

804 Are We Deceived Morally?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

In 1993 I preached the gospel to a group of women in prison in the province of Belarus of the former Soviet Union. When I spoke about sin to the prisoners, a lady about forty years of age said that she had never sinned. I was amazed she could say that. Since that time, I've met many people who live immoral lives but act as if it were nothing. Does sin matter?

Today we're asking the question, "How are we deceived morally?" Americans don't use the word morality much anymore. Some theologians have actually said that sin is an outdated word. Others think the grace of God is so abundant we are forgiven no matter what we do. We certainly hear more about grace than repentance these days. It seems there are a number of things people misbelieve about sin and morals. People easily lie to themselves about moral matters in order to cover up their deeds or to keep from having to change their lives. It seems people will do anything to keep from owning up to their sins and giving them up. I hope you are letting unresolved sin rob you of a relationship with God and hope for eternity.

The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 7:1-5, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." It would certainly be absurd for anyone to have a log sticking in his eye. Why would anyone allow something so apparently large to stay in his eye? But absurdities happen when people deceive themselves.

Jesus was trying to help people see how willfully blind they are to their own lives. Most folks don't think of themselves as blind to the truth, but it is amazing what people do to convince themselves that a sinful behavior is okay. If we do not honestly face up to our own sins, and confess them, we blind ourselves to ourselves; and then we can't see clearly enough to help others. The Pharisees saw the sins of other people, but they would not look at their own sins. You'll remember the Lord's prophet in Jeremiah 17:9-10 says: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds." How easily people deceive themselves to get their way. Here are some of the things people tell themselves.

First, people justify themselves by saying, "Everyone is doing it!" They believe God won't condemn everyone, so they can do as they please. When I was in eighth grade gym class, a number of my classmates decided they would leave a minute or two early for lunch and beat the crowd, so they took off before the bell rang. Now the gymnasium was in another building separate from the main school. When they ran out of the gym, they forgot to notice all the windows in the other building. In their haste they did not realize they were being seen by teachers and students across the way. The next day Mr. Skelton, our gym teacher, asked all the students who left early to line up. They figured that he wouldn't punish so many, but each boy received his swat from Mr. Skelton's paddle. Only three of us who stayed behind till the bell rang were spared.

Just because many people believe something is right doesn't make it right. What is popular isn't always what is right, and what is right isn't always popular. Jesus stated one of the most surprising teachings of the Bible in Matthew 7:13-14. The Lord said, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." The easy way is popular but deadly. Many people deceive themselves that a large crowd cannot be mistaken, but crowds take the wrong roads everyday. No matter how many people lie, get drunk, commit acts of fornication, or gossip, these sins are still wrong. God doesn't count noses to determine right and wrong.

Second, you might hear someone say, "Just once won't hurt," or "I can stop anytime I want to." The apostle Paul by inspiration warned in 1 Corinthians 10:7-12: Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. My friend, if you play with sin even just once, you can fall.

I wonder how many young ladies have become pregnant after having sex just once. I wonder how many thieves or killers have gone to prison for committing one crime. I wonder how many relationships are destroyed over just one angry outburst! Even one sin has consequences. The Lord Jesus said in John 8:34, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." No one sets out to be an addict, but every addiction started with trying something "just once." A dear friend of mine, Ron Wilkins, is an expert on addictive behaviors. He says people can get addicted to some behaviors in a matter of days or weeks. Such addictions happen to people just like you and me everyday. Doing something "just once" may lead you into a habit that is nearly impossible to break.

Breaking an addictive habit isn't easy; people can't always stop anytime they want. Ask any alcoholic, smoker, or drug addict. Until someone understands why he does what he does and changes his thinking, he is likely to continue his behavior. People usually get addicted to a behavior in order to escape or ease some emotional pain. Rather than deal with the pain, they escape to some behavior they feel will comfort them. In time they become dependent on the comfort they get from the behavior. Unfortunately, their escape behavior is often as destructive as the pain they seek to avoid. Getting drunk or taking drugs may give them temporary relief but at a great price! They are still in pain when they sober up. That's not the answer!

The answer is in finding peace through the teaching of the Lord. God's ways lead to peace of heart and soul. Our pain usually comes through people mistreating us or from our own failures. Some folks hurt throughout their lives because they haven't learned to forgive others or to forgive themselves. People who come to know the grace of God, how God forgives, can find the power in their hearts to forgive others and even to forgive themselves. Grace teaches us to change our lives and to change our perspectives toward others. Grace helps relieve the pain. Get rid of the pain, and you won't have to rely on drugs and alcohol to muddle through life.

