

COMMON IDEAS ABOUT TRIFLING SIN AND FLAGRANT SIN

Because we preach the Gospel, we must beware the temptation to attenuate the Law because of the Gospel. The Law and the Gospel are contradictory revelations of God. Because the Gospel is the answer to the human dilemma that is intensified by the Law, we have to remember that the full force of God's Law remains. Otherwise, its purpose of showing sin and indicating that people must look elsewhere for deliverance from it is blunted. Moses, the one through whom God gave the Law, felt the force of the Law he delivered against his own disobedience.

We also often see attempts to classify sins as more serious and less serious. We think about attenuating circumstances, about motives, and about how seriously we regard their effects. We hear it argued that a lie to protect a dear friend is excusable, or a "white lie", or a trifling thing, or a "venial" sin, as opposed to a "mortal sin."

An incident had lasting consequences for Moses. It seems to us that it was not entirely Moses' fault. He must have become very impatient with the Israelites' repeated complaining while they were having difficulties in the desert. Besides, his disobedience seems to us to have been only a small departure from the Lord's instruction. When the Israelite community had no water in the desert on one occasion the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. Some of their fellow Israelites had been killed and implied that their deaths were Moses' fault. They wished they had died before their fellows had. They suggested that it was Moses' fault that they had come into the desert, only to die with their livestock there. They fondly remembered the food they had had in Egypt, and made no mention of their slavery there, and the lack of water seemed to be the last straw.

When Moses and Aaron went and fell face down at the entrance to the Tabernacle, the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD told Moses, to take his staff, get the Israelites to assemble with him and Aaron and speak to a certain rock in the desert. Once before, near Mount Sinai, Moses had struck a rock with his staff, and water had gushed out in great quantities, and that was the supply that gave the Israelites their water during their long stay at Mount Sinai. On this occasion God promised that the rock would pour out its water before their eyes and it will pour out its water.

Moses took his staff from where he stored it in the LORD's presence. He also gathered the assembly together, just as the LORD had commanded him. So far his obedience was strictly correct. However, then he spoke, not to the rock, but to the Israelites. We must understand his frustration. "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" He spoke because of his pent-up frustration and anger after he had had difficulty with them for forty years.

Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. We think the repeated frustrations of Moses with the Israelites, the apparently insignificant difference between speaking to the rock and speaking to the people. We think about the effects, the copious supply of water. At close to a hundred and twenty years of age there must be some justification if Moses was a little crotchety.

However, the LORD told Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

The name "Meribah" means "strife" or quarrelling. Moses commented on the incident, "These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarrelled with the LORD and where He showed himself holy among them.

Four times in his farewell speech to the Israelites before they crossed the Jordan Moses referred to this incident, which prevented him from entering the Promised Land during his lifetime. He pleaded with the LORD to reverse His judgment, but to no avail. He told the Israelites that it was because of them that the LORD was angry with him. However, the LORD told him, "That is enough. Do not speak to me anymore about this matter. The LORD's decision that Moses would die on Mount Nebo was not subject to revision. God told Moses to go up to Mount Nebo and view Canaan from there. He again alluded to that act of disobedience: "This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel"

So sin has its consequences in this life, even when we think that motives and attenuating circumstances and perceived results alter the case.

We can think of similar instances. God rejected Saul on the principle that obedience is better than sacrifice. Jesus gave the final blow to attempts to classify sins when He said, "Anyone, who says, 'You fool' will

be subject to hellfire,” and when He equated lustful thoughts to adultery. So did John when he wrote that hatred is equivalent to murder. What is the point? It is that any sin at all deserves punishment in hell. There is no point in trying to classify sins as less serious and more serious. That is the end of all casuistry. Classifying some sins as “venial” does not mean that some are trifling or excusable. It merely contrasts them with “mortal”, and that sin, like the sin against the Holy Spirit, is not forgivable.

What we have to come back to in Moses’ case is that all sin is not defined by attenuating circumstances or motives or perceived effects, but by the fact that it is sin because it is the transgression of a specific command of God. Is a lie a sin? Yes, because it transgresses the commandment, “You shall not bear false witness.”

So there are really only two points to make. The first is that, even though forgiven by God’s grace when there is repentance, there may be lasting consequences in this life. The second is that the remedy for any and all sin with respect to God’s verdict of justification that leads to eternal life is the twofold one of sorrow for sin before God, and His mercy, which cannot be merited in any way.

What God told Moses on Mount Sinai remained true, that He is a merciful and compassionate God, who forgives sin. Because of the obedience of God’s Son in the place of all sinners, there is forgiveness, life, and salvation. Why was it that Moses had such high praise from the writer of the concluding chapter in Deuteronomy? “A prophet like Moses has not arisen again in Israel. The LORD knew him face to face. He was unequalled in regard to all the miracles and wonders that the LORD had sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, to all his servants, and to his whole land and in regard to all the mighty power and all the great awesome deeds that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.” It was not Moses’ superior goodness or great modesty, but a question of the inexplicable mercy and choice of God. That is the lesson for all of us. , Through Jesus Christ’s atonement we have the hope of seeing our Lord Jesus face to face and being like Him, with all God’s holy people.