

Original sin, modern morality and the human struggle for goodness.

The difficulty of living a morally upright life has preoccupied theologians and philosophers for centuries. In the Christian tradition, this struggle is traced to the Genesis account of Adam and Eve,¹ where disobedience marks the entry of sin into the world — a condition inherited by all humanity,² known as Original Sin. In the Old Testament, this flaw is met by a God of justice, who responds to wrongdoing with punishment, exile, and law,³ underscoring both moral accountability and the weight of human choice.

The New Testament shifts the emphasis. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,⁴ God is revealed as compassionate and merciful, offering forgiveness through the atoning sacrifice of the cross.⁵ This transformation from divine justice to divine mercy raises a pressing moral question: does the assurance of forgiveness risk diminishing the seriousness of sin, or can it inspire a deeper moral commitment born of gratitude and love? The tension between human weakness and the call to goodness is vividly expressed in the Apostle Paul's lament over his inability to do the good he desired,⁶ and in Augustine's confessions of wrestling with sinful desires even as he longed for virtue. Their struggles reveal that moral failure is not merely ignorance or lack of willpower, but a deep-seated condition requiring both divine grace and personal effort.

In Christian ethics, the doctrine of Original Sin provides the primary lens for understanding this universal moral struggle. Rooted in the Genesis account, Adam and Eve's choice to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was not a mere lapse in judgment, but a deliberate act of disobedience — a turning away from God's command toward self-determination. This first sin did more than introduce wrongdoing; it altered the moral nature of humanity itself. From that moment, according to Christian teaching, every person has been born with an inclination toward sin, shaping both individual behavior and the collective moral landscape.

The ethical implications are profound. If human beings are inherently flawed, moral perfection cannot be achieved through human effort alone. This belief underscores the need for divine guidance, moral formation, and ultimately redemption through God's grace. The struggle to do good is thus not simply a matter of personal weakness, but a universal human condition inherited from the first humans. Within this framework, the personal testimonies of figures like the Apostle Paul take on deeper significance. His writings reveal the inner conflict between the desire to do good and the pull of sin — a struggle that mirrors the Genesis narrative and reinforces the conviction that only divine grace can truly free the human will for righteousness.

¹ .The Holy bible, Genesis 3

² Augustine, *city of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), x111.14.

³ The Holy Bible, Exodus 20; Genesis 6-9; Genesis 19.

⁴ The Holy Bible, Romans 5.8

⁵ The Holy Bible, 1 John 2.2

⁶ The Holy Bible, Romans 7.15-25

Like Paul, Augustine of Hippo wrestled with the tension between wanting to live righteously and feeling pulled toward sinful desires. In his *Confessions*, he describes stealing pears not because he needed them,⁷ but because he enjoyed doing something wrong. For Augustine, this showed the “disordered loves”⁸ that shapes the human condition. Sin was not just breaking a rule; it was loving lesser things more than God, who is the highest good.

Augustine’s honesty about his motives makes his reflections surprisingly relatable, since people today still recognise how easy it is to choose what feels good in the moment over what they know is right.

This inward corruption, inherited from Adam, could not be fixed by willpower alone. It required God’s grace to heal and redirect a person’s desires. Augustine’s reflections also echo the Old Testament’s picture of God as a figure of justice, whose laws are clear and whose judgments are serious.

The Ten Commandments are presented as binding moral duties, and breaking them leads to real consequences, seen in stories like the Great Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Israel’s repeated cycles of exile and restoration.

From a Christian ethical perspective, Augustine’s struggle shows that divine justice is rooted in God’s holiness and the moral order He created, but it does not remove responsibility.

Instead, it highlights the need for repentance, discipline, and the transforming work of grace. For Augustine, as for Paul, the law exposes the depth of human weakness, while grace provides the only true path to renewal.

Both thinkers saw the law as something that revealed the truth about the human heart rather than simply controlling behaviour.

The movement from the Old Testament’s focus on justice to the New Testament’s emphasis on forgiveness marks an important shift in the moral vision of Christianity. Original Sin explains why humans continue to struggle morally, with the Old Testament highlighting responsibility through law and consequences, while the New Testament reframes the struggle through grace, mercy, and the hope of transformation.⁹ This raises a lasting question: does the promise of forgiveness make people more committed to doing good, or does it risk making sin seem less serious? This tension is not limited to theology. Modern legal systems also try to balance punishment and rehabilitation, aiming — much like Christian ethics — to encourage moral growth without allowing repeated wrongdoing. This parallel suggests that the difficulty of living a good life is a universal human challenge that goes beyond time, culture, or belief.

The teachings of Jesus, centred on love, mercy, and the equal value of every person, connect strongly with ideas found in modern morality.¹⁰ While it would be too simple to say He “invented” modern ethics, His message has had a major influence on Western ideas about human dignity, forgiveness, and responsibility toward others. In the end, the Christian tradition teaches that morality is not sustained by fear of punishment or by forgiveness without responsibility, but by a changed heart that chooses good out of love. Throughout history, the challenge has remained the same: to live in a way that reflects justice, mercy, and the hope of redemption — a calling that continues to shape the moral imagination of humanity. Paul’s lament over his inability to do the good he wanted, and Augustine’s struggle with sinful desires, both point to a deeper truth: moral weakness is not just the result of bad

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), II.4.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, II.6.

