

There is much debate today regarding how natural law and moral law fit into the overall picture of how the Bible defines sin. Sadly, the most egregious of errors is to think that nature (i.e., a state of being, because of birth), in and of itself, is sin; in addition, to blur the lines between natural and moral law. It's when we don't have a clear-cut understanding of the two subjects, we get the concept of sin wrong; we misinterpret or misunderstand what the sacred texts are trying to tell us, as was recently demonstrated in a video, entitled "The Nature of Sin".

One thing we must understand, right from the start, is, "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). Thus, to understand the mystery of iniquity in its most basic concept, the man must eventually be moral and upright.

Natural Law

- The laws of nature do not and cannot satisfy the aspirations of man; none can accept them as a standard of action, no matter what his philosophy may be, because they are destitute of the element of morality. We cannot trace a single moral element in their framework or their implementation. He who studies them intelligently must be convinced they are designed solely for a natural system; not at all for a moral one.
- Natural law is what rules us, absent of a Governor; as such, there is a *natural* order of cause and effect, when operating under such a system. For example, if I jump out of an airplane 5,000 feet above the ground without a parachute, the likelihood I will die upon impact is near 100%--the laws of physics apply. And, not only to me, but also to anyone, who might try such a stunt.
- Based on this example, I think we can agree: The laws of nature have no penalties, per se, when we consider the fact they are neither accepted nor considered as a judicial system, which requires some type of standard of governing principles. In executing penalties, there must be a consideration of the just reward of the crimes committed. But there is no such consideration; there is no discrimination whatsoever in the case of an effect of the violation of natural law. In this respect, the operations of natural law are as blind and unreasoning as nature itself.
- Notwithstanding the fact, whether we're Christians or atheists or Buddhists or Muslims, the realities of natural law affect us all. There are hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanoes, forest fires, floods, and pandemic diseases. And this being so, it follows they have no *penalties*, but rather, *consequences*.
- It's here on this point, many well-meaning men blunder, though they recognize the distinction between moral and natural law. They speak of the *penalties* of the laws of nature, when no such penalties exist. We must recognize and accept the violations of natural laws are attended with consequences, **uniform in operation**, such that in nature we see an unbroken series of causes and effects; the results being the same whether issuing upon a reliable or an unreliable object, regarding no distinctions of good or evil. They do not discriminate between right and wrong, sinner and saint. They act upon all, in the same manner. This is not to say, however, God doesn't intervene, at times, to extend mercy to saint or sinner.
- Because we are born in this natural world of evil and degradation, we fall under its curse—we are indeed enticed to do what natural things do. Further, once the biology has run its course, we as living organisms expire—we die.

- That said, we must understand, natural law is not entirely a function of being in a fallen world—no. The laws of physics and such applied to the period before Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation. Although we don't completely understand (or, dare I say, even remotely understand) the antediluvian world and its unique environment, absent of the catastrophes we now face, we can deduce some of the principles we face today, were in place then. For example, had unfallen man subjected himself to an extreme height, as previously suggested, the likelihood of injury or death was in all likelihood, high.
- Because of this, there are governing principles in place, which, because of the disobedience of our forebears, have put us not only in a natural world replete with dire consequences, but also in a world overtaken by evil. Absent of governing principles, we are bent toward evil and will succumb to evil tendencies.
- But there is hope! Because the fingerprint of his maker is still upon him, notwithstanding the sinful world in which he lives, there is implanted in man a sense of justice, or convictions of right, to which he finds no counterpart in the operations of nature. These convictions are *entirely on a moral basis*. J. H. Waggoner wrote, “this sense of justice is erected in the human mind as a [court], a judgment seat, whereat we determine the nature and recompense of actions. And mark this truth: Before this court we always arraign the **actions** of intelligent agents, but *never* the **operations** of natural law. And in this, what is true of one is true of all; it shows that all, whatever their theories may be, do in fact and in practice make a proper distinction between moral and natural laws.” This idea should be well and carefully considered.
- One thing we must understand, at this point, so we can continue hand-in-hand, is: Evil falls into the category of natural law. It was fashioned, however, by a failure to comply with the moral law. Here, we see the moral law's penalty being the genesis of natural law's consequences. For example, the lion kills another animal to survive; the vulture subsists on what the lion leaves behind. These animals do this, not because they *are* evil, but rather, because they live in a world under evil's curse.
- To that end, a failure to comply with established moral principles results, not so much in natural consequences (though, at times, they overlap), but rather, penalties of jurisprudence. Thus, two evident questions arise: “Can we choose to be natural?” “Can we choose to be moral?” The natural man will become what the biology dictates, based upon genetics, epigenetics, environment, etc. Absent of a moral compass, the man is a law unto himself.
- In this regard, we must understand: Evil itself is *not* sin, as many today would suggest, but rather, a *result* of it. The sin(s) of Adam and Eve cast the entire creation into a state of evil. However, just because someone is born into a world of evil, does not make the person evil. It makes one prone to evil, because of the need to partake of the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet 1:4); hence, it is not fostering righteousness. Again, evil does not equal sin, but rather, is a result of it. Sin is a choice—always has been. Evil is upon us, by no choice of our own. However, one can *choose* to side *with* evil by committing acts not in harmony with the moral law.
- Now, here are some additional questions we must consider: “If these actions are contrary to the moral principles of a Governor and the man has not been made aware of them, is jurisprudence via penalty warranted?” “Moreover, can one be called a transgressor of the moral law, of which he has no knowledge?”
- We know ignorance of the law is no excuse, and yet, God winks at such ignorance until such time an individual is educated on the standard. Thus, can one be guilty of breaking a law of which he had no knowledge? Can one rightly be called a criminal in such a scenario? This is not to say the law hasn't been broken—unwittingly, of course—but how can there be justice, absent of education first? (BTW, from a Gospel standpoint, we must understand: “As soon as there was sin, there was a Saviour.” – DA 210.2)

