

Grace and “On and Off Salvation” #3

In the previous segment we pictured Tim as finding his neighbor’s pears, sports car, and his wife to be very appealing, yes, tempting as he thought about them. Those tempting thoughts, however, did not bring guilt, for temptation is not sin.

Now, let us develop the story further. As evening came on, Tim grew tired and somewhat depressed and agitated. He began to think of how selfish his friend, Matt, had been in not inviting him to come over and pick some of those pears. As he let resentment grow in his mind, Tim planned to reach over the fence Monday while Matt would be out of town and pick a supply of the pears.

Tim’s depressive feelings began to feed rebellious thoughts as his daughter, Katie, proposed that he pay her way on a youth group project in Jamaica. Tim suspected that such mission trips were more of an adventure than a real help. He had been saving so long on her college fund; this would seem like a selfish disregard for it.

A telephone call revealed that Sara’s mother had relapsed and needed Sara’s help for a week or two. Sara arranged for an early flight the next morning. In her hurried preparations for leaving, she gave little attention to Tim. This added to his negative feelings in which he felt that he was always pushed aside for others. In his restlessness as he awaited sleep hindered by his negative feelings, he made a decision. He would use Katie’s college fund to buy a sports car for himself. She could work her way through college. And, with Matt and Sara being gone, he decided to make a move on Kelli. He felt sure that he could convince her to have a week of illicit sexuality with him while their spouses were out of town. He felt that he deserved some excitement, and who would ever know about it?

At this point, has Tim committed sin? Yes, very grievously! But he has done no sinful act. He has “committed” himself – given consent of his mind – to steal, adulterate two marriages, and deal selfishly with his daughter. He has violated the highest principles of love toward Matt, Kelli, Sara, and Katie though he has not translated it into action. Sin is the attitude of heart that causes one to violate others.

The alarm soon awoke Tim and Sara; so they quickly got up and prepared to go to the airport where they were immediately occupied with preparations for her to board the plane. Neither spoke to the other in any personal way.

To his surprise, Tim heard Matt calling his name as he hurriedly came toward him on his way to boarding his plane. Matt quickly told him, “Tim, I am so glad to tell you now what I intended yesterday. Kelli is so uneasy when I am gone and she expressed to me how secure she feels when you were around. She knows you would drop everything to help her in any need. I feel much better leaving her for the week knowing you are there to help her. Oh yes, also, I had forgotten how much you like my pears. They are ripening. Help yourself to as many as you can

use. Thank you for being my friend.” With that, he gave Tim a hearty hug to which Tim reacted rather stiffly at first, but then melted into a sincere embrace.

Tim had just reached home when his phone rang. It was Sara calling from the plane. She began, “Tim, after being airborne and I began to relax, I realized that I left you without telling you again how much I love you. Thank you for letting me leave you to care for my mother. Thank you for taking me to the airport so early. You show so much love for me that I sometimes take it for granted. You are the love of my life and I will miss you every minute I am away. Take care of Katie and help Kelli when she needs you.”

As he was sitting at the kitchen table listening, Katie came in and, seeing his trembling lips, gave him a hug and whispered that she would make him some coffee and pancakes without interrupting. As soon as his conversation ended, Katie explained, “Daddy, I am sorry I asked you for more money last night. I know how hard you have saved for my college fund. I will forget the mission trip or earn my own way.” As she turned to look at her father and saw him in tears, she asked, “Daddy, what is wrong? Did something happen to Mom?” “No, Katie,” he sobbed, “Nothing is wrong with your mother or you, but something has been wrong with me. I have failed to realize how much I love you. I am crying because I love you so much!”

Then Tim went to his bedroom, closed the door, and tearfully pled with God to forgive him of his selfish intentions against those whom he loved most. He called on God, not only for his forgiving mercy, but also for strength to overcome the temptations in the road ahead.

All of you, I assume, will agree that Tim’s sins were forgiven, but what of his state between the time of his commitment to sin and his confession and plea to God? Was it a time of loss of his salvation?

