

Grace and “On and Off Salvation” #2

If you fear that you sin so often during each day that it would result in a constant “on and off” salvation, let me inquire as just how often you sin and why you continue to commit those sins instead of repenting of them. God calls upon us to repent, and he does not ask us to do the impossible. You can count me as a self-righteous Pharisee with a capital “P”, but I don’t think I go around sinning all the time. And I have better expectations of you who have dedicated yourselves as living sacrifices.

Do you think David was speaking universally including you and me when he confessed, “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*” (Psalms 51:5)? In utter contrition David wrote those words after Nathan had uncovered his sin with Bathsheba. Was he saying he was born totally sinful inheriting the sin of his mother? If that were true, he would not be guilty for none of it would have been his fault. He was born in sinful circumstances but that did not make him a sinful baby. Actually, in his two-line parallelism, he is laying himself prone before God as without defense for his terrible crimes of adultery, deceit, and murder.

In your emphasis on God’s grace and your dependence upon it, grace is not enhanced by your piously stacking imaginary guilt supposedly laid to your charge. We need not vie for the title of being the humblest chief of sinners.

In the earliest days of his ministry before the gospel of grace was made known, Jesus pronounced this blessing, “*Blessed are **the pure in heart**, for they shall see God.*” (Matt. 5:8). Some are pure in heart. Instead of branding all mankind as having desperately corrupt hearts, we serve better in joining Jesus in the defense of good people and in encouraging purity of heart.

Hear David in another setting: “*Who shall ascend into the hill of Jehovah! And who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and **a pure heart**...*” (Psa. 24:4). Paul urged Timothy, “***Keep yourself pure***” (1 Tim. 5:22). An impossible demand? He had already stated, “*The aim of our charge **is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith***” (1 Tim. 1:5). “*Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him, and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile’*” (John 1:47).

Purity of heart, good conscience, and sincerity are closely related, if not synonymous. Peter wrote to some “...having **purified** your souls by the obedience to the truth **for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart.**” And he urges, “*Put away all **malice and all guile and insincerity and all envy and all slander***” (1 Peter 1:22; 2:1). Was Peter torturing his readers with an impossible demand? Have you never known good people who have done what Peter prescribed? If not, I pity you! I have known many loving, sincere, and conscientious people whose earnest and constant desire was to do the will of God. None of these were perfect but they were constantly being purified. To say that they are all desperately corrupt is to slander God’s good people. Vacillating “on and off” salvation is not their problem!

Being uninformed, misinformed, or incapable of understanding matters of teaching is not a defect of the heart. The most sincere, conscientious, zealous, and pure heart is not corrupted by lack of capability.

In Romans, Chapters 1 and 2, Paul definitely indicates that God expected that even those who had no revelation should recognize him in nature and respond to him. In 2:14-15 he concludes, *“When Gentiles who have not the law **do by nature what the law requires**, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and the conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them ...”* **“By nature!”** Paul should have known that Gentiles were totally corrupt by nature making it impossible for them to have the requirements of law written their hearts. Or, is it theologians rather than Paul who have been off target?

Paul declared, *“None is righteous, no, not even one,”* in quoting David, who wrote these familiar words, *“The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of man, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one.”* (See Psalms 14:1-5; 53:1-4; Rom. 3:9-18). Who could be so bold as to say there were righteous people? Well, David did in the very Psalm (14:5) Paul was quoting! David was railing out against his enemies, not against God’s righteous people!

In order to get the flock to “walk the line,” preachers and teachers have made it their aim to create doubtful definitions of sin to intimidate the devout. Let me picture a scene with Tim and Matt, both disciples, friends, and neighbors, and then pose some questions.

Having completed the outdoor chores of that Saturday afternoon, Tim relaxes in the shade of his patio reviewing his Bible class lesson for the next morning. His attention shifts to Matt’s shiny, new sports car in the driveway. It is so tempting that every time he sees it, he imagines himself driving it. He fantasizes the thrill of driving his on sports car and showing it off to friends and neighbors.

His attention is also drawn to Matt’s pear tree near the fence. It is loaded with the most delicious ripe pears. Tim enjoys them so much that he is tempted to reach across and get some to eat.

Matt is also barbecuing for his family. The aroma is most appealing, creating a compelling appetite. As it reaches perfection, Matt brings enough of it for the evening meal for Tim’s family and hands it over the fence. Tim offers to pay for it but Matt protests. Tim then drops a twenty-dollar bill over the fence to Matt.

As Tim settles back with his lesson, Matt’s wife Kelli comes out to help her husband. She is the most appealing, tempting woman Tim ever saw. Any time Tim sees her, though he respects Matt, Kelli, and Sara, his own wife, he has fantasies of holding her in his arms and caressing her.

Now, let me ask: Has Tim committed sin while relaxing on his patio? Am I kidding, you ask; his mind has been filled with evil thoughts. Which thought or thoughts? All of them? Is it evil to think how delightfully good a juicy ripe pear is? What about thinking of chocolate fudge? Is it

wrong to desire a new car or a piece of beautiful jewelry? Are the strong sexual feelings that you enjoyed which led you to search for and marry a spouse sinful? Must the intentional stimulation of those appealing sensations be avoided? And is it sinful for you to ever find another person other than your spouse to be tempting?

We read, “*Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, **think on these things***” (Phil. 4:8). We must only think on good things! But do you read that in such a pious manner as to imply that thinking about delicious food, sexual fulfillment, or owning a desirable object is sinful — that those cannot be good things? See how we have fogged over the truth so as to induce guilt. It is no wonder that good people believe that they sin constantly. They are made to think salvation is more “off than on”.

Thinking about desirable things is not necessarily sinful, nor is thinking of unlawful things necessarily sinful. Besides, sin is in people, not things. Temptation is not sin! We wrongfully define strong desires as sinful lust. Even strong desire toward sinful fulfillment is not necessarily sin! Else Jesus was among the most sinful!

“*For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who **in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.***” (Heb. 4:15). In our warped thinking we have been led to believe that Jesus never really found evil appealing or entertained feelings which, if left unrestrained, would have enticed him to sin. Do you think it blasphemous to suggest that Jesus found beautiful girls or even married women sexually attractive? If so, then read again the passage above.

You may contend that, even if he had urgent feelings, he pushed them out of his mind immediately. But the only way they can become temptations is for the person to think about them. Jesus entertained compellingly tempting thoughts in his forty days and nights in the wilderness! (See Matthew 4:1-11.) His temptations were not just passing fantasies pushed out of mind immediately.

I am willing to let Tim go to bed confident that he is still walking in the light. But we will follow his story further in the next (yet unwritten) essay, if the Lord wills. []

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