

## The Covenants, Grace and Law (Part 16)

### **Does Law Define Sin?**

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**Given 01-Jul-95; Tape #190**

Last week, the major subject that we covered was concerned with the spirit of the law. However, as important as that is, I want to begin this sermon by reinforcing another thought that I gave during that sermon. It has to do with Matthew 4: 4, which says that we are to live by every word of God. It is essential that we look at the Old Testament as a Christian book that was purposely written with the Christian in mind.

It is very easy for us to think of the Old Testament as the book of Judaism and that Christianity's roots are in Judaism. In fact, that is an idea that is very freely spoken out there in the "Christian world," but it is not true—not true in the least, except that there are some shared beliefs. If it were true, its modern day corollary would be that Christianity's roots are in paganism, because some of the concepts that pagans have are also shared with Christianity. That, incidentally, is what one large Church of God group has claimed in its writings about the Holy Days—that they actually came out of paganism.

Judaism was a corruption of the religion God gave to Moses. It, too, was syncretic. It was part pagan, part truth; and it was bound together by their own reasoning. I think that you know well many places that Jesus corrected and railed against the Sadducees, the Scribes, and the Pharisees. He said right out that they had rejected God's commandments in order to keep their own traditions. God's commandments are in the Old Testament; the Jews' traditions were not in the Old Testament. However, they were living by their traditions—not by the commandments that are in the Old Testament. Therefore, how can we say that Judaism came out of the Old Testament? God called the people out of Judaism in order to bring them into Christianity, just as today God is calling people out of "Christianity" in order to bring them into real Christianity.

If Judaism really were God's religion, why did He not fix it from within? The period between the Testaments—the period between Malachi and Matthew—was a period of roughly 400 years in which a great deal took place. If you ever read that history, you are going to find that the record of Judaism is very much like that of the Papacy during the Middle Ages. When I say "the record of Judaism," I am speaking mostly of the history of the high priests, which is pretty much specifically recorded for that period of time.

Christianity's roots are in the truth of God—not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament. Judaism, though, rejects the New Testament. Judaism claims the Old Testament as their book, and that perception is very strong. This world's Christianity claims the New Testament as their book and virtually ignores the Old Testament.

Luke 16:14-17 And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided Him [Christ]. And He said unto them, "You are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knows your

hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presses into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail.

Where have you heard that Scripture before? I want you to notice the context in which this appears. It is different from the context in which it appears in Matthew 5. It is spoken by the same Jesus Christ, but the context is different. Then, seemingly out of the blue, [He continues]:

Luke 16: 18 Whosoever puts away his wife, and marries another, commits adultery: and whosoever marries her that is put away from her husband commits adultery.

Here we find Jesus confronting the Pharisees. He had just given them the Parable of the Unjust Steward, which has something to say about money. That is why this little section is introduced by the Pharisees being shown as being covetous. Does covetousness have anything to do with the commands of God? How about the Tenth Commandment?

The Pharisees were offended. Even though Jesus did not say anything directly about covetousness, they were perceptive enough to pick up the drift of what much of the parable was saying. They justified their attitude of covetousness towards men who would accept their rationalizations; but, as Jesus was saying in verse 15, they could not escape the scrutiny of God—who judges the heart!

Jesus says that people were pressing into the Kingdom of God. Why? Because Jesus was preaching it, and people were repenting. People were believing the message. How deeply they were believing it is not the point at this time. Crowds were following Jesus around, and this enters into this explanation. Jesus warns the Pharisees that just because people were pressing into the Kingdom of God because of the preaching of the gospel, they should not be misjudged—because God was going to judge them according to the standards given in THE LAW.

Where are those standards given? In the Old Testament! That is why He said that it is easier for heaven to pass than for one tittle of the law to pass. Their covetousness was going to be judged by what was written in the Old Testament. In other words, He could perceive that they were not sensitive at all to what was written in the Old Testament.

Therefore, He gives this additional principle that He also pulls out of the law. From where did He get it? He got it from Genesis 2. "Whosoever puts away his wife, and marries another..." Why did He bring that in? It was because they had a very cavalier attitude towards the law of God. It was something that they just brushed off.

