

THE PIECE OF PAPER THAT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE - How Living Together Before Marriage Diminishes Life After the Vows - Part four

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WHY OBEDIENCE IS *BETTER* THAN SACRIFICE - The Story of Four Christians Going to the Same Church

Meet Harry. He's solidly involved in a good Bible-based church. He currently teaches a class in the church's weekly Christian Education program. Three years ago Harry met Sally. She too attended the same church. They were both involved in the church's married's ministry with planning various events.

After dating Sally for about six months Harry knew Sally was the one for him. They were both deeply in love after only a few dates. And they were so thankful they were both followers of Jesus Christ. Nothing unequally yoked about them, for sure.

Soon after they were talking marriage. They both knew there would never be anyone else. And because they were already planning marriage, and to help with astronomical expenses in the booming city rental market, they decided to move in together. Every day they prayed for their upcoming marriage and every week they kept passionately involved in the church. No one else needed to know the details of their lives.

Sooner or later, however, word got out. People warned and prayed and, as much as churches can do, they were pulled out of some prominent ministries. Church discipline is always easier to read about in the New Testament than to practice in the real world so most churches don't bother anymore and most members hate it when they do.

Long story short (which is usually a lie, by the way) they got married. Time passed. They were back involved in the church. It seemed all the fuss died away and they proved the nay-sayers wrong.

If pressed, they expressed regret but said the church people needed to "get over it" because they had repented. After all, it was years ago now. Perhaps they should have married before moving in together. But, God is gracious. Life goes on. Now they are using their experience to help other young couples in the church. And they rejoice over God's forgiving grace for their sins. It's a happy ending, for sure.

Now meet Larry. He's involved in the same church as Harry and Sally. As providence would have it, he too, about three years ago, met Patty. Sometimes they would go out together with Harry and Sally. Larry considered Patty the love of his life. And he too, might have moved in with Patty but for her resolute conviction that God wanted such things reserved for marriage.

Now Larry is glad Patty's devotion won the day. They've been married for three years and share in the married's ministry with Harry and Sally. All love the Lord Jesus with all their hearts.

Now here is the question most Christians never consider and perhaps can't fully answer. Even if they *offer* an answer they're not sure they could summon *reasons* for the answer they give. ***Are these two couples presently identical in their walk with their Lord?***

Please don't miss the idea behind the question. I'm certainly not asking if Harry and Sally, after repenting, are fully and freely forgiven for their sinful past living arrangement. There's nothing to discuss there. ***Of course*** they are forgiven - totally and freely - with ***no ongoing condemnation*** for their past sin. Like ***any*** past sin - like ***my*** past sin - God has removed their guilt and their sin, like the Bible says, ***"as far as the east is from the west."***

My question has nothing to do whatsoever with ***forgiveness***. Are the spiritual lives - the ***ongoing*** spiritual lives - of Harry and Sally ***effected*** or ***un-effected*** by their freely forgiven past living arrangement?

We sometimes sing a chorus that says because of Jesus' grace ***"...my sins don't matter anymore."*** Is that true? They're ***forgiven***, for sure. But are they then totally ***insignificant***? Does it matter that I ever committed them? And when you say those sins don't matter anymore do you mean the ***past*** sins or the ***future*** sins? And is it just possible that there's more of a relationship between the two than we frequently consider?

This is not a light question. And disciples of Jesus need to be able to do more than just equate the ***entire*** Christian life with the initial experience of forgiveness. Conversion is not the whole Christian experience. And what I want to explore today is ***how sin is experienced in different heart-types***. What is the relationship between ***sin, forgiveness, obedience, and safety*** in the Christian

walk?

Of course *all* sin is sin. There are no *innocent* sins. All grieve the Holy Spirit. All damage the soul. But not all *in exactly the same way*. Follow me:

1) **ALL SIN IS SINFUL, BUT NOT ALL SIN IS EXPERIENCED IN THE SAME WAY IN TERMS OF ITS ONGOING BONDAGE**

Consider the *process* in the experience of sinful desire and the different effects it has depending on our *reaction* to it. I can think of several different *responses* to the experience of temptation and presence of sinful actions.

