

PARTICIPATING IN THE SINS OF OTHERS - The Kind of Sin Forgiveness Can't Erase

Teaching #1990 - Sunday, September 10th, 2017, 10:00 a.m.

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Matthew 10:41 - "The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward."

2 John 8-11 - "Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. [9] Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. [10] If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, [11] for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works."

Could there be a more encouraging promise than those words from our Lord in **Matthew 10:41**? - "**The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward**"

It's astounding grace. A person who has never **been** a prophet - who has never been **trained** in any type of prophetic work - one who has never done an ounce of the **work** of a prophet - **that** person can stand on equal footing at the judgment with a true prophet. He can be given the **very same** reward as any faithful prophet might be given.

According to Jesus all a person must do is "**receive**" a prophet to get a prophet's reward. So the full reward of a prophet is given both to the prophet **and** to the one who **receives** - assists - encourages - supports - welcomes - that prophet. The one who **receives** the prophet is counted by the words of Jesus as **doing the work** of that prophet and is rewarded accordingly.

This is incredibly encouraging news for all Christians. How frequently we hear we will be rewarded according to our faithfulness in service. How many times we have been taught that our gifts are our talents and must be used to the best of our gifting and ability. And there's no argument from me on that point.

But how rarely we hear that our rewards can vastly exceed our own gifting! How few Christians understand the reward of the most effective and anointed servants of the Lord can be **our own** reward as well. I find it exhilarating indeed that my reward from my Master may well exceed anything I myself have done for Him - indeed it can exceed anything I possibly **could** do for Him. I can simply "**receive**" a vastly more gifted servant of the Lord and earn the **same reward** as he or she. I'm going to return to these words from Jesus on World Impact Sunday.

This would be a sunny sermon indeed if it weren't for the similar words of the Apostle John in our opening text - **2 John 8-11** - "**Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. [9] Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. [10] If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, [11] for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.**"

Here John, the beloved disciple from the inner circle of Jesus' followers, takes the words of Jesus and applies them in the opposite direction. One gets to see the inspired logic of how we can all participate in not only the **rewards** of faithful **servants** but also the **sins** of unfaithful **infidels**.

There are people who don't abide in the life of Jesus. There are people who mock and reject the kingdom of the Light of the world. And John's words press our minds in a haunting direction. Is it possible for Christians who have never **committed** those same sins to be judged as though they had? Is it possible for Christians to so **minge** with the wicked - to so **accommodate** the wicked - that they are **judged** with the wicked, just as the one who **receives** the prophet is **rewarded** with the prophet?

And lest you think that's a fanciful interpretation of John's words I would call your attention to the fact that I think John **anticipates** his readers doubting the full impact of his words in the way he prepares us with his opening caution - "**Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for....**" "**Watch yourselves....**" means consider the full weight of the warning. It means something **more** is being said than we might naturally expect. It means we are not to carelessly assume **less** meaning than is actually intended. It means give **additional attention** so no divine revelation is missed.

"Don't assume you already know this. Think about my words carefully!" That's what John's "***Watch yourselves,***" means.

I have one other introductory thought. There is a special need to consider these divinely inspired words as a needed correction to the common thinking of today's church. Though admittedly it's not stated explicitly, one could easily conclude the church considers herself **more** Christlike in its treatment of the surrounding culture by the way she **doesn't** intentionally rebuke its sin.

We will only appear judgmental and self-righteous if we're perceived as being **against** what is ungodly. Certainly we'll gain more ground for the kingdom if, instead of being judgmental, we simply embrace and show the love of Jesus. After all, He dined with publicans and sinners. And He even **said** He didn't come to **condemn** the world. So we will appear more winsome and more Christlike if we don't come across as being **against** a whole bunch of people we're trying to reach. It all just seems to make sense.

But perhaps this is going too quickly. The real issue, of course, is what **kind** of love is the church to show the lost? Is holiness - without which, apparently, no one will even **"see the Lord"**(Heb.12:14) - is this holiness just something to be **pursued** or also **proclaimed**? Is the doctor life-loving toward his patient when he takes his cancer-ridden patient out for dinner or when he prescribes live-saving radiation?

I know there are shades of truth here. I can't reach **anyone** in **any** way unless I establish some friendly relationship. It's almost impossible to make any hard truth reach a total stranger. We can't place ourselves on some other planet and reach the lost. That much is for sure.

But that's not the point John's trying to make in today's text. John means to remind our church that at some point in any contact with our culture two worlds will have to collide. There is no avoiding this. Nothing has changed since the Light first shone in the darkness and the darkness **hated** the Light. The issue of today's text isn't the obvious need of making **contact** with our culture. The issue is what **kind** of contact must we make. The issue is what is a Scripturally loving response to our culture's participation in eternally damning sin.

And O, how I wish John's words meant only that if I fail to expose that sin I will fail to reach that person I was trying to reach. I **wish** that was what John was saying. But it **isn't**. What John seems to be saying is **I myself** participate in the sins I fail to rebuke.

When I fail to rebuke my culture's sin not only do I cease to be **loving**. I also cease to be **holy** - **"...for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works"**(2 John 11). So there's a **greeting** - "Hey, how are you?" But the eternal context is ignored. It's a greeting that has no context of eternal consequences for our actions. When that happens I **participate** in the sins of that person.

I want to consider **two ways** we participate in the sins of others:

1) **WE PARTICIPATE IN THE SINS OF OTHERS WHEN WE FAIL TO REBUKE THEIR WICKEDNESS**

That the Christian is commanded by God to rebuke cultural sin is the incessant message of the New Testament - **Ephesians 5:11-14** - **"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. [12] For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. [13] But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, [14] for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."**

What powerful words! How important is it for the church to **expose** the uncountable works of cultural darkness? The Apostle tells us. **Exposing** those sins is **as important as not "taking part" in them**. That's why Paul says, **"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them"**(12). **"Instead"** is an important word here. It means the second command is just as important as the first. In other words, as important as it is to **not participate** in those sins it is **equally important to expose them**.