What I am trying to get across to you and me is this: Our Savior did not have a cavalier attitude towards the Old Testament. He had every opportunity here to tell these people, "Well, there is a New Covenant coming, so do not worry about your sins. We are just going to overlook them." However, the teaching does not stop here.

Luke 16:19 There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day.

Do you think that His reference might be to the Pharisees once again, that He is using a typical Pharisee--a rich man, dressed in nice clothing, who has plenty to eat? Remember the parable that just preceded this, the Parable of the Unjust Steward, which the Pharisees rightly understood had something to do with covetousness about money. Now He tied these together with His warning, "Hey, the law is not done away. You are going to be judged by that law that says something about covetousness."

Luke 16:27 Then he [the rich man] said, "I pray you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house."

In the parable, Jesus is quoting the rich man, and the rich man is appealing to father Abraham, "Send somebody to my father's house."

Luke 16:28 "For I have five brothers; that he [the one Abraham sends] may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment."

The man was in fear, and he was trying to save his brothers. He wanted to have somebody be sent there so that they would not come into this place.

Luke 16:29-31 Abraham said unto him, [Listen to this!] "They have Moses and the prophets: let them hear them." And he [the rich man] said, "No, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. [If they see a miracle, it will really put them in awe; and they will repent.] And he [Abraham] said unto him, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Jesus is the one who is actually saying this whole thing. He is the one who put the story together in which He uses Abraham as a character, Lazarus (the poor man) as a character, and the rich man (Pharisee) as a character. He is the one who came up with the dialogue. He is the one who put the words into Abraham's mouth. So our Savior—the Founder of Christianity—is the one who actually said, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, they will not hear one though he rise from the dead."

His instruction to the Pharisee (and to you and to me) is that, if you want instruction to make sure that you do not come to this place of torment—which is hell, which is Gehenna, which is

the Lake of Fire—you had better look to Moses (the law) and the prophets. In addition—if I can add this from the apostle Paul—they are able to make you wise unto salvation.

We understand that salvation is by grace through faith. I want you to think about that faith for a little bit. Jesus taught us that miracles are not conducive to producing the faith that saves! Paul said the same thing in Hebrews 4: 1-2. Israel saw all of those miracles when they were coming out of Egypt, yet they failed because they did not have faith. Jesus is saying the same thing here: A miracle will not produce a saving faith.

If a person does not believe the Word of God—Moses and the prophets—it will not change his conduct. A miracle will not change a person's conduct except momentarily. You can see that very clearly in the example of Israel in the Old Testament. God is looking for faith—trust in Him over the expanse of one's life—and for that kind of faith, one needs the Spirit of God and the Word of God, and not a momentary surge of awe in some miraculous occurrence.

I might add to this that Jesus did not say, "Be a good person. All you have to do is love." He did not even say, "Look, fellow, all you have to do is believe in Me." No, He said, "Look to the law and the prophets." Please do not miss what I am saying here. He is saying that to you and to me. That is the word of our Savior, because what God wants is changed lives. In order for us to use our faith, our free moral agency, and our will, we must have standards and the guidance that are given in the law and the prophets. You do not get those in a miracle.

I went into that because there is a common teaching out there among the modern religionists and those who attend these evangelical churches, and, would you believe, in the mother church from which we just came. When confronted in an issue like this, they will say that Jesus only said this because He was talking to the Jews. They also say that the only reason that He kept the Sabbath was that He was a Jew.

At first, that might seem reasonable, but it is not! It is nothing but a clever dodge that the deceitful heart has invented in order to justify its conduct before men. If one follows that line of reasoning, it then gives him license to eliminate any section of the Scripture that offends him on the basis of, "Well, that only applies to them. It does not apply to me."

Answer this: Was Jesus a man? Well, then the Sabbath was made for Him, too—because He was a man. When He identified Himself many times over as the Son of Man, He was referring to His humanity. Out of His own mouth, He said that the Sabbath was made for man. When Jesus spoke and acted, it was because the Father was inspiring His words and example for the purposes of Christianity, not merely the immediate moment.

Do you want another Scripture along this same line? Go back to the writings of Paul, in I Corinthians 14. The subject here, over a larger context, has to do with people's conduct during church services.