In settling our minds about our eternal welfare, we have the tendency to search for dogmatic answers, whether it be belief that a sovereign God chooses and saves us at his own will despite our own, or that God calls for our performing acts of acceptance, performance of certain rituals, acts of obedience, and refinements of sanctification. Unfortunately, persons can become dogmatic, and even legalistic, on either end of this theological spectrum or at points in between. We want to define whether Tim lost his salvation temporarily when he violated the greatest command, which is love. We want to make definitions of salvation and eternal life which fit our presumptions. We seem to forget that eternal life is a relationship with God sustaining us until we are given immortality as we leave this mortal body.

The violation of love is sin. Sin is sin. No grades between little and big; no venial and mortal classifications. Stealing pears certainly does not bring the devastating social effects and consequences as the adulterating of two marriages. But sin alienates one from God. Unless mediation is effected, one pays for his own sins in forfeiture of immortality.

Tim was “walking in the light” of fellowship which we have discussed in former lessons. In such continued fellowship, Jesus’ atonement continues to cleanse us. Is that “automatic” like some sort of plenary indulgence? Paul quoted David, “*Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not*

reckon his sin?" (Rom. 4:7-8). Who is this person whose sins God does not account against him? Whether Jew or Gentile, it is the believer of tender conscience, for *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:5-10). God is patient with those who seek to serve him. *"He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"* and *"Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him"* (2 Peter 3:9, 15 NIV). That was illustrated in Tim's case. Who can judge how much more patient God might have been with Tim because of his clinical depression? We can trust that God is patient with all penitent believers. It is not an "on and off" salvation.

Later, Tim stepped outside to turn the sprinkler off just as Kelli returned home. "Hey, Tim," she called out in laughter, "I just now learned that you are a criminal! You remember giving Matt that twenty-dollar bill? I gave it to the cashier at the cafeteria a while ago in paying for our lunch. She looked at it, rubbed it, and said, 'That looks like funny money.' Examining it, the manager confirmed that it was counterfeit! So, you committed a crime passing counterfeit money!"

Again, Tim is weighted with guilt for who knows how many times each day he sins unknowingly, whether it is by "commission or omission," as we used to hear in prayers? He offends people without being aware of it and violates rules and laws of which he is ignorant. Is there grace to cover those sins?

Okay, are you ready for this? I submit to you that no man sins accidentally, unknowingly, or against his will. A man does not sin without the consent of his own mind; nor is strong desire/temptation sin. Sin is not simply in breaking of laws and rules but it is the decision of the heart to violate the highest law/principle of action – love – upon which just laws and rules are based. To those more concerned about violating rituals, Jesus explained, *"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man"* (Matt. 15:19-20).

The same God who gave us a strong craving for pears (approval, security, etc.) gave us a strong craving for sexual fulfillment. Thinking of either is not sinful. Temptation to satisfy either craving is not sinful. But **consent of the mind** to steal pears or to gain sexual satisfaction by violating others is sinful.

In former times the Gentiles had no code of law defining requirements and prohibitions, yet **in their ignorance they could sin or be righteous**. How could that be? Paul explained, *"All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law unto themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus"* (Romans 2:12-14).

How could they sin without the law? **The highest principle of the code of Moses was love, not rituals, regulations, and prohibitions.** Persons who never heard of Moses could fulfill the law if they had love written in their hearts. God has always judged persons according to their heart regardless of how enlightened or unenlightened the persons might have been. Ignorance is not a sin, unless it is willful ignorance which is a defect of the heart. Misunderstanding of points of doctrine is not a defect of the heart unless it is willful resistance. God does not demand of anyone what is impossible. The same grace of God through Christ which redeemed the righteous of Israel could also redeem the upright Gentile.

The believer with tender conscience can confidently trust that grace.

These essays are addressed to you who are familiar with the Scriptures, so I have not offered pages of proof-texts. Rather, I have trusted that you recognize the basic principles that the Scriptures offer for guidance. []

(Cecil Hook; February 2007)