

DISCUSSION GUIDE

RESPECTABLE
SINS

CONFRONTING THE SINS
WE TOLERATE



JERRY BRIDGES

Discussion Guide by Stephen Sorenson



RESPECTABLE SINS

JERRY BRIDGES

NAVPRESS 

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with me in ministry, this book is gratefully dedicated.*

*“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you . . .
because of your partnership in the gospel.”*

(PHILIPPIANS 1:3, 5)

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CONTENTS

Preface v

- Chapter 1: Ordinary Saints 1*
Chapter 2: The Disappearance of Sin 7
Chapter 3: The Malignancy of Sin 15
Chapter 4: The Remedy for Sin 23
Chapter 5: The Power of the Holy Spirit 33
Chapter 6: Directions for Dealing with Sins 41
Chapter 7: Ungodliness 47
Chapter 8: Anxiety and Frustration 57
Chapter 9: Discontentment 67
Chapter 10: Unthankfulness 75
Chapter 11: Pride 85
Chapter 12: Selfishness 97
Chapter 13: Lack of Self-Control 105
Chapter 14: Impatience and Irritability 111
Chapter 15: Anger 117
Chapter 16: The Weeds of Anger 125
Chapter 17: Judgmentalism 137
Chapter 18: Envy, Jealousy, and Related Sins 145
Chapter 19: Sins of the Tongue 155
Chapter 20: Worldliness 161
Chapter 21: Where Do We Go from Here? 173

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Preface: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate 181

Using This Guide: Tips for Personal and Group Study 183

Session 1: Facing Up to the Truth 189

Session 2: The Remedy for Sin 199

Session 3: Ungodliness and Unthankfulness 207

Session 4: Anxiety, Frustration, and Discontentment 215

Session 5: Pride and Selfishness 225

Session 6: Impatience, Irritability, and Anger 235

Session 7: Judgmentalism and Sins of the Tongue 247

Session 8: Lack of Self-Control, Envy, and Jealousy 257

Session 9: Where Do We Go from Here? 269

Notes 279

Author 281

PREFACE

“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (John 8:7, κϿν). Though many scholars today question whether the well-known account of the woman accused of adultery actually belongs in the Gospel of John, the expression has become a part of our wider culture, along with a similar one: “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matthew 7:1, κϿν).

This book, as the title announces, is about sin—not the obvious sins of our culture but the subtle sins of believers, the target audience of this book. So let me say up front that I am not without the sins addressed in this book. In fact, you will find that I sometimes use my own sad experiences as examples of some of these sins.

The motivation for this book stems from a growing conviction that those of us whom I call conservative evangelicals may have become so preoccupied with some of the major sins of society around us that we have lost sight of the need to deal with our own more “refined” or subtle sins.

While seeking to address these “respectable” sins, however, I also want this to be a book of hope. We are never to wallow hopelessly in our sins. Rather, we are to believe the gospel

through which God has dealt with both the guilt of our sin and its dominion over us.

The gospel, though, is only for sinners, for those who recognize their need of it. Many Christians think of the gospel as only for unbelievers. Once we trust in Christ, so the thinking goes, we no longer need the gospel. But as I seek to bring out in this book, the gospel is a vital gift from God not only for our salvation but also to enable us to deal with the ongoing activity of sin in our lives. So we still need the gospel every day.

This book by no means covers all the possible subtle sins we face. A number of friends in Christian ministry looked over a lengthy list of sins I had compiled and helped me reduce it to a manageable list of the more common ones. To those friends I express my deepest thanks for their suggestions.

Three other people deserve special acknowledgment. Don Simpson, who is not only my editor but a close personal friend, has been very helpful. Dr. Bob Bevington, with whom I have just collaborated on another book, also read the manuscript and made helpful suggestions. Mrs. Jessie Newton transferred my handwritten manuscript to a computer composition so that it could be submitted to NavPress. This is the third manuscript Jessie has typed for me. Finally, there are an unknown number of people who have supported this project in prayer. Thanks to all of you for your part in this book.

And above all, to God be the glory both now and forever.
Amen.

