

Teaching E-mails

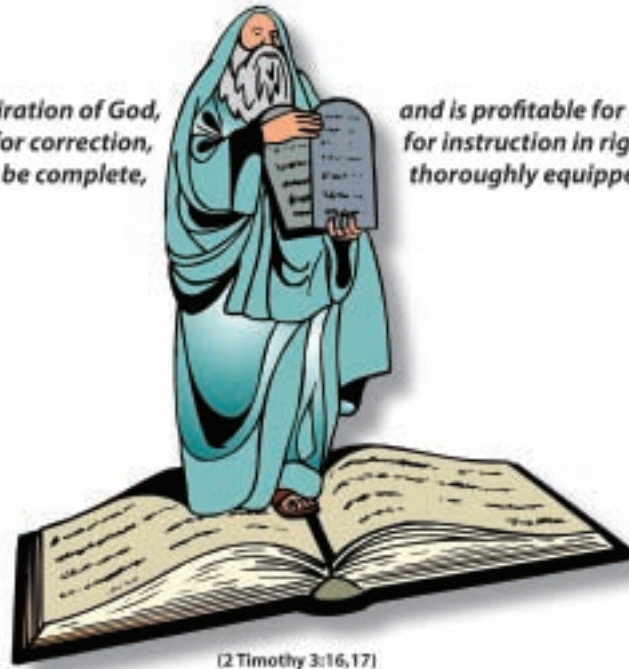
Prophetic Warnings From a Righteous God

38. Do You Understand the Severity Of Your Sin?

(May 24, 2008)

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,
for reproof, for correction,
that the man of God may be complete,*

*and is profitable for doctrine,
for instruction in righteousness,
thoroughly equipped for every good work.*



(2 Timothy 3:16, 17)



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When was the last time you considered how essential to your life journey in our Lord Jesus is a *holy fear of God*, a fear that leads you to live *according to His Word*? The Apostle Peter was astonished to witness the Holy Spirit come upon the Gentile centurion Cornelius and his friends. This startling turn of events was spiritually eye-opening to the devout Jew:

In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him (Acts 10:34,35).

All through the Bible the theme of *fearing God and doing what is right* is the basis to relating to Him the way He calls for. Sadly, a large part of Christendom today has discounted any need to *“fear God”*.



Pervasive in modern teaching is an understanding, whether voiced or not, that God exists to fulfill our needs in exchange for our giving Him a few hours a week of “worship and study” while trying to live as “good people”. This *perversion of biblical truth* has pointedly increased as perceived relevance of the Hebrew Scriptures to Christian life today has continued to decrease.

Ever aware of and obedient to the Hebrew Bible, Jesus commanded of those He called His friends a *holy fear of God*:

I will show you Whom you should fear: Fear Him Who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him” (Luke 12:5).

This is a holy fear with an element of terror in it—the kind of terror that knows

that God isn’t to be trifled with despite His wonderful love for you! When you firmly trust this all-powerful God you love and serve, His commands regarding interaction lose their sense of infeasibility: *“Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king”* (1 Peter 2:17).

Note that aside from your relationship with God, none of the other categories *deserve* your honor or love. Certainly the oppressive Roman regime didn’t inspire honor. Yet because of their *fear of God*, the followers of Jesus were able to submit even to that tyrannical governing power.

When the Apostle Paul commands the Philippian believers to *“work out your salvation with fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12), Whom are we to fear in the pilgrimage to our salvation? It’s obvious from the Newer Testament writers that we have a personal responsibility of *ongoing obedient trust* until we receive our salvation at the Judgment Throne. That element of holy fear is part of the salvation journey. [See our Hebrew Article, *The Gospel of the Covenant is the Pilgrimage to Salvation*, for more on our covenant responsibility and privilege in Jesus.]

The Bible never depicts our Lord as our buddy or as our “personal Savior”. That the King of kings and Lord of lords has reached out to embrace His own as beloved bondservants who collectively are His Bride is HIS prerogative, not the presumptive familiarity with which many regard Him.