- a) ***There is the inward desire to sin that is quickly rejected***. No sin is actually committed. This is the disciple who has somehow learned the value of *sharp repudiation* of the first inclinations to spiritual deception and compromise. But while no sin is actually *committed* in this case, the *process of spiritual decline* was available and set into motion.

And the important point here is *this immediate rejection of the first impulse to sin affected the disciple positively for future temptations to sin*. Even if he isn't aware of the theology of sanctification he or she is now *safer* from future deviations from holiness still totally unseen in the future. All resistance *strengthens*. All compromise *weakens*.

- b) ***There is inward desire to sin that is entertained***. This is a different kind of heart from our first example. There isn't the same *polar opposite* to the inclinations of sinful desire. So even though, as of yet, no sinful action has been committed, the chances of uncompromised purity being sustained are greatly diminished.

And we need to ask *why* this slightly weakened moral alertness exists? Why is there not the same rejection of desire as in example one? We need to ask that question because *there is a reason*. This disciple isn't somehow just less lucky or less loved by the Spirit of God. The answer lies elsewhere.

Somewhere in the past habits of life spiritual desire has been diluted. No lights flashed. No warning buzzers sounded. No one *forced* him to spend less time at the movies and more time in the Word. No one forced him to turn off the sit-coms mocking sexuality and purity. And he just got used to the moral atmosphere he chose to breathe. Probably he started going to church a little less faithfully.

But the point here is this. Even though nothing drastic or self-announcing seemed to be happening, it *was* happening. It always does. And the desire to sin - even before acted upon - can't possibly seem as repulsive to such a dulled heart.

In the exact opposite of the *first* example of sinful desire immediately rejected and the life becoming *safer* against future sin, in this *second* example, even if he is fortunate enough to step around *present* sin, he is less and less protected against *future* sin.

Note. While all sin is sinful, these two people will not experience the process of future sinful desires in the same way.

Now, what about when we move beyond the *desire* level? What about when sinful actions take place? Can the process of sin still be different for different people?

Please remember, we're not debating whether or not these actions are *sinful*. They *are* sinful. *All* sin brings guilt before a holy God and *all* sin demands deep repentance. What we're considering now is the different kinds of *damage* sin does to different types of hearts. Are some sinners - some *Christian* sinners - more protected by and prepared for divine grace than others? Do some find divine light in the darkness of sin sooner than others? And if so, what *causes* this difference?

- c) ***There are devout hearts that sin, experience the sting of quick, sharp conviction, and are totally broken in shame, coming to rapid repentance***.

This person doesn't repent because his sin was **discovered**. He isn't sorry for his sin because his wife threatened to leave him or he can no longer be involved in ministry in his church.

No. Because of his sin his heart is experiencing something new and foreign and he can't accept it. He feels distance from Father God. He feels a **spiritual separation** that his heart can't accept. He feels what we would all feel when a loved one dies. The loss of a precious relationship is suddenly a source of intense pain. And it can't be endured. The spiritually broken heart is relentlessly driven home to the forgiving Father.

But not all sinners react like this. And the central point of this teaching is while all sin is sinful it is the **process** of sin and the **reaction** to sin committed that makes the difference.

- d) ***There are careless professing Christians who enter lightly into sin either justifying their actions or presuming in advance on God's forgiving grace whenever they may come to sense their need of it.***

Sin is always the most cancerous when it becomes either **planned** or **justified**. That is the absolute law of life in the Spirit. Harry and Sally moved in together **knowing better**. And after they married they assumed their sin was not a big deal because, after all, it's all in the past and God is gracious and forgiving. In fact, they moved in together thinking it would be God's **job** to forgive them once they got married.

Now please understand. The issue here isn't that God wouldn't forgive them. His grace has always been amazingly displayed to the most undeserving. But the issue at this point for Harry and Sally isn't just one of simple forgiveness. The issue is **they have done something to their heart that mere forgiveness can't erase**.

They plotted their own spiritual carelessness. They made it that much easier to commit **additional** sins in the future. They sowed something into their hearts that **carries over** and **perpetuates future carelessness**.

The affect of sin on the one committing it is largely dependant on the attitude of the heart toward that act of sin when it was entered into. The other variables are exactly the same. God's holiness is the same for each. God's mercy toward each is the same. There is no variance in these things.

But some people commit sins already **assuming** they will be fine because, after all, God is forgiving. In other words, they've already **calculated on grace before they departed from God's will**.

