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Sin by Survey? Americans Say What they Think

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As is so often the case, research comes with both good news and bad news. [Ellison Research](#) conducted a survey of representative Americans to find out what the public believes about sin. The good news is the simple part — the vast majority of Americans believe in sin.

According to the [Ellison Research study](#), 87% of Americans believe in the concept of sin, defined as “something that is almost always considered wrong, particularly from a religious or moral perspective.” That is good news of a sort, since the absence of any notion of sin would spell social and theological disaster. It is somewhat reassuring to know that most of our neighbors believe that at least some acts are “almost always considered wrong.” It is hard to imagine how we would sleep at night if a majority believed otherwise.

But all that reassurance quickly dissipates when the rest of the data are considered. It turns out that Americans do not have a very clear idea of which acts *are* sin.

A significant majority of Americans were agreed that the following are sins: Adultery 81%, Racism 74%, Using “hard” drugs such as cocaine, heroine, meth, LSD, etc. 65%, Not saying anything if a cashier gives you too much change back 63%, Having an abortion 56%, Homosexual activity or sex 52%, Not reporting some income on your tax returns 52%.

A “significant percentage” of Americans agreed that these acts are also sinful: Reading or watching pornography 50%, Gossip 47%, Swearing 46%, Sex before marriage 45%, Homosexual thoughts 44%, Sexual thoughts about someone you are not married to 43%, Doing things as a consumer that harm the environment 41%, Smoking marijuana 41%, Getting drunk 41%, Not taking proper care of your body 35%.

A much smaller percentage believed that these acts are sins: Gambling 30%, Telling a “little white lie” to avoid hurting someone’s feelings 29%, Using tobacco 23%, Not attending church or religious worship services on a regular basis 18%, Playing the lottery 18%, Watching an R-rated movie 18%, Being significantly overweight 17%, Not giving 10% of your income to a church or charity 16%, Drinking any alcohol 14%, Working on Sunday/the Sabbath 14%, Spanking your child when he/she misbehaves 7%, Making a lot of money 4%, Dancing 4%.

There are surprises here, at least as measured against similar surveys. The Ellison Research survey indicates that only 52% of Americans believe that homosexual acts are sin and only 45% defined sex before marriage as sin. These two data points may indicate the evaporation of biblical morality in the worldviews of many Americans — at least when it comes to sex. The worldview of personal autonomy, wedded to the Sexual Revolution, may have produced a moral reversal on these matters of sex. Homosexual acts and extramarital heterosexual acts are clearly identified as sins in the Bible. This research indicates that only adultery is generally understood to be sin.

The spread of legalized gambling goes hand-in-hand with the fact that only 30% of Americans believe that gambling is a sin. America is becoming a continental Las Vegas.

There is more to the data, of course, and the full report makes for interesting reading. For Christians, a few observations are in order.

First, we do not find out what acts are sinful by asking our neighbors. Christians believe that God alone has the right to determine sin, and that the ultimate authority for determining sin is the Bible — not a poll.

Second, these data seem to indicate that Americans think of sin only in terms of what we *do*, not in terms of who we *are*. The Bible reveals sin to be what we are as fallen humanity, not merely the acts we commit or fail to commit.

Third, Christians understand that sin is, most importantly, an act of rebellion and disobedience against God himself. Surveys like this point to the fact that most Americans think of sin as acts against other humans or acts against the self (as in gluttony). When sin is seen only in this perspective, all that remains is a negotiable social etiquette.

Fourth, this report reminds us of the evangelistic challenge we now face. The loss of a deeper sense of sin means that many (if not most) Americans see themselves in no need of salvation. As a previous generation of Christians knew so well, we have to communicate the “sin word” before we can explain the “grace word” in evangelism.

Keep these points in mind as you take a look at this report — and be reminded why we lock our doors at night.

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