ORDINARY SAINTS

The church at Corinth was all messed up, both theologically and morally. They were proud and fractious; they tolerated gross immorality, sued each other in court, flaunted their freedom in Christ, abused the observance of the Lord's Supper, misunderstood the purpose of spiritual gifts, and were confused about the future resurrection of believers. Yet when writing to them, Paul addressed them as "saints" (2 Corinthians 1:1) or as those "called to be saints" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

The popular meaning of words often changes over time, based on their common usage. So today we wouldn't think of those messed-up Corinthians as saints. We might call them worldly, carnal, or immature, but certainly not saints. In the Roman Catholic tradition, sainthood is conferred posthumously on Christians of exceptionally outstanding character and achievement. I write these words a few months after the death of the greatly admired Pope John Paul II, and already there is a widespread popular sentiment to canonize him as a saint.

Apparently, over the course of church history, most of the original apostles, including Paul, came to be called saints. My grandfather was a member of St. Paul's Methodist Church.

In our city we have St. John's Baptist Church. A Presbyterian friend of mine pastors St. Andrew's Chapel. I have preached in St. Thomas's Anglican Church. Even Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace Judas, gets into the act with St. Matthias's Church in Sydney, Australia. And, of course, standing above them all in eminence is St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

Today, outside the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the word *saint* is seldom used. But when it is, it is most often used to describe a person (usually elderly) of unusually godly character. Someone might say, "If there ever was a saint, it is my grandmother." Upon hearing such a statement, we immediately picture a kind, gracious woman who regularly reads her Bible and prays and who is known for her good deeds toward others.

How then could the apostle Paul address the messed-up believers at Corinth as saints? In fact, this form of address seems to be a favorite of Paul's. He uses it in several of his letters and frequently refers to believers as saints (see, for example, Romans 1:7; 16:15; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; 4:21-22; and Colossians 1:2). How could Paul refer to *ordinary believers*, even the problem-plagued ones at Corinth, as saints?

The answer lies in the meaning of the word as it is used in the Bible. The Greek word for saint is *hagios*, and it refers not to one's character but to a state of being. Its literal meaning is "one who is separated unto God." In this sense, every believer—even the most ordinary and the most immature—is a saint. The actual wording of Paul's address in 1 Corinthians is to "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1:2). Here again, we may be surprised with Paul's use of the word *sanctified*, a word we usually associate with holy living. But the words *sanctified* and *saint* both come from the same Greek word family. A saint is simply someone who is sanctified. Although it sounds

awkward in English, we could literally rewrite Paul's words as "to those separated in Christ Jesus, called to be separated ones."

Separated for what? A better question is, *Separated for whom?* And the answer is, "for God." Every true believer has been separated or set apart by God for God. Paul, in one place, described our Lord Jesus Christ as the One who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works (see Titus 2:14). And in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul says to us, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price." Together, these two passages help us understand the biblical meaning of *saint*. It is someone whom Christ bought with His own blood on the cross and has separated unto Himself to be His own possession.

What does it mean to be separated, or set apart? A good analogy is to be found at the US Air Force Academy near our home. Entering first-year cadets are treated vastly different from the way freshmen entering public or private universities are treated. From the time they get off the bus at the Academy grounds and throughout their first year, they are subjected to extremely rigorous discipline designed to transform them from easygoing American teenagers into well-disciplined cadets preparing to become military officers. Although this discipline is progressively relaxed as the cadets pass through their four years, it is never completely removed. Even as seniors, they are still subjected to demanding academic and behavioral requirements.

Why is there this difference between the Academy and a typical university? These young men and women have been in a real sense "set apart" by the US government to become Air Force officers. It costs our government over \$300,000 to educate and train each cadet over a four-year period. So the Academy doesn't exist to prepare young people to be schoolteachers or Wall Street

bankers. It exists for one purpose: to prepare officers for the US Air Force. And the cadets are “set apart” for that purpose.

In a way similar to a young person entering the Air Force Academy, every new believer has been set apart by God, separated unto God to be transformed into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ. In this sense, every believer is a saint—a person separated from his old sinful way of life and set apart by God to increasingly glorify God as his life is transformed.

In the biblical sense of the term, sainthood is not a status of achievement and character but a state of being—an entirely new condition of life brought about by the Spirit of God. Paul describes it as “[turning] from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18) and again as having been “delivered . . . from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13).

We don’t become saints by our actions. We are made saints by the immediate supernatural action of the Holy Spirit alone who works this change deep within our inner being so that we do, in fact, become new creations in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). This change of state is described prophetically in Ezekiel 36:26: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone [a dead, unresponsive heart] from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh [a living, responsive heart].”