- Therefore, we must then proffer the question: Can a man be called a sinner without the knowledge of sin? Of course, natural law (e.g., genetics, epigenetics, environment, etc.) can bend a man in the direction of action contrary to righteous living, but again, unless an education on morality—either through the things of nature or the explicit law itself—is given, it appears one cannot rightly be labeled a transgressor, criminal, or sinner.
- Up to this point, we've examined natural law and hinted at moral law, so it's imperative we make a clear distinction between the two of them.
- In short, the prime distinction between moral and natural law is this: The first has respect to motivation, whereas the other has not. Fire will burn, and water will drown, whether we fall into them accidentally or rush into them madly. A small child, who is yet unconscious of any intention of good or bad, suffers as surely and as intensely on putting its hand into the fire, as the mature man, who presumptuously does the same thing. And should the man willfully and maliciously set fire to his neighbor's house, and the child, playfully and without intention of wrong, do the same thing, all would blame the one and not the other. And were a judge, in the administration of law, to issue the same penalty upon the man and the child, because the actions and results were the same, all would detest such a perversion of justice. Thus, we not only find men acting upon the difference between moral and natural laws, but we find them in one accord judging of the actions of moral agents according to their motivations, that is, the thoughts and intents of the heart.
- But, we need to understand the operations of natural law cannot be judged in this manner. And its *consequences*, often miscalled *penalties*, have no regard whatsoever for the claims of justice.
- A child is born innocent of wrongdoing, and at the same time, he is on probation, which seeks the need to be justified. He cannot be unrighteous, and thus, unjustified, because he's not done wrong. He has not been taught the law, nor has he been taught what is wrong. Therefore, nature, that is, sinful flesh, cannot be sin. It is a result of the sin of our forebears, and thus, as previously stated, a subset of evil. But on its own, it cannot be sin. Sin is a learned behavior, which is brought about by nurture. Think about it: Why did Lucifer sin? Because iniquity was found in his heart. Did God place it there? Was he, by nature, a sinner? No. He chose to transgress. A child, sadly, has the pull of evil around him; in other words, because he is standing in the dirt, there is a desire to get dirty.
- Now, just because I'm standing in the dirt, doesn't mean I'm dirty. Children, therefore, are *not* born separated from God. They are born in need of partaking of the divine nature. They've not yet been given the opportunity to choose separation; rather, they are born in the dirt (i.e., evil all around), but they've not gotten dirty, intentionally (i.e., sinned).
- Let's carefully read 2 Cor 5:1-8. Does Paul suggest a third condition or state, such that it's not an either-or construct? What is meant by the term "unclothed"? Please notice, Paul specifically declared he did not desire to be naked or unclothed. We can be certain, then, the unclothed state did not involve being with the LORD, because Paul did not desire it. In fact, the apostle referred to being clothed with only two houses, the earthly and heavenly. In the unclothed state, he was neither in the earthly body nor clothed with the heavenly. That leaves only one possible explanation: To be "unclothed" or "naked" is the condition of death that is the interlude between the dissolving of the earthly house and putting on the heavenly. Hence, we have a third category with respect to sin.

- A child is born neither righteous nor unrighteous, neither saint nor sinner. Rather, a child is born *in need of* justification—a surrender of self, so the spirit of Christ can dwell within him.
- As before said, the child is burned in the fire as certainly as the man; the good suffer under a violation of nature’s laws as severely as the most hardened and brutal. I cannot stress the idea strongly enough that, confined in our finite and feeble reasoning to the present state, to observation without a written revelation, justice can neither be attained nor vindicated. A moral system is necessary, and the idea of probation must be accepted, to meet the requirements of justice.