Back to Harry and Sally. Remember, the issue isn't whether God forgave them for living together. If they repented He did. The issue here is deeper than that. The issue here is, even as they stand forgiven, they can't skate around the fact that they **played with God** for a period of time. Forgiveness doesn't remove that inclination to pre-calculate God's grace the same way for **future sins** as it did for **past sins**.

Yes. They may well have wept and honestly asked for forgiveness. And I would never take that away from them. But both Harry and Sally also made it difficult to sustain that repentant heart for future sins because of the way they already committed sins, justifying their disobedience by **banking on grace in advance**. And that strategy leaves scar tissue on the Christian's heart. Spiritual tenderness isn't as easy the next time it's needed.

And here's why this matters so much:

- e) ***For professing Christians who drift from a repentant heart the only option is having isolated sinful actions turn into repeated habits. This is the end result of repeated sinful acts. The whole moral mental outlook becomes unable to summon repentance - Ephesians 4:18-19 - "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. [19] They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."***

The most frightening words in that dark passage are, **"...They have become callous...."** Numb. Unable to feel. This is the end result of that tempting option of **cloaking sin in secrecy and denial**. The capacity to feel guilt can easily be thought of as something **natural to us**. It isn't. It can be lost at our own eternal peril.

So I have tried to analyze the process of sin in **five stages** or **types of response**. We need to know this because sin

doesn't float around in space like oxygen. It tempts and conditions and lures and lies and bribes and masks - always filtering its way through human minds and the push-back of conscience and the Holy Spirit in Christians.

All of this matters for my opening illustration of Harry and Sally and their decision to cohabit rather than marry. When they eventually married did their past decision to cohabit simply disappear? Even if they ask God (and the church) for forgiveness and they *receive* forgiveness are things exactly the same as if they had never calculated disobedience to God in the first place?

And my answer is yes, they certainly are totally forgiven and clean in God's sight and should be so considered in the church. No question about that. But my answer is also no. And depending on the way they *entered into that disobedience* (With *full knowledge?* Already *presuming on asking for grace later?*) - depending on the way they entered into that disobedience it may be easier to indulge *future sins* with ease and presumed innocence.

For sure there is always a connection between *past intentional disobedience* and *future potential compromise*. That's why *obedience* is always better than *sacrifice*. *Forgiveness* can make you *clean*. *Obedience* will make you *safe*.

2) **THIS WHOLE COMPLICATED PROCESS IS WHAT IS SIMPLIFIED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND DESCRIBED AS THE PROCESS OF REAPING WHAT IS SOWN**

The sociological experts explain the link between present actions and future ones regarding cohabitation and marriage. *David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead* sum up the research like this: ***“Living together before marriage increases the risk of breaking up after marriage....The longer you live together with a partner, the more likely it is that the low-commitment ethic of cohabitation will take hold, the opposite of what is required for a successful marriage.”***

That's the research. The experts look at the factual statistics *from the outside*. By that I mean they *observe what happens to marriages preceded by cohabitation and chart the data*.

But we're still left wondering *why* past, present and future connect. What *force* - what *invisible cause* - makes these patterns so observable and predictable?

And this is where God's Word comes into play. Here we see the master plan - the divine explanation - for the way sinful choices effect future plans and reactions:

Galatians 6:7-8 - ***“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. [8] For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”***

Enter God's revelation of the mystery of our choices in this life. We are reminded our chosen actions only *appear* spontaneous and original. But this is only the outward appearance of what we do. In fact, my actions today aren't as spontaneous as I think. ***Today's choices grew out of yesterday's choices.***

That's the whole point of Paul's words about sowing and reaping. He's reminding us of the *hidden connectedness* between what I *did* and what I will *do*.

Of course, we should all rejoice in the power of grace to break this cycle and cause a new kind of sowing to actually sprout a new kind of future in the life of the Holy Spirit. Without grace there is no way out of this downward spiral.

But - and here's my closing point - even divine grace shouldn't cause us to take the sowing of our choices lightly. Grace won't function when toyed with or presumed upon. Sin always *matters*. And the closer you follow Jesus in discipleship, the *more* sin - *all* sin - will matter to you. It will matter to you as much as it mattered to Jesus on the cross.