

Holy Spirit's Unique Way of Telling You Whether or Not You're Sinning

You've heard the questions. You've probably asked them yourself. "Is it a sin to drink alcohol?" "How far can I go with my boyfriend (girlfriend) sexually before it becomes sin?" "If I get a divorce, am I sinning?" Our human nature sometimes struggles to know if something is right or wrong.

When I was a tween, I went through a period of being overwhelmingly concerned about my standing with God. Every night, I'd religiously write down every wrong thing I had done so I wouldn't forget to ask God or others for forgiveness. I kept a notepad hidden near my bed, and would cross off a "sin" once I had appropriately humbled myself before God or anyone else involved.

I've grown up a lot since then. It's not that I'm any less committed to seeking forgiveness when I do something wrong, but I have a much deeper understanding of what God is after. And frankly, His "list" is a lot longer than mine.

But God's list has much more to do with matters of the heart than it does with outward behavior.

Sin in the Bible

Religious people and institutions have a tendency to come up with lists of outward behaviors that you're supposed to do and not do. The Jews in the Old Testament were very good at that, and God did not look kindly on that behavior: "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hos. 6:6).

The Pharisees in Jesus's day were also good at that, and He

quoted that same Old Testament Scripture in rebuking them: "But go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Matt. 9:13).

The Ten Commandments, when viewed from a simplistic stance, seem to be about outward behaviors. But even keeping them perfectly (behaviorally) does not truly meet God's standards. A young man asked Jesus, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" (Matt. 19:20). Jesus told him that if he wanted eternal life, there was something necessary that would change his heart.

Outward behavior matters, but God's larger concern is the state of your heart.

'But I Don't Feel It's Wrong'

The Bible says certain things are wrong, but different people interpret certain details of the Bible differently. How are we to know what's right or wrong in our individual circumstances?

As we've mentioned, human beings tend to create their own lists of what's right or wrong depending on their culture, preconceived ideas and more. Is something you believe to be sinful also sinful for me? Could God have different lists for different people?

And what if I don't feel as though something is wrong? Does anything go, as long as your heart is right? That's certainly what culture supports, but that's not what God's Word says. Truth is not whatever you want it to be. The Bible presents God's way as right, and every other way as wrong. Our human minds can rationalize, rebel or otherwise find ingenious ways to try and wiggle out of God's way of doing things.

We certainly need pastors, teachers and others to speak God's Word to us. And yet no human being is infallible. No one has a more direct line to the Holy Spirit than you do. It's not that

godly leaders are unimportant in helping us know right from wrong, but we must remember that something is right or wrong because of what God says about it, not because of what any human being says about it.

God's Promise to You

So then, how are you to differentiate between what God desires and what human beings might say? That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. Isaiah promised, "Your ears shall hear a world behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand and when you turn to the left" (Isa. 30:21). The New Testament quotes God's promise through Ezekiel in saying, "I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts" (Heb. 8:10b).

The Holy Spirit will make clear what is sin and what needs to change for the person who is listening.

Many experiences—including our own decisions—may affect our ability to hear the Spirit's voice. No one can play junior Holy Spirit in another person's life. Yes, pastors have a responsibility for teaching about sin. You and I are responsible for speaking into another person's life when God gives an opportunity. But we must remember it's the Holy Spirit's action in each person's heart that counts, not our words. God does the saving, convicting and changing.

Responding to the Holy Spirit

When it comes to your own heart, natural human tendency is to say, "I'm OK. The Holy Spirit hasn't talked to me about this, so it's not sin for me. So don't you talk to me about this either." That's a very dangerous place to be. God may use people to help you understand what sin is and what you need to change. Just remember that something is sin because of what God says about it, not because of what other people say about it.

One thing is clear: Once the Holy Spirit puts His finger on that place in your heart and says, "This needs to change," and you refuse to let it go, it is sin. It may be an outward behavior, or it may be an attitude of the heart. Godly discomfort may set in at that point. You may feel all kinds of distress until you agree with what the Spirit is saying, repent or change your direction, and do it God's way.

Will you comply perfectly? Probably not. Who of us can? But that's why God promised to write His laws in our hearts (Heb. 8:10). The quicker you comply with the Spirit's prompting, the easier the process will become, and the more like Him you will be. You will more easily recognize His voice and experience more peace.

The Holy Spirit doesn't dump on you the whole list of things you need to change all at once. It's a process. There will be easier and harder times, periods of quicker and slower growth.

Bottom line: Give God permission to be in charge of your spiritual maturity, and He will not let you down.

Question: Has the Holy Spirit put His finger on something in your heart and said, "Here, let's change this"? What are you going to do about it? {eo}

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