I Corinthians 14:34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also says the law.

If you start examining the context of this whole thing, you will see that was Paul's only

authority—the law. Do not be misled by this word *also*, as if it were just an aside. It was *the law* that said this.

I thought he was the man who said that the law was "done away." However, just as we can see a little bit earlier in I Corinthians 9 about the remuneration of the ministry, Paul's authority was again the law. Do you think God cares only for oxen? No! That was written with the ministry in mind.

Here again, in terms of the order of church services, Paul appeals to the law. All of this fits within the framework of what I have been attempting to help us understand: that is, that the Old Testament was written with the New Testament church in mind. Yes, it may have covered situations that were of immediate concern to people in the area and at the time in which it was written, but it is much more concerned with the New Testament church, as Paul wrote, "upon whom the ends of the world are come."

As I mentioned at the end of last week's sermon, after reviewing my notes I was concerned about some getting the idea that we were talking about a salvation by works of keeping law. Therefore, before proceeding any further, I want to touch bases again with a central foundational fact.

Ephesians 2:8-10 For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.

Salvation has always been by grace. It has to be, because we have already broken the law; and its death penalty is hanging over us by the time we (or anybody living at any time in the history of man) become aware of God through His calling—and, therefore, the reality and the seriousness of sin.

There is no salvation without justification, and justification is by grace through faith. The penalty of the law must be satisfied; and that satisfaction comes through God's grace by means of Christ's sacrifice, and then our faith in that sacrifice. Justification and salvation are NOT the same thing.

If salvation is to be by the keeping of the law, then one is obligated to keep the law in the same way that Jesus did: perfectly. Then, salvation would not be of grace, but of works. It would be something that is owed, because it was earned.

I think you are going to have to agree to this: We have already sinned. Therefore salvation must be something that is given; it is not earned. If we could pay the penalty ourselves, then there would be no need of Christ's sacrifice and no need of grace.

Obviously, paying the penalty of death ourselves is impossible. God's purpose would not then continue because it would essentially come to an end as soon as we committed our first sin. However, the fact that salvation is by grace does not diminish the importance of law; rather, it puts it into its right perspective. Another way of saying that is this: God's grace gives us a clearer focus on the law's true purpose.

Notice verse 10 again, which says that we were created to do good works. The law is the basic guide as to what *good works* are. Obedience to that law will do a number of things. It will produce the witness that our God is God. It will also prove our loyalty to His government. Obedience will assist in the producing of godly character. It will provide the foundation for a stable and secure community.

In preparing this sermon, out of curiosity I reread Psalm 119; and I counted the number of times that the law was referred to as a "path," as a "way," or as a "course." I counted twenty-two times. Ten different words (eight of them very prominent) are used to describe *law*. One of those appears in every verse except for verse 122.

In addition to this, there are words such as *swerve* (which means to turn out of the way), *stray*, *blameless*, *steady*, and *right* that are used to show holding to something: holding to a course, holding to a way, holding to a path, holding to a standard.

What Psalm 119 does is that it shows at least part of the law's purpose. It is showing that the law is the rules of the game. If you try to play a game without rules, you have absolute chaos. God is not the author of chaos or confusion. Thus it is with life. Without rules, you have chaos. That is what this world is heading to, in this end time, because evil men are growing worse and worse in NOT using the rules. It is a very simple principle.

Hebrews 12:12-16 Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths [just like Psalm 119] for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

First of all, I want us to notice that it is entirely possible for one to fall short of God's grace. What does that mean—to fall short of God's grace? At its very worst, it means to lose out on salvation. There is a common teaching, again "out there," that teaches the doctrine of "once saved, always saved."

Notice the warning about how we can avoid falling short. He says, "Lift up hands which hang down, and the feeble knee"; he says, "Change your attitude!" Then he says, "Make your paths straight"; he says, "Follow the right way." There has to be an effort in making them straight. Human nature always wants to pull us off of the path. It wants us to swerve. By the exercise of faith and the setting of our will, we have to make the effort to follow the path that is before us.

He says, "Be healed"; he is saying, "Do not ignore your spiritual problems." "Pursue peace and holiness." Then he says, "Do not fornicate." Then he talks about a profane person, that is, somebody who is far from the temple. It means to get close to God. He is saying to repent and quit breaking God's law.

