difference had nothing to do with their guilt or the severity of their crimes—only their willingness to *turn*. Most beautiful of all, Jesus accompanied *both of them* on the long, humiliating, painful road of death by crucifixion, just as He accompanies all of us, regardless of our choices.

What is clear to me from both of these things is that sin, or lack thereof, is not a qualifier for the kingdom of God. The actions, and our corresponding guilt, are almost irrelevant. They don’t play a role in the salvation of people in either of these parables. The only relevant actions are being willing *to turn* to Jesus, and being willing to accept the corresponding bestowed grace represented by the wedding garment. The willingness to work on our relationship with God is what’s important, not our ability to do so or the state of the relationship.

However, turning to Jesus is a nontrivial thing. It's transformative. You can't turn to Jesus without being completely transformed by the act. The miracles of the New Testament are clear symbols to me of people turning to Jesus and being changed fundamentally: The blind see, the lame walk, the leprous (unclean) are healed (can reintegrate with society). All of these point to fundamental personal, interpersonal, and spiritual changes as symbolized by the physical miracles.

The beauty of this paradigm of sin and guilt is that perfectionism, a veritable plague in my church, goes out the window. The commandments themselves are not important. Our hearts are important. It aligns us with Jesus so much more than mainstream dialogue does now. We don't have to obsess over rules or specifics (and mimic the Jews of the New Testament by doing so!). We don't ever have to worry that we aren't good enough, because *we don't have to be good enough*. Jesus invites everybody into heaven. Literally the only thing you have to do is to be willing to turn and to work on the relationship between you and God, at whatever pace makes sense for you. Because in the end, we're all equally guilty of sin, having done damage to our relationship with God. The guilt is irrelevant. The question is, are we willing to turn?