⁹ *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3; Romans 5.8; 1 John 2.2.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 5–7; Luke 6.27–36.

choices, but something rooted in the human heart.¹¹ This understanding leads naturally into the New Testament's focus on transformation through grace, which reshapes how morality itself is understood. From an ethical point of view, the New Testament builds on the moral vision of the Old Testament, shifting the emphasis from outward obedience to inner change. Justice is not ignored, but it is joined with mercy, compassion, and reconciliation through Jesus Christ. His death on the cross, seen as an atoning sacrifice for all people, is presented as the highest expression of divine love — forgiveness that is given freely rather than earned¹².

Jesus' teachings call His followers to forgive as they have been forgiven, to love their enemies, and to show mercy even to those who do not deserve it.¹³ This approach moves morality beyond simply keeping rules. It encourages believers to act out of gratitude for God's mercy and to develop virtues such as love, humility, and compassion. However, this strong emphasis on grace raises an important ethical question: if forgiveness is always available, does it risk making sin seem less serious? Some might treat repentance as something quick and easy, which creates tension between the call to holiness and the assurance of mercy. This tension brings the discussion back to the doctrine of Original Sin. Rooted in Christian theology, it explains why humanity continues to struggle morally — a struggle that both Paul and Augustine knew personally, and one that still shapes the conversation between ancient Christian teaching and modern ideas about morality.¹⁴ Paul and Augustine's reflections on the struggle to do good show that this problem isn't new. Even though their explanations come from Christian ideas like Original Sin and divine justice, the basic question of why people find it hard to live morally is still relevant today, even in mostly secular societies. Modern thinkers often point to things like social pressure, personal desires, or even biological instincts that push people toward self-interest. In a way, this isn't too far from the Christian idea that humans have some built-in moral weakness, even if the explanations are different. Modern morality usually focuses on ideas such as human rights, equality, and personal freedom.

These can overlap with Christian values, especially when it comes to treating people with dignity or protecting the vulnerable. But the foundations are different.¹⁵ Christian ethics depend on God's character and commandments, while secular ethics rely more on reason, social agreements, or trying to increase overall well-being. Still, both approaches agree that living a good life takes effort, empathy, and sometimes putting others before yourself. Even the tension between justice and mercy shows up in both places. For example, legal systems try to hold people accountable while also allowing room for compassion, which is similar to the balance Christian ethics tries to strike.¹⁶ Both Christian and secular views also recognize that people don't make moral choices in a vacuum. Christian theology talks about a fallen world that influences behaviour, while modern psychology and sociology point to things like poverty, trauma, or unfair systems that make good choices harder. This helps explain why wanting to do the right thing doesn't always mean someone will actually do it¹⁷. Even so, both perspectives believe people can grow morally. Christians describe this as

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), II.4–6.

¹² *The Holy Bible*, Romans 5.8; 1 John 2.2.

¹³ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 5–7; Luke 6.27–36.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), II.4–6.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), II.4–6.

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible*, Micah 6.8; Matthew 23.23

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible*, Romans 5.12; Romans 7.15–25

working with God's grace, while secular thinkers talk about education, self-reflection, and building good habits.

In both cases, becoming a better person is seen as a slow process, not something that happens overnight. Overall, the difficulty of living a morally good life seems to be a universal human experience. Whether someone explains it through theology or through psychology and social factors, the struggle itself is the same. This makes it easier to see how the Christian tradition later develops its understanding of humanity's moral challenges.¹⁸

The Christian tradition explains humanity's moral struggle through the ideas of Original Sin, God's justice, and the mercy shown in Jesus Christ. In this view, moral failure is not just an occasional mistake but a deep condition that requires both God's grace and human effort to overcome. Modern philosophy and psychology, even without the religious framework, notice many of the same things: people are often driven by self-interest, shaped by social pressures, and influenced by instincts that don't always lead to kindness.

Both perspectives agree that living a morally upright life is something people must face again and again, not a problem that can be solved once and for all.¹⁹

The tension between justice and mercy, which runs throughout the Bible, also appears in modern discussions about morality. Legal systems today struggle with similar questions: how to hold people responsible without removing the chance for change, and how to show compassion without encouraging repeated wrongdoing. This suggests that the moral challenges faced by ancient Israel, the early Church, and modern societies are not as different as they might seem, even if the language used to describe them has changed. In this light, forgiveness does not have to weaken moral commitment. When understood properly, it can actually strengthen it. Instead of being a free pass, forgiveness can inspire gratitude and a deeper desire to live well.

This is the moral vision found in Paul and Augustine, taught in the Gospels, and still reflected in many modern conversations about ethics and human behaviour²⁰. In the end, the question of why it is so hard to live a good life goes beyond theology or philosophy. It is a question every person faces. The Christian tradition offers one answer: that human weakness is real, but so is the grace that helps us grow. Modern thought offers another: that our flaws are part of being human, but so is our ability to improve. Together, these perspectives remind us that the pursuit of goodness is both an old inheritance and a present-day task — a journey marked by failure and forgiveness, justice and mercy, and the hope that we can, with effort and grace, become better than we are.²¹ In this sense, the pursuit of goodness becomes not just a moral duty but a shared human journey, one that connects past and present in a meaningful way.

¹⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), XIV.11–13.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), II.4–6.

²⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 5–7; Luke 6.27–36

²¹ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), XIV.11–13.

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