It would be nice if we could end the story here, because the last two paragraphs might suggest a saint is someone who no longer sins. Alas, we all know that is not true. Rather, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that nearly every waking hour, we sin in thought, word, or deed. Even our best deeds are stained with impure (mixed) motives and imperfect performance. And who of us can ever begin to say, “I have loved my neighbor as myself”? And of course, the messed-up Corinthian

church stands as Exhibit A that we saints can be quite sinful in our attitudes and actions.

Why is this true? Why is there a disconnect between what God has seemingly promised and what we experience in our daily lives? The answer is found in such Scriptures as Galatians 5:17, which says, “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

The guerrilla warfare between the flesh and the Spirit described in Galatians 5:17 is fought daily in the heart of every Christian. That is why, for instance, Peter urges us “to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). So although 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Ezekiel 36:26 speak of a decisive change that always occurs in the heart of every new believer, the outworking of that change is not instantaneous and absolute. Instead it is progressive over time and never complete in this life. However, the awareness of this internal struggle with sin should never be used as an excuse for sinful behavior. Rather, we should always keep in mind that we are saints called to live a life that is set apart for God.

So Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthian church by addressing them as “those sanctified [set apart by God] in Christ Jesus, called to be saints [set-apart ones].” Then he spends the remainder of his letter *vigorously exhorting them to act like saints*. In one sense, Paul’s letter could be summarized in this statement: “You are saints. Now act like saints!” Sometimes that idea is expressed more succinctly as, “Be what you are.” That is, be in your behavior what you are in your state of being. So although the word *saint* basically describes our new state of being as people separated unto God, it carries with it the idea of responsibility to live as saints in our daily lives.

When I was serving as an officer in the US Navy some fifty

years ago, there was an expression: “conduct unbecoming an officer.” That expression covered anything from minor offenses resulting in a reprimand to major ones requiring a court martial. But the expression was more than a description of aberrant behavior; it was a statement that the conduct was inconsistent with that expected of a military officer. The officer so described had failed to live up to his responsibility to act as an officer should act.

Perhaps we might do well to adopt a similar expression for believers: “conduct unbecoming a saint.” Such an expression would pull us up short, wouldn’t it? When we gossip or become impatient or get angry, we could remind ourselves that our conduct is unbecoming a saint. We are, in principle, if not in degree, acting like the Corinthians. We are living inconsistently with our calling.

The Bible has a word for conduct unbecoming a saint. It is *sin*. And just as “conduct unbecoming an officer” covers a wide range of misconduct, so the word *sin* covers a wide range of misbehavior. It covers everything from gossip to adultery, from impatience to murder. Obviously, there are degrees of seriousness of sin. But in the final analysis, sin is sin. It is conduct unbecoming a saint.

One of our problems, however, is that we neither think of ourselves as saints—with our new state’s concurrent responsibility to live as saints—nor do we think of such actions as our gossip and impatience as sin. Sin is what people outside our Christian communities do. We can readily identify sin in the immoral or unethical conduct of people in society at large. But we often fail to see it in what I call the “acceptable sins of the saints.” In effect, we, like society at large, live in denial of our sin. So now let’s move on to talk about sin and our frequent denial of it in our lives.

SESSION ONE

FACING UP TO THE TRUTH

Before Gathering: Read *Respectable Sins* chapters 1, 2, and 3, then respond to the “Think It Through” questions.

Key Verse: “Sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

GET FOCUSED

Some forms of cancer grow undetected until they reach a terminal stage. Likewise, sin—especially the so-called “acceptable” or “subtle” sins—can exist in our lives, virtually undetected and dangerous. We can be deceived into believing that such sin is not all that bad, into denying that sin is really sin, and into not thinking about sin. In fact, the word *sin* has virtually disappeared from our culture—and is even avoided in some churches. Well-intentioned believers find it all too easy to focus on the blatant sins of our “evil” culture while ignoring their own, more subtle sins—“respectable” sins.

In contrast to the feel-good-about-ourselves philosophy of our day, Puritan believers in the seventeenth century had

a different view of themselves and sin. They feared the reality of sin; they saw all sin as a diabolical force living within themselves. They recognized, like the biblical writers, that *any* sin breaks God's law.

During this session we will explore the impact of sins that Christians tend to downplay in their own lives—sins such as impatience, gossip, pride, resentment, and anger. These often become larger malignancies, cascading us into deeper sinfulness.