In the midst of this, it says, "looking diligently." This is very similar in meaning to the Greek

term that is translated in Philippians 2:12 as "to work out your own salvation." Here it is closer to the English phrase meaning something like, "Take charge of your life!" "Do not drift." "Take positive steps towards the Kingdom of God." My question to you is this: How can you do this if there is no clear path to follow?

Let us say that people are out in the jungle. What do they do if there is no clear path to follow? (1) They stand still and do nothing; (2) they make efforts to move, but they wander all over the place because they have no path to take them in any direction; or (3) the one that they most often do is that they cut their own path. That is what men have done—using their own reasoning apart from God.

However, God has done the thinking for us. He has already set the path out there, and that path is His law. It is the basic path towards the perfection of what God is creating. Do you remember what it says back in Proverbs about how to be wise? God said,

Proverbs 3:1-2 My son, forget not My law; but let your heart keep My commandments: for length of days, and long life, and peace shall they add to you.

There is the path right there. That was written with the New Testament Christian in mind—that we might have that wisdom. I do not want us to forget that I am showing you in this section of the sermon that even though salvation is by grace through faith, we can fall short of grace if we are not following the path.

II Corinthians 6:1 We, then, as workers together with Him, beseech you also that you receive not the grace of God in vain.

It sounds very similar to Hebrews 12, does it not? "Do not receive the grace of God to no purpose." That is what vanity is. It has no purpose, no contact with reality. God is reality. The Kingdom of God is reality. The law of God is reality because it is truth, and truth is reality.

Again, Paul's appeal is "Do something!" What does he say? He says, "Cooperate with God! Truly work with Him to accomplish His will in your life." Do you remember that Jesus said, "Why do you call Me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?" He is the one that said those things in Luke 16. If you want guidance in how to miss out on the Lake of Fire, look to Moses and the prophets. Paul goes on to say, "Be reconciled to God through the repenting of sin. Quit breaking His law."

II Corinthians 7:1 Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Purify your conduct. This includes two aspects. First of all, the negative side which

involves *putting off* the carnal characteristics of the kind mentioned there in Galatians 5:19-21; that is, the works of the flesh. Then there is the positive side of *putting on* godly characteristics—such as judgment, mercy, and faith (which out of our Savior's own mouth, in Matthew 23:23, are matters of law).

Romans 2:12-13 For as many as have sinned without law [or apart from, or in ignorance of, the law] shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law [that is, having knowledge of the law] shall be judged by the law; (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.)

Very interesting. We cannot be justified before God except through faith in the sacrifice of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and then God gives us grace. That does not excuse us from keeping the law, because He says those who keep the law will be justified; therefore, keeping the law cannot justify. It cannot save one, but those who keep the law will be justified and saved—not because they are keeping the law in order to be saved but because they are faithful in showing God that they are preparing their lives for His Kingdom where everybody lives the same godly life (according to the same rules). That is what God's law outlines—the way of life.

This section in Romans 2, up to verse 16, shows that both those with a formal ignorance of God's law (we will say the Gentiles) and those with knowledge of the law (in this case, in this context, the Jews; or, in our context now, the Christians) are going to be judged by the law. Why? Because that law defines sin! That is what we are dealing with here. Sin brings God's judgment.

Romans 2:14-16 For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts, the mean while accusing or else excusing one another; in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

Everybody is going to be judged by the same law or against the same law. God is impartial in His judgments; He uses the same standard for everybody. It has not specifically said yet, but just in case you are wondering what law he is talking about, jump down to verse 21.

Romans 2:21-22 You therefore which teach another, teach you not yourself? You that preach a man should not steal [Where is that found?], do you steal? You that say a man should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you commit sacrilege?

It is very clear what law he is talking about. In fact, in one commentary that I read—the *New Testament Commentary*—the man went so far as to admit that the law Paul is talking about

here is at the very *least*—get that word *least*—the Ten Commandments. He might be talking about the whole Pentateuch, in which the Ten Commandments appear. That just about knocked me over, that a Protestant theologian would be willing to admit that!

