

## PART I



# DEALING WITH SIN

My first introduction to Russ and Gwen came through a desperate call from Russ. He and Gwen had been married for nearly fifteen years, but their marriage was in trouble. Russ had heard that I helped people with troubled marriages, and he wanted to talk.

After coming to my house, he poured out his story. He and Gwen had had conflict much of their marriage, but recently things had gotten worse. She no longer trusted him. She accused him of all sorts of things from cheating on her to being physically dangerous. In fact, she had placed a restraining order on him. He was barred from his own house. Furthermore, Gwen declared she was done with the

marriage. She was getting a divorce.

Russ acknowledged that he was “not perfect.” Many of Gwen’s accusations and dissatisfaction in their marriage grew out of his weekend habits. Instead of going with her to church, he would go to his cabin in the woods, have some beers (though he denied getting drunk), and enjoy the weekend relaxing. Russ acknowledged he had made some unwise threats to Gwen when she became “totally unreasonable,” but he denied ever having hurt Gwen, and *never* would he lay a finger on the children. The idea that she would put a restraining order on him was totally groundless, he said. He was convinced she had done it only to hurt him.

I start with this story to make an important point: *We live in a world of sin.* People violate God’s ways. Sometimes we do exactly what we know we ought not to do, and other times we refuse to do what we know we ought to do. Russ and Gwen knew better. Russ didn’t have to be told he was being selfish to spend his weekends alone at the cabin. Gwen knew it was wrong to get a divorce. She attended church regularly. Russ refused to go because the pastor had offended him. The more I heard of their story, the more tangled the interpersonal sins became.

Everyone seemed to be intent on following his own agenda regardless of how it hurt others. Of course, it was always the other person's fault.

When I think of people like Russ and Gwen, I realize that this is one couple, one marriage. How many more marriages are, like theirs, in the process of falling apart because of selfishness and sin? How many angry words, hateful attitudes, selfish desires, lustful plans, and hurtful actions are happening in my town alone in any twenty-four-hour period? Multiply that by all the towns and cities in the country. Spread that over the entire world. What a world of sin!

And it surely isn't hard to sin in such a world.

We sin, of course, because we have been sinned against, don't we? We never would do what Russ and Gwen did, would we?

The frightening thing about sin is that it lies much closer home than we want to admit. We really do need to talk about sin.

## SIN

THE BIBLE GIVES A NUMBER of definitions for sin, offers lists of sins in both the Old Testament and

the New, and illustrates sin in countless stories. The Bible starts with a perfect garden and concludes with a perfect Heaven, but in between are the sad tales of human sin. From the time Adam and Eve sinned so long ago to the prophecies of earthly conditions when Jesus returns, we see violations, disobedience, wicked scheming, wrong desires, hurtful actions, bad attitudes, and all the consequences that go with sin. The picture isn't pretty.

What is sin?

The Bible gives us a number of answers to this question. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). God tells us what is right and what is wrong in His Word, and His Word is law. God doesn't do this arbitrarily. His Word is the expression of His character. God *is* right. In Himself, He is the moral standard of everything. Stealing is wrong, in other words, not simply because God decided it is better than not stealing, but because it is contrary to the character of God to steal. Lying, adultery, selfishness, greed, stinginess, treachery, ingratitude, disrespect—these things go against who God is. They violate His truth, faithfulness, love, generosity, mercy, and kindness.

Sin is not simply a matter of what we do, but a matter of what we are because righteousness is not

simply a matter of what God does, but a matter of who He is. When we sin, then, we are violating God, and we are violating ourselves. We are walking across who He is, and we are desecrating who we are to be. He is righteous, loving, honorable, gracious, and true. And He created us in His image. Not exactly like Him, but a “finite image of the infinite God.”<sup>1</sup> Sin transgresses what God has said, but it also desecrates what God has made us to be.

The Bible also says, “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). Sin is not just doing wrong, but failing to do what is right. Sometimes we refer to these two kinds of sin as sins of commission (doing wrong) and sins of omission (failing to do right).

It is sin to lie, but it is also sin to be silent when the right thing is to speak up (Proverbs 24:11, 12). It is a sin to steal, but it is also a sin to refuse to give what we have to someone at our doorstep who is in need (Luke 16:20; Proverbs 21:13). It is a sin to commit adultery, but it is also a sin not to love one’s companion or to withhold marital kindness (1 Corinthians 7:5).

We must think of sin, therefore, not only in light of what we are forbidden to do, but also in light of what