

How Much Sin Can You Get Away With?

“So what can I get away with?” a church member asks his pastor. “Excuse me?” replies the perplexed pastor.

“Yeah, now that God’s grace has come into my life, now that the price for my sin has been paid and its penalty has been taken away, how much sin can I still entertain and enjoy?”

Oh, it doesn’t come out quite like that—not in those exact words. But as a pastor with a passion for people, I’m often around men and women who are asking their own variations of this question. Only it’s usually in the form of, “Can I date that person?” “Can I drink that drink?” or “Can I do that dance?”

What are they really asking? They want to know what they can “get away with” now that they are Christians.

I understand, because I remember being there myself. When I first became a Christian, I had no idea what God had in store for me. I figured He was only concerned with the really “big” sins in my life. In my mind, everything else was still on the table.

Little did I know then that He wanted to deal with every aspect of sin in my life, including the ones that I wasn’t even aware of at the time! There was a process I went through as I began to see that sin wasn’t something to be categorized as big or small, minor or major, optional or non-negotiable. Sin isn’t something to be gotten away with, but something to be gotten rid of.

I find it interesting that this was a question that was being asked back in biblical times, too; so much so that the Apostle Paul made it a point to address it in the book of Romans. As

he unpacks the power of God's grace, Paul pauses and asks an interesting question: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1).

Why did he ask that? Because the same thing was happening in human hearts back then that's happening right now. People are pretty much the same, regardless of which century they live in. When it comes to sin, they want to know how close they can get to the cliff's edge without falling off.

In Paul's time, there were those who disguised this desire by twisting the teaching of God's grace to infer that sin was actually a good thing, because it provided an opportunity for grace to be exercised. What better way to honor the Lord than to go ahead and sin, right? It was just one more attempt at pushing the edge of the envelope and determining how much sin they could get away with without getting burned by it. Notice how decisively Paul answers the question: "Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" (Romans 6:2).

Paul is telling us that we're missing the big picture if we're asking what we can get away with. That's not the issue. The real issue is this: Grace is something that gives us freedom from sin, not something that gives us freedom to sin. If we don't see it that way, we have a serious misunderstanding that needs to be fixed.

So where does this misunderstanding come from and how do we fix it?

When we misunderstand grace as a license to sin, it can actually be traced back to a set of three separate misunderstandings. The first is a misunderstanding of sin.

It has been well said that we're punished not only for our sins, but also by our sins. The point is that sin's presence in our lives is punishment in and of itself, because sin is inherently harmful to us.

That was the underlying principle at play when David cried out, “My iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me” (Psalm 38:4). God never created or intended for human beings to handle sin. It’s simply bad for us all the way around: physically, emotionally and spiritually.

In the long run, sin will always leave us the worse for wear, and it will always get more out of us than we ever get out of it. As a matter of fact, it will always drive us to the point of desperation where we cry out along with David, “I just can’t carry this anymore. It’s too heavy for me!”

We were never meant to harbor or carry around sin, and yet we often do so, to our own self-destruction. But when we see sin for what it truly is—when we understand how hurtful and hazardous it is—we won’t want to get away with it, but rather, we’ll want to get rid of it.

Our second misunderstanding in thinking that grace gives us a license to sin is a misunderstanding of the cross.

There’s a side of God we don’t often talk about or dwell on. But this aspect of His nature is just as real as anything else about Him: His wrath. Wrath is defined as an intense anger or rage toward something. In God’s case, that “something” is ungodliness and unrighteousness: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18).

God has an intense anger toward sin, and He’s determined to punish it thoroughly. One way or another, He will be faithful to judge every sin ever committed. And the only thing that stands between our sin and God’s wrath is the cross.

It was on the cross that Jesus served as our sacrifice and satisfied God’s wrath on our behalf. As our sinfulness was placed upon our innocent substitute—Jesus—God’s fury toward

sin was placed upon His pure and innocent Son.

I can't speak for you, but when I see the cross in that light, it makes me look at my sin a lot differently. Sin loses its luster when I recognize what Jesus went through, how He endured the Father's wrath for the sake of my sin. How can I even entertain the idea of continuing in sin when I consider the cross and what happened there?

The third and final misunderstanding in seeing grace as a license to sin is a misunderstanding of grace itself.

Grace is humbling when properly understood. Think about it. We were completely powerless to help ourselves as sinners. God, who knows everything, knew that the only way for us to ever be saved was for Him to do it for us. Grace—God's favor despite our sin—was our only hope. That's humbling.

By very definition, grace is something that cannot be earned or deserved: "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6).

None of us ever can or will be able to earn the grace God freely gives to us. He has done more for us than we can ever imagine, and that's nothing compared to what He has in store for us—and we don't deserve any of it. In fact, we deserve the exact opposite.

If that doesn't humble your heart, if that doesn't cut to your core and break you down, then you're not really reading this. When we understand grace for what it truly is and how it's affected our lives, the last thing we're going to ask is, "What can I get away with?"

Instead, we're going to wonder, "Lord, who am I that You would be so good to me?"

When we have a proper understanding of these three things,

when we see sin, the cross and grace for what they truly are, we'll have the same perspective Paul did. We won't miss the bigger picture of what it means to be touched by God's grace. And instead of seeing grace as something that gives us the freedom to sin, we'll see it as the very thing that sets us free from sin.

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