Paul had *at least* the Ten Commandments in mind. Again, since God is impartial in judgment, those in ignorance of the law will still be judged according to what they do know. Get that. They will be judged according to what they do know. Those who are privileged to know the law—in Paul's time, the Jews; in our time, us—must never allow themselves to think that the knowledge of the law will save them. What it does is that it makes them subject to more severe judgment because THEY KNOW.

"To whom much is given, from him much is required." Those who have the law, however, have a tremendous advantage over those who do not have the law, because they have the opportunity to make their lives exceedingly better by following the way of life that God has laid down. That is a privilege that God has not given to those who do not yet know the law.

I want you to notice two things as we go through part of II Peter 2. One is that God is unbending in regard to His law. Peter shows this by illustrating that it does not matter who sins or when he sins.

II Peter 2:4 For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment...

Here are angels, before God ever created man, who broke the law of God. God, being just—being holy—could do only one thing. Because He cannot permit sin to occur in His Kingdom, He had to follow through with the punishment.

II Peter 2:5 ...and spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly;

The "ungodly" are sinners. God being the just God that He is judged according to His law, and wanted to save these people so that they could be resurrected and given an opportunity for salvation at a better time. He could not put up with their rebellion; therefore, He wiped them out because they were sinners, because they were ungodly, because they were breaking His law.

II Peter 2:6 and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly;

Do you see how Peter is bringing this forward in time, and how each illustration emphasizes the point that he is making? Now comes a positive thing:

II Peter 2:7-8 and delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy

conversation [or conduct] of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;)

Oops! Did you see that word? *Unlawful* deeds.

II Peter 2:9 The Lord knows how to deliver the godly...

In the context, you know what the word *godly* means. The ungodly are those who commit unlawful deeds. The godly are those who do righteous [deeds].

II Peter 2:9 ...and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished.

It is obvious that those who do not walk God's way (those who do not live God's way, who are not living according to His law) are going to receive God's judgment. The positive side is that God does know how to save people—His people. It is obvious that they are distinguished from the others by the way that they live.

Remember Ephesians 2:10. We were created in Christ Jesus for good works, and we are to walk in them. We are also, according to Philippians 2:12, to work out our own salvation. The doing of works proves that one is "with the program." He is growing and changing.

I am going to give four principles by which we should be enabled to tell whether a law is binding. Be aware, though, as we begin this, that all four of these principles work together. Their concepts overlap, so that we should not assume that each one stands all by itself or is, all by itself, an absolute.

I am only going to be able to give one of them today. It is the longest of the four, because it involves some information that we need, I think, very much to understand. Number One is this: Does the law define sin?

The first order of business here is to get a broad understanding of the way the Bible looks at sin. How does the Bible show it, perceive it? We can look at scriptures like I John 3:4, where it says, "Sin is the transgression of the law." We can look at Romans 6:23, where it says, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." We can look at other scriptures, and it is very easy to lump all sin as being one and the same—as though no sin is of greater or lesser importance than others. That is NOT true!

Some of you, who have been Catholics in the past, are probably aware of the Catholic concepts of mortal sin and venial sin. We might disagree as to what they might label a "mortal sin" and what they might label as a "venial sin;" but the principle, brethren, is not wrong. A mortal sin is that which will bring death. A venial sin is one of lighter consequence. (Right at this moment, I have forgotten what the word *venial* means, but it is appropriate to the Bible usage.)

The Bible's approach to sin is very broad! It is NOT merely the breaking of one of the Ten

Commandments. Did you get that? It is NOT merely the breaking of one of the Ten Commandments. Turn with me to I John 5:16-17. It is good to remember that this man, who wrote these two verses, is the same one who wrote I John 3:4.

I John 5:16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is *not* unto death...

Did you catch that? You can sin and not incur the death penalty.

I John 5:16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask [meaning, in prayer], and He shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death; I do not say that he shall pray for it.

Now look at verse 17; and, if this does not broaden your understanding of sin, I do not know what will.

I John 5:17 All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin *not* unto death.

The concept in these two verses begins to provide a foundation for showing that the Bible very clearly categorizes sin in a number of different ways. In order to understand, I think we have to define a couple of things here. You remember Psalm 119:172, which says, "All Your commandments are righteousness."

