

Defining Sin in the New Covenant

I John 1:9

There's a big problem when it comes to "labeling" sin for the Christian. When I was a kid, sin was defined as "transgressing the Law of God." It was explained to me that "transgression" was to "cross the boundary," and that the Law of God was a boundary "not to be crossed." All well and good; except for the fact as a kid I was very confused with what God's Law was for me as a believer in Jesus Christ.

The Jews set down 613 Commandments in the Old Testament that were not to be crossed, calling these Laws of God the Mitzvot. I knew better than to argue with people who can read the Old Testament in its original Hebrew. These Laws were real. The Sabbath Laws, the Festival Laws, the Dietary Laws, and all the Laws of God in the Old Covenant were to be kept. Blessings came for obedience and punishments came for disobedience.

However, as I grew in my faith in Jesus Christ, I came to understand that "all the Law and the Prophets" were beautiful shadows and pictures of the Person and work of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27). I came to see that "Jesus fulfilled the Law - every jot and tittle of it" for me (Matthew 5:18). Through Christ's active obedience to the Law in His life and through Christ's passive obedience to the Law in His death (dying in my place), "I am justified" (i.e. "treated by God just-as-if-I-never-sinned and just-as-if-I-fully-obeyed") through my "faith in Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). God takes my faith and "credits it to me as righteousness" (Romans 4:22). When I look at the Law of God, I only see Jesus Christ. He fulfilled the Law and then "set it aside for a new agreement" (Hebrews 8:13). That New Covenant in His blood is a promise that those who "kiss the Son" through faith have the full pleasure of God. The Law and its observance became obsolete and abandoned through the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. I rest in the fact that God's love for me is freely and forever mine through my faith in Jesus Christ.

Free from the Law—oh, happy condition!
 Jesus hath bled, and there is remission;
 Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,
 Christ hath redeemed us once for all.

So, with all that said, what is "sin" as a Christian? How do I "define it" or how do I "describe it?" In my opinion, if we make lists as to what is sin is for other people, then we will always emphasize the things we don't do as sin, and keep off the list the things we do. For example, you rarely hear a message on the sin of "eating-too-much" or "speaking-too-much" or "thinking-too-much-of -yourself" because those are the things preachers do! But it's sure easy to speak against "homosexuality" and "adultery" and "gambling" and "drinking" because those are things that preachers don't do!

The problem is the creation of a list. The Law of Israel is gone - fulfilled in Christ. But for some reason churches create new lists of 613 "Christian Commandments" like "tithing" and "not running in the house of God" and "obeying the words of the preacher/God's prophet" and... well, you get the idea. The lists change according to the denomination and the preacher-in-charge (like the one to whom I was listening), but the lists are there. That's the problem.

I propose that as a New Covenant believer in Jesus Christ, I may frame my understanding and description of "sin" around the things which "abide" or "continue on" in the New Covenant era (i.e. "this side of the cross"). Those three things which abide in this age are "faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love" (I Corinthians 13:13).

Faith

"Whatever is not of faith is sin," says the Apostle Paul (Romans 14:23b). If I think that by my activity I earn the favor and blessings of God (i.e. eating meat offered to idols/or not eating meat offered to idols), then I am "sinning" due to my lack of faith! Faith leads me to believe that God's favor rests on me because of my trust in "the righteousness of His Son" and not because of my obedience to "any Law" (Philippians 3:9). Whatever is not of faith that the blessings of God secured for you through the obedience of Jesus Christ is sin.

Hope

"We give thanks for the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel" (Colossians 1:5). The hope of these believers in Collosae was everlasting happiness because of the inheritance reserved for them as co-heirs with Jesus Christ (see Titus 2:13 and Galatians 5:5). This is why they kept "their minds on things above, and not on the things of this earth" (Colossians 3:2). This inheritance, which all believers receive by faith in Jesus Christ, is called "the object of our hope" because it is not yet possessed. Receiving the rewards Christ earned - as a co-heir with Him (Romans 8:17) - is future. Whatever in this life causes you to lose sight of this hope stored up for you in heaven is sin.

Love

"But the greatest of these is love" (I Corinthians 13:13). For "by this love will all know that you are My disciples" (John 13:35). The Royal Law of the New Covenant - the greatest Commandment given by the New Lawgiver (Jesus Christ) - is so clear it cannot be misunderstood. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Jesus loved me selflessly, sacrificially, and unconditionally. To whatever extent I don't love others as Jesus has loved me, then I sin.

Conclusion:

Rather than making "a list" of sin for other people, maybe we'd be better off by examining our own lives for sin and defining and describing sin for us as "a lack of faith in Christ, a lack of hope in heaven, and a lack of love for others."