Yes, God sent Jesus to earth to take humankind's sins on Himself. But as long as we believers recognize our call to glorify God and become like Jesus, we will battle sin. To live as God's people includes facing sin—especially sin we don't recognize or we rationalize away. That's what this first session is all about.

THINK IT THROUGH

For Personal Study

What Is Sin?

1. Why do you think it's important for us to understand what sin is and its impact on our lives and relationships?

2. What do James 1:14-15 and 2:10-11 reveal about the root of our sinful actions? About God's law and the consequences of breaking it?

3. In Matthew 5:22, 27-28, what did Jesus emphasize concerning the seriousness of sin—of breaking God's law?

What Happened to the Word *Sin*?

4. What evidence do you see that the word *sin* has virtually disappeared from our culture? That awareness of personal sin has effectively disappeared from many believers' consciences? Explain your answer.

The very word, *sin*, which seems to have disappeared, was once a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. . . . But the word went away. It has almost disappeared—the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?

Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?*

RESPECTABLE SINS

5. What impact do you think the “softening” of language regarding sin is having on our lives? On our churches?
6. Why is it often easier for believers to focus on the sins of unbelievers rather than on their own personal sins?

“Respectable” Sins

7. List some common “respectable” sins. Why do you think we are more inclined to tolerate them?
8. In Galatians 3:10, what did the apostle Paul quote to emphasize the importance of obeying God’s law? What might this reveal about the consequences of tolerating “seemingly minor sins”?

9. Even though God always makes a decisive change in every believer's heart, what does every believer face when he or she seeks to live in obedience to God? (See Galatians 5:17; James 1:14.)

10. Describe the choices Peter and Paul urge every true believer to make. (See Galatians 5:16; Ephesians 4:29; 1 Peter 2:11.)

How Our Sin Affects God

11. Jerry writes: "When we sin, when we violate the law of God in any way, . . . we rebel against the sovereign authority and transcendent majesty of God. . . . It is indeed cosmic treason." Do you agree or disagree with the concept of "cosmic treason"? Explain.

RESPECTABLE SINS

Even though our [believers'] hearts have been renewed, even though we have been freed from the absolute dominion of sin, even though God's Holy Spirit dwells within our bodies, . . . sin still lurks within us and wages war against our souls. It is the failure to recognize the awful reality of this truth that provides the fertile soil in which our "respectable" or "acceptable" sins grow and flourish.

Chapter 3, Respectable Sins

12. How much do you think God knows about our sin? (See Psalm 139:1-4; 1 Corinthians 4:5.)

13. Read 2 Samuel 12:1-10, where Nathan the prophet spoke God's words to David, who had committed adultery with Bathsheba, murdered her husband, and lived in denial of his sin. What do we learn about denial? About sin in relation to God and His law?

14. What effect does sin have on the Holy Spirit—that is, God—who lives inside each believer? (See Ephesians 4:30.)

TALK IT OVER

For Group Discussion

1. Why should we take our “respectable” sins seriously?
2. How might we begin to see our own sins more clearly instead of focusing so much on other people’s sins?
3. What impact do you think the “softening” of language regarding sin is having on our lives? On our churches?
4. As we realize that our sin is not only rebellion against God’s sovereign authority but a despising of both His law and His person, how might we view sin differently?

5. How might what we learned today influence what we say, do, and/or think?

Group Prayer

As a group, thank God for the opportunity to gather and explore this important topic. Ask Him to help you recognize “respectable” sins and to take them seriously.

For Next Time

Read *Respectable Sins*, chapters 4, 5, and 6, then respond to the “Think It Through” personal-study questions for session 2.

TAKE IT TO HEART

A Personal-Growth Journal

Personal Reflection

During this session, what discoveries, quotations, or verses especially connected with you? Why?

What “respectable” sins might you be tolerating in your life?

In what ways might these sins be affecting your life, your relationships, and your relationship with God?

What do you think God wants you to learn from that situation?

Personal Action Point

What one insight regarding “respectable” sins would you like to begin applying to your spiritual journey this week? Write it down and commit it to the Lord.

Personal Prayer

Write a brief prayer to God about sin’s lure and impact in your life—and your desire for Him to help you stand strong in the face of temptation.

Progress Report

What have you discovered this week about “respectable” sins?

RESPECTABLE SINS

As you have begun to apply what you learned from session 1, what new choices have you made? What challenges have you faced?

In what ways has knowing God's view of all sin—including the more "acceptable" ones—influenced you this week?