Moral Law

- Moral law cannot be explained absent of the terms, righteous and just, as well as their derivations; so, to better understand what we mean, let’s define them, according to the Bible.
- The word, just, is the same as the word righteous (δικαιος), an adjective, and means to *be righteous*; to render or pronounce as righteous. The parent of righteous is righteousness, which is about observing divine laws; keeping the commands of God; right doing. Also, the term, justified (δικαιόω), a verb, is a declension of just.
- The relationship between the two is obvious in the sacred text. It is written: “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom 4:3 KJV). Here we see Abraham’s belief—that is, his obedience, because of his conviction via God’s persuasion—is what led to his righteousness and being justified before God. Righteousness speaks of right doing; justified speaks of right being. (Please note, works and obedience are not the same. Works is legalism and attempts to earn salvation, whereas obedience is willingly following orders, because of a close relationship.) All that said, the righteousness of which Paul wrote isn’t an inward righteousness borne from Abraham; rather, it is the righteousness of Christ. Abraham’s willingness to cooperate, by submitting to God’s will, earned him—if you will—the grace of God, through the Holy Spirit, to move forward in faith and in courage. Thus, all glory and honor and praise belong to God, not Abraham.
- Now, time to put on our thinking caps and look at this issue, logically: A person lacking righteousness is not, by definition, unrighteous.
- Not righteous does not mean unrighteous. Not righteous simply means a lack of right doing, whereas, unrighteous means wrong doing. Again, let’s examine the Scripture: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (Eze 18:20 KJV).
- Please recall, biblically, a righteous person is one who *does* righteous things in keeping with the moral law. Thus, a lack of righteousness simply means a lack of right doing, in terms of God’s standard. In contrast—and please follow this, carefully—an unrighteous person is one who has chosen wrong actions and is unjust. Therefore, he is unjustified. And yet, this only applies if he is aware of the standard to which he’s being compared. We, therefore, need to ask: What does it mean for one to be justified? What does it mean to be righteous?
- The Bible is clear, by both inductive and deductive reasoning, when a child is born, it is not born doing right, observing divine laws; thus, by an understanding of the two terms, it cannot be justified. However,

one *cannot* conclude a child is born a sinner, because, by definition alone, he cannot be declared unrighteous for two reasons: 1) a knowledge of the divine commands has not been given; 2) a child has had no opportunity to do wrong, that is, going contrary to the divine standard. Here is where 1 Jn 3:4, Jas 4:17, Eze 18:20, Isa 59:2, and Rom 4:15 come into play. If anything, the child can be declared not righteous.

- It's downright absurd to think babies are born sinners, doing wrong, any more than to think they are born righteous, doing right.
- Thus, righteousness => justified, but this does not conclude, not righteous => sinner. In mathematics, for example, when a function is said to be "not increasing", this does not mean it is decreasing. In the biblical sense, within the Hebrew and Hellenistic idioms, simply because one is not righteous, doesn't imply he is unrighteous. These are different ideas, altogether.

Righteous, Unrighteous, Just, and Unjust – A Closer Look

- If we look carefully, one who is righteous and justified is one who has come to Christ and has been born again, following a total surrender (Rom 12:1, 2; Gal 2:20). The merits of the "work" required belongs entirely to Jesus.
- Thus, when a man is not justified, it means he *needs* the righteousness of Christ, that is, a partaking of the divine nature. He either has yet or failed to embrace the work Christ has done for him, in terms of the cross.
- To that end, one cannot rightly conclude—exegetically speaking—a child born in need of partaking of the divine nature is born a sinner. He is simply born in need of taking upon himself the mantle of Christ via justification. (When he chooses to be sanctified, through right doing—the duties of which EGW wrote in GC 488—Jesus can rightly proclaim, justification holds).
- That said, until a child is of accountable age (subjective and different for all), he cannot be held accountable for a law of which he's not aware; thus, he cannot be called a transgressor of the same. For those who wish to proclaim: "Yes, but the law has still been broken!" let us recall, before there was sin, there was a Saviour.
- Not until a definitive difference is set forth, whereby nurture presents a system of morality, demonstrating a protocol contrary to nature (i.e., evil), can a person be held accountable; assuming, of course, the person is able to grasp what's presented intellectually—both in terms of aptitude and emotion. Clearly, children and those with severe mental and emotional impairments fall under a different dispensation of God's government. That is a matter reserved for God alone, and I choose not to speculate about nor enter that shaky ground.
- When one makes the right decision (i.e., obeys), he is then given the grace of God to further obey. This is a supernatural power. Take, for example, the words of the LORD's Messenger in *Steps to Christ*:

