

Ecclesiastes 7:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

Analysis

This verse provides one of Scripture's clearest statements of universal human sinfulness: 'there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.' The Hebrew 'tsaddiq' (צָדִיק, just/righteous man) refers to one who lives according to God's standards. Even such a person—the morally upright, covenant-faithful individual—inevitably sins. The phrase 'doeth good' (ya'aseh-tov, יָעָשֶׂה-טוֹב) emphasizes active righteousness, yet the conclusion is unambiguous: 'and sinneth not' (velo yecheta, אֵלֹא יְחִטָּא) applied universally means no human being perfectly avoids sin. This verse anticipates Romans 3:23 ('all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God') and 1 John 1:8 ('If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves'). It demolishes self-righteousness and drives readers toward dependence on divine mercy. The doctrine of universal sinfulness establishes the necessity of atonement—only Christ, the sinless one (Hebrews 4:15), could provide the righteousness humans cannot achieve.

Historical Context

Solomon wrote this during Israel's monarchy when covenant obedience was understood as the path to blessing (Deuteronomy 28). Yet even in this context, wisdom literature acknowledged the gap between divine standards and human performance. Job wrestled with this (Job 9:2-3, 20), and the Psalms repeatedly confess sin and plead for mercy (Psalm 32, 51, 130). The sacrificial system itself testified to universal sinfulness—requiring daily offerings for inadvertent sins (Leviticus 4-5). Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature generally lacked this

radical acknowledgment of human moral failure; pagan religion focused on ritual correctness rather than moral transformation. The post-exilic community, reflecting on exile as judgment for covenant unfaithfulness, deeply resonated with this verse. Early church fathers cited it against Pelagian claims of human moral perfection. The Reformation emphasized total depravity—not that humans are maximally evil, but that sin affects every aspect of human nature, making salvation by grace alone necessary.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does acknowledging that even 'just' people inevitably sin protect you from both self-righteousness and despairing perfectionism?
2. What areas of subtle sin in your life are you minimizing or excusing rather than honestly confessing to God and seeking transformation?

Interlinear Text

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H120															

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Romans 3:23 (Sin): For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

James 3:2 (Parallel theme): For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

1 Kings 8:46 (Sin): If they sin against thee, (for there is no man that sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy, far or near;

Proverbs 20:9 (Sin): Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?

2 Chronicles 6:36 (Sin): If they sin against thee, (for there is no man which sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them over before their enemies, and they carry them away captives unto a land far off or near;

Isaiah 64:6 (Righteousness): But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

Psalms 143:2 (Righteousness): And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

Psalms 130:3 (Parallel theme): If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?