Some folks who live immoral lives try desperately to justify their sin. One excuse I often hear is, "Jesus wants me to be happy." The assumption is that their desire makes them happy and Jesus wants them to be happy, so Jesus approves of what they are doing. A man or woman who uses this excuse to cheat on a spouse or to divorce and remarry someone else is only fooling himself. Jesus wants people to honor their wedding vows. Someone objects that Jesus wants them to be happy. Yes, Jesus wants us to be happy; but happiness is a by-product of righteous living.

The Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). Jesus calls "happy" or "blessed" those who want righteousness as badly as they want to eat food or drink water. Happiness and righteousness go hand in hand. The apostle Paul wrote with authority of God to the Galatians. He said in Galatians 5:16-17, "But I say, walk by the

Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please." Fornication or adultery may make you happy in the flesh, but it is not God's will for you to find your pleasure in sin.

Another fallacy I hear is: "If it doesn't hurt anyone, then it's okay." With that comes the notion, "It's my body, and what I do is nobody's business but mine." I remember back when many of the discussions took place about marijuana; people said using marijuana was a victimless crime and should be made legal. I wonder how many people have been victims of theft, rape, and murder, because somebody was high on drugs or had to have the money to buy drugs. Drugs are not victimless. They destroy the people who use them; they destroy the families of people that use them; and they have often led to the destruction of innocent people. Any policeman will tell you that drugs are at the base of many if not most crimes.

Many years ago I attended the funeral of a young lady who was killed by a drunk driver. The drunk driver who turned the wrong way didn't intend to kill anyone, but my friend's young life was taken. Her family still grieves; the drunken driver still has to live with what she did. She may have told herself all kinds of things to permit driving intoxicated, but none of these things will bring back my college friend. Sin hurts. All sin hurts; that's why God opposes sin! That's why He gave us the Bible! The Bible teaches us what is good for us and what is bad for us. He gave the Bible to us to protect us. God has seen it all, and we need to trust the wisdom He gives to us in this book.

Sometimes I hear the statement, "If no one finds out, then no harm is done." Is that true? Whether someone finds out or not, evil is still evil. People like to hide their sins in order to keep from facing the consequences of sin. But no one really gets away with sin. Even if no one else finds out about it, there are always two who know what you did. You know it and God knows it. You can hide things from others, but you cannot from yourself. You will carry in your heart and memory the things you have done. You can hide from others, but you cannot hide from God. Some people can ignore or forget what they have done, but God does not forget. Years cannot erase your sin. Hiding them cannot erase them. Only the blood of Jesus removes sin.

David by inspiration wrote in Psalm 50:16-21: But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son. These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you." The worst thing we can do is think that God is like us, that He doesn't care if we sin, that He won't hold our sins against us. God is holy, and He demands justice against sin!

That justice may come in the loss of your salvation. You and I and everyone need to take sin seriously again. God says, "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die" (Ezekiel 18:4). God says, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). God says, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). People often fool themselves that they can escape the consequences of sin, but no one can!

The apostle Paul said in Scripture, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). You can be sure that God will judge the secrets of men on the day Jesus comes again (Romans 2:14). Without the blood of Christ, none of us can find salvation, none of us will be able to stand before God justified. Thanks be to God that Jesus was willing to die for our sins that we might have forgiveness of sins and hope of eternal life! Without Jesus we have no hope; without Jesus we would all surely be lost in our sins. But because of His love and grace, we can enjoy the grace of God and our salvation!

The apostle John said in the Bible, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10). God has no desire to punish us for our sins. You'll remember the prophet Ezekiel speaking for God asked in Ezekiel 18:23, "Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord GOD, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?" God is in the saving business. The Bible says in John 3:16-17, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." Again, Paul said by inspiration in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." The inspired apostle Peter said the Lord is "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). So, God is on your side and wants to save you, but God will not save you against your will. He will not do for you what He has asked you to do to come to Him. He won't believe for you, confess your sins for you, repent for you, or change your life for you. You must do that yourself. God loves you, but He will not save you if you don't or won't love Him. You can't keep on denying your sins or hiding them and still please God. You have to confess them and give them up. To become a Christian, you must believe Jesus is the Son of God and take Him as your Lord. You must change your life by repenting of those ugly sins and living a life that pleases God and says you love God. You must be willing to confess Christ as your Lord and the Son of God before others. And... you must be willing to be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. It is in baptism that God uses the shed blood of Christ to cleanse you from sin. When God washes away your sin, He washes every one of them away. Once you are baptized into Christ, you can stand before God free from sin and as His child. Today, my friend is the day to get right with God. Won't you obey Him today?

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