What does the word *righteousness* mean? It is an Old English word that we still use somewhat today. We use it a lot in religion; I do not think that it is used much anywhere else. It is slowly but surely being replaced by the word *rectitude*. The Old English word *righteousness* is a combination of two words: The word *right*, meaning "correct," and the word *wise*, which is not spelled anything at all like our modern word *wise*.

You remember what Mr. Armstrong taught us about what wisdom is. Wisdom is right application; it is right doing. Now we have the definition of the word *righteousness*: It means RIGHT DOING. "All Your commandments are right doing."

All unrighteousness—which means all WRONGDOING—is sin. All wrongdoing is sin. We have I John 3:4—"Sin is the transgression of the law"—and we need to define this word *transgression*. *Transgress* means "to go beyond the limit." It means "to violate." That gives us a broad foundation for understanding this. *Sin*, though, is defined as "going beyond the limit of what the law allows." Righteousness is *applying* the law's letter and/or its intent!

Quite a number of words—Hebrew and Greek—are translated into this single English word *sin*. There is a general element that is present in all sin, regardless of which word is used: It is FAILURE. *Sin equals failure*. It is failure to apply, or failure to live up to, the standard of what is right. This is why John said that all wrongdoing is failure. It is the failure to do what is right;

but some failure is much more serious than others. I will show you where this is right in the Bible. Go back to the law, in Leviticus 4, and I will show you how the Bible itself categorizes this thing. Your Bible probably has a little subheading under chapter 4 that says, "The Laws of the Sin Offerings."

Leviticus 4:2 Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, "If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the LORD concerning things which ought not to be done, and shall do against any of them:

That provides the introduction. Then, beginning in verse 3, Moses begins to list categories of individuals or groups. Verse 3 has to do with if the priest sins through ignorance. In verse 13, it is the whole congregation that sins through ignorance; verse 22, when a ruler has sinned and done somewhat through ignorance; in verse 27, if any one of the common people sins through ignorance. With that in mind, flip to Numbers 15 where a comparison is made.

Numbers 15:27-31 And if any soul sin through ignorance, then he shall bring a she goat of the first year for a sin offering. And the priest shall make an atonement for the soul that sins ignorantly, when he sins by ignorance before the LORD, to make an atonement for him; and it shall be forgiven him. You shall have one law for him that sins through ignorance, both for him that is born among the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourns among them. But the soul that does aught presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproaches the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandments, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him.

It is obvious from these examples that the attitude and the knowledge of the sinner categorizes the acts, even though it might have been the same sin as committed by him who did it presumptuously. The sin might have been adultery; or the sin might have been murder; or the sin might have been lying. If the person did it ignorantly—not really knowing what he was doing—then there could be a sacrifice for that person. If, however, the person did it presumptuously—willfully, with full knowledge of what he did, with premeditation—there was no sacrifice for that sin.

Did the Bible categorize here, or did it not? It surely did! All sins are NOT the same. Some failures are far more serious than others. Generally, the Ten Commandments themselves are arranged in the order of the seriousness the effects of breaking them brings. The first, and by far the most serious, is to commit idolatry. If a society, a family, or an individual person does not have the true God, everything else gets out of whack to a lesser or greater degree. There is absolutely no foundation at all. Breaking it is a very serious failure.

They are arranged in descending order. Of the ones that pertain to our worship of God, the one that is least important of those [first] four is the Sabbath commandment. The one that is most important is the first commandment.

Of the next six, beginning with commandment five, which one is the most serious? Honoring your parents by far and away is the most important one there. If that one gets out of whack, everything that follows it gets out of whack. Society becomes deranged, and that is what is happening now. The family is breaking down; and, as the family breaks down, the intensity of the breaking of the others increases. That only tends to break the family down even further until eventually it is going to go into total dissolution, total chaos, just as it was in the days of Noah.

Let me ask a very obvious question: There are laws all through the first five books [of the Bible], are there not? Which is the greater failure: to break the first of the Ten Commandments or wearing clothes of mixed fibers? That is a law of God. It appears in Deuteronomy 22:11, and God is serious. That is not in there for fun. It may have no spiritual meaning at all, but God wants His children to strive for perfection in every area. He is telling you that animal fibers and vegetable fibers do not mix; you are going to get a garment of poor quality.