Instead of **participating** in those sins, **expose** them. The first (participating in sins) **mustn't** be done. The second (exposing them) **must**. John says I actually **participate** in the sins I fail to rebuke. So there is no **love** and there isn't even any **holiness** in merely tolerating cultural sin.

And then Paul, just like John, calls the church to **wake up** to this command. And the whole flow of that text makes clear the truth these Christians needed to wake up to wasn't primarily the **avoiding** of sin, but the **duty of exposing it**. Hence the promise **"Christ will shine"** on those who **expose unfruitful works of darkness**(14).

And even that designation of these sins as **"unfruitful"**(11) reminds us all how **unloving** it is to allow anyone to

continue in them without warning. This is how Christians suck all life and hope from the lost.

Remember, the point here is the church is commanded to expose culturally accepted sin. And the reason she **must** do this is no one else can or will. Paul makes it clear cultural sin is always **mutually encouraged and even legislated**:

Romans 1:32 - **“Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they *not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*”**

As though sinners weren’t prompt enough in rushing into sin, there is massive mutual encouragement to run even more quickly and more deeply. Sin always breeds **self-justification**. Sinners are always restless until others are as wicked as they. So there is no hope for **self-correction**. Such a culture will need an **outside** message for any hope of redemption.

So the summons of the Holy Spirit is to **“expose the unfruitful works of darkness”**(Ephesians 5:11). But what if I don’t? It is certainly easier **not** to do this. Is my failure at this point a small thing? What is I just love and mind my own business? What harm is done by keeping the peace? This is the issue the Apostle John speaks to when he says my serene treatment of another’s sin is **participating** in his wickedness.

But surely, I think we can all be agreed, this is nowhere near our intention. We love our Lord and we love righteousness. But consider these common situations:

- a) **Consider the times I willfully leave culturally accepted sin unchallenged.** In this way it’s entirely possible others will continue in their wickedness by my silence. Many others will **encourage** their wickedness, as the Apostle Paul stated. Who will sound the alarm? Will others be spurred on in their sin because I was too afraid to speak out against it? Is leaving others to continue in sin unchallenged by me not the same in effect as giving them bad advice?
- b) **Consider the times I casually soften the moral differences between the Christian and the world.** It’s easy to do this for social acceptance. And what is the fruit of leaving many to think they can be followers of God without ever parting company with the values of the world? John says if they’re emboldened to continue in their sin I **participate** in their sin.
- c) **Consider the times I relativize categorical statements from God’s Word.** How easy it is for God’s Word to be edited to allow sinners to continue dreaming that our Lord will never come again in vengeance to judge the wicked:

2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 - **“....when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels [8] in flaming fire, *inflicting vengeance* on those who do not know God and on those *who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*”**

My point in all these simple examples isn’t to be exhaustive. It is merely to point out one doesn’t have to **seduce** others into wickedness to participate in their sins. One has merely to **leave their wickedness unexposed**.

2) **WE PARTICIPATE IN THE SINS OF OTHERS WHEN WE OFFER UNSAFE EXAMPLES OF HOLINESS**

No Christian life is insignificant. No Christian can hide his or her gospel light under that plea. Jesus said each Christian was a **“city set on a hill that cannot be hidden”**(Matt. 5:14). Every Christian is a center of influence. There are invisible fibers - thousands of them - connecting each one to countless others. **Whenever you act, you act for a multitude.**

There are two aspects of application for this truth:

- a) **The godless seek excuses to reject the things of Christ.** It is in exact proportion to my profession of Christ that any inconsistency in following Him will be used by others to write off Christianity. Who can calculate how many others have been hardened into deeper sin by my carelessness of example?

John’s words are haunting. If my bad example causes others to continue in rejection of Christ I participate not only in the sin I **commit**, but the sin I **cause**.

- b) ***The power of example has particular application in the body of Christ.*** The Bible speaks with undeniable clarity on this subject. Every Christian's life casts influence. Not everything that might be lawful for me ***standing before God alone*** is lawful for me ***as a member of the body of Christ.***

Actions totally indifferent in themselves can have disastrous effects on the conscience of others and lead them into genuine sin. And when that happens the haunting question John raises is ***who's sin is that?***

This is the clearest example yet of participating in the sins of others. The power of example carries my actions into places I have never been and will never go. The actions prompted by my bad example can carry my sin into a time I'm no longer alive. How do you put an expiry date on the multiplied effects of bad example? How can you track down every situation where your silence encouraged others to belittle the eternal damage of sin in their lives?

These are hard questions to face. Truly precious it is that I can confess my sins, knowing He is faithful and just to forgive. How wonderful that he removes my transgressions as far as the east is from the west. And yes, though my sins were like scarlet they can be made white as snow.

But how shall I confess my participation in the sins of others? How can I get them back? How shall I confess sins committed by others, perhaps through my own silence or example, long after I'm off this earthly scene?

3) **HERE IS THE APPLICATION OF THIS NEGLECTED TRUTH**

We could hardly, after hearing John's warning, treat any sin as slight or insignificant. We need daily prayer and the reminding of the Holy Spirit of sin's capacity to ***propagate*** itself once committed. I must never measure the safety of any course of action merely by its effect on me alone. We can participate in the sins of others.

There is nothing slight or unimportant in following Jesus. We need to fear the Lord. We need to pursue holiness with an eye to others. This text teaches we all have much to live up to in following our Lord.