"What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him." SC 47.1

- Good works are a result of grace—the power of God working in us through His spirit. Because we know the spirit to be that of Christ, therefore, Christ is our righteousness. However, we must respond and cooperate. Yes, Jesus paid it all and accomplished the necessary work we are to receive by faith. To that end, I must agree and obey. As we read in *Patriarchs and Prophets*:

But while everything in nature is governed by natural laws, man alone, of all that inhabits the earth, is amenable to moral law. To man, the crowning work of creation, God has given power to understand His requirements, to comprehend the justice and beneficence of His law, and its sacred claims upon him; and of man unswerving obedience is required. (PP 53.3)

The result of the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is manifest in every man's experience. There is in his nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist. To withstand this force, to attain that ideal which in his inmost soul he accepts as alone worthy, he can find help in but one power. That power is Christ. Co-operation with that power is man's greatest need. In all educational effort should not this co-operation be the highest aim? (Ed 29.1)

Some Thoughtful Questions

- When you say sin is only a choice, where is that definition? (1 John 3:4 doesn't say it's just that)
 - What about James 4:17? Transgression in 1 Jhn 3:4 intimates a violation of law. Violation suggests an action of wrongdoing. I understand ἀνομία is a noun, and yet, it is a noun that brings an implied verb to bear to demonstrate a state of being, because of action; not because of birth. The Aramaic rendering is a little more explicit in this sense: “And everyone that practices sin, perpetrates iniquity; for all sin is iniquity.” Clear as day, I think. You can draw your own conclusions.
 - Some want to insist the Greek, *anomia*, lends itself to sin as a state of being (i.e., nature, by birth); however, a careful, grammatical examination demonstrates this state comes as a result of wrongdoing.
- It seems you are suggesting a third in-between state for newborns. They are neither good (righteous) nor bad (unrighteous). What is the name of this state and what evidence is there for that? If I'm misreading you about a third state then please clarify
 - How would either of these conditions apply to a newborn? A suggestion of the latter would necessitate the need for infant baptism, because it assumes original sin. Again, as I stated earlier, children are born innocent; if they weren't, as some very influential men suggest, then they need to be baptized right away—this is Roman thinking.
- If sin is only a choice, and Ellen White says we inherit sin, then which sin (choice) exactly is inherited?
 - We inherit sinful flesh, because we're born into a world of evil, that is, we are born no longer in harmony with what God original created. But again, just because I sit in garage all night, doesn't make me a car.
 - What saith the Scripture?
 - Abraham **believed** God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. (Rom 4:3 KJV)

- Even as Abraham **believed** God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. (Gal 3:6 KJV)
- And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham **believed** God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. (Jas 2:23 KJV)
- Can sin exist without guilt?
 - Of course not. Once a sin is committed, then there is guilt. Sinful flesh is not sin, itself. The sinful flesh in which we're captured is a *penalty* of the sin committed by our forebears. As a result, natural law has a consequence—biological death. That said, a violation of moral law has a penalty—spiritual/eternal death—unless one repents. Please note how the Bible uses various terms for sin: sin, transgression, uncleanness, iniquity. Each one has a quality of distinction, such that transgression is the worst—it actually means rebellion.
- Can sin produce something that is better than sin (something not as bad as sin)?
 - Can a bad tree produce good fruit? Not by its nature, it cannot. Why does a bad tree produce bad fruit? How did it get bad? A good tree comes from good seed, and vice versa. But how did that happen? A tree must be rightly nurtured, so it might produce good fruit: properly watered, fertilized, pruned, and sunned. Unlike the tree, however, a man can decide—choose—to get dirty, because he's in the dirt. In other words, instead of walking in the spirit, he walks in the flesh, and thus, develops the carnal mind. Now, a question must be raised: Can a bad tree become a good tree, such that it produces good fruit? Again, what saith the Scripture?
 - He spake also this parable; A certain [man] had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung [it]: And if it bear fruit, [well]: and if not, [then] after that thou shalt cut it down. (Luk 13:6-9 KJV)

Friends, I believe the conclusion is both simple and straightforward: There is a clear distinction between natural law, which is about cause and effect, in terms of consequences, and moral law, which focuses on penalty, because of the violation of governing principles. Sadly, there are many today, who want to blur these lines in a manner that confounds the understanding of how the Bible defines sin—the transgression of the law. Period.

They want to invoke natural law, which stems from the first violation of the moral code and affects all—rich and poor, free and bond, male and female, Jew and Greek—as the basis of defining sin. Truth is, a man is no more born a sinner than he is a saint. Both of these states of being must be developed by human action—the power of choice and of the will. I pray this presentation has been clear and will build upon the solid of God's word and the testimonies we've been given.

Dr. Allen Davis, PhD