If you want to get the best quality, you get something that is 100% wool. Do you understand the principle? Man has been able to synthesize threads and there are polyester cloths, but they have made it so that the fibers of those materials are either very much like wool or very much like the vegetable fibers; and they blend them together. It is a matter of quality. God wants His children to do the best in quality.

Which is more serious? Is wearing a piece of cloth that is a mixture of wool and cotton going to cost you your salvation? Of course not! If you persistently, consistently, and in a self-willed way break the First Commandment, though, you are committing a sin unto death; you may not make it.

In the Bible, sin is sometimes seen as the breaking of an individual commandment, an important commandment, as David did. In his sin, he committed adultery with Bathsheba and he brought about the death of Uriah. God's own judgment is in the Bible. [1 Kings 15:5] Which one was worse? God Himself categorized it. The adultery was a bad sin; the murder was worse. Which one is listed first [in the Ten Commandments]? Murder is listed before adultery, is it not?

The effects of murder are greater than the effects of adultery. That is one way to judge. You murder somebody and their hope is cut off, not to be revived. If someone commits adultery, as bad as it is, the person still lives; and he can repent of that. If one is dead, he cannot repent.

In addition to that, David's sin with Bathsheba apparently was not premeditated. His sin with Uriah most assuredly was; and he went about it in a sneaky way, giving orders to make sure that this man would be put in a place where it was almost 100% sure that he would get killed in the battle.

When you read the story of David, you will see that God categorized it. All sin is NOT the same. Thus, when we break the Ten Commandments, we bring upon ourselves the death penalty, but some sin is worse than others. Sometimes sin is shown in the Bible as merely a turning aside,

or a going off the path. Some sin—some failure to live up to the standard set by God—may affect only the person who is doing it. Others, like idolatry (especially idolatry that is committed by a leader—the head of government or those around the head of government, or a spiritual church leader), have awesome effects on a nation. God records this over and over again in the history of the kings of Israel and the high priests, because their sins have great impact, great effect. In a family, the sins of a father and mother are greater than the sins of the children.

What about murder? The murder of one person is bad enough, but murder on a vast scale, such as in war, can effect large populations. In fact, brethren, the Bible shows us that if a person were at the right place, at the right time, his sin (or his righteousness) could affect everybody on earth for all times. Do you know of whom I am thinking? Adam and Eve!

What is the worst sin? I can only give you my opinion in a generality, but I think Jesus named it. He said *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*, which will not be forgiven. Paul shows what that is in Hebrews. By putting several scriptures together, we can understand that it is the acceptance by faith of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and then the willful rejection of the same by trampling the blood of the Son of man underfoot. The actual sin, or the actual commandment broken by repeated presumptuous and deliberate transgression in the committing of that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, might be any one of the Ten [Commandments].

It is God's desire—indeed, His command—that His children strive for what He is: PERFECTION. We are to seek after the Kingdom of God, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That is His desire, but that does not mean that our salvation is hanging in balance with every decision that we make.

Think of this illustration: A teacher in school may desire perfection in each and every student. Reality clearly shows that none will reach it, but what every teacher does expect is honest effort to the best of the student's ability. Is God any different? He sets before us His desire: that we strive for perfection. He understands reality better than we do, and He knows that we are not going to reach perfection; but He wants us with all of our being to strive to try to reach it, to work within whatever we have by way of gifts, talents, or intelligence. That is why He tells us in Ecclesiastes, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."

God expects us to strive. "Take charge of your life," Paul says. "Work out your own salvation." What eventually becomes the major, determining factor (because we are going to sin, and we are going to sin frequently) is the attitude, the motive behind what we do and why we do it. When a teacher sees consistent and persistent willful failure, he may have no recourse but to reject such a person on the basis of his own record.

There remain yet a few things on which to speak in this principle, but I think that for me to go into the next section would require too much time. I want to thank you in advance for your patience with me as we wade through this. To me it is an exciting study, and I just keep finding more and more to give you. We will, God willing, pick up on this next week.