There IS a holy confidence which we who trust and follow our Lord Jesus have as we hold fast to our hope in Him to the end (Hebrews 3:6,14). But beware that you don’t bring our Lord Jesus down to a manageable figurehead toward whom you have no awesome fear. He is and ever will be the King of His Kingdom!

Holy Fear: A Generational Responsibility

Perhaps it's timely at this point to visit the tragic error of our Israelite forefathers who strayed into compromise that led to full-fledged *spiritual adultery*. As Psalm 78:10,11 mournfully intones, the descendants of the Patriarchs were guilty of the following sins. As you read them below, examine your heart and discuss them with your faith family. Do vestiges of these sins linger in your own faith practices? In those of your family?

- They did not keep the covenant of God. [Newer Testament believers are also in covenant with God, with the *covenant privileges and responsibilities* that His Word calls for.]

- They refused to walk in His law. [The Newer Testament contains *1050 commands* that followers of Jesus are both empowered and called upon to keep.]

- They forgot His works and His wonders [all the wondrous *answers to prayer and Divine intervention* that you and they experienced].

In setting aside the parameters of God's covenant, His commands and teachings, and His awesome power as evidenced by His miracles and deliverance, contemporary Christians have thrown off any fear of Him. He too often has become a *historical figure* in a text called the Bible.

Do you recall the old saying, "What one generation allows in moderation, the next excuses in excess?" If you have completely disregarded any concept of holy fear of God, then you can be sure your children and their children will relegate God to a file of *irrelevance*.

Psalm 78 stresses time and again the necessity of rehearsing repeatedly with your children the praiseworthy character

of God, His power and His law so that they may set their hope in Him, not forget His works, and keep His commands (v. 3-8). These requirements haven't been nullified for us who are followers of Jesus!

Do your children or grandchildren point out buildings with steeples and call them *churches*? Is a visible representation of religious activity really any different than the idols and statues which represented the false deities lusted after by the Israelites (see Acts 7:39)? The true "church" is of course the collective body of the King's bride—those in whom He dwells invisibly by His Spirit.

Keep in mind that it's all too easy to stray into law-lessness: doing what *seems* right but still violates God's way. King David, the man esteemed for his heart for God, fell into that trap. Calling for the ark of the covenant to be transported to Jerusalem, David had it placed openly on a cart. He flagrantly disregarded God's requirement for the ark to be carried on the shoulders of men via special poles through the attached rings.

While David and all of Israel rejoiced with dancing and singing, God's displeasure was revealed when one of the men extended his hand to keep the ark from falling. That presumption cost him his life and instilled terror in David — so much so that he delayed three months to bring the ark to his city!

Unholy, feel-good soulish pleasure describes the Israelites as they worshiped and frolicked around the abhorrent golden calf in the wilderness. Stephen tells us they "*rejoiced in the work of their hands*" (Acts 7:41). But was their joy pleasing to their holy, offended God? Obviously not! Tragically for them, He gave them up to their darkness as they mixed sacrifices to Him with unholy worship of false gods. (See Acts 7:38-43).

What does this mean for us today? Can it be that the dancing and singing and praising in so many congregations is actually designed to attract and please *worshippers* rather than give due praise to a holy and awesome God? Are numbers of those worshippers also serving idols of self-gratification, greed, personal prestige, or worldly choices alongside their service to God? That's *spiritual adultery*, and a holy and jealous God wants nothing to do with it.

During the 11 years we taught at a retreat center we'd occasionally ask, "How many hours a week are you without unconfessed sin?" The average was *four hours*. That meant that 164 hours each week professed Christians were out of fellowship with God because they were holding on to unconfessed sin. Where in God's Word is this pattern acceptable?

Periodically Mike preached in various congregations. At times he'd challenge those gathered: "If you have *no unconfessed sin* at this moment, please stand up". Revealingly, few would rise from their pew.

- As you read this, is our Lord counting sin against you that you've failed to confess? If so, why haven't you obeyed His command and forsaken that sin?
- Do you even *know* what God considers to be sinful?

What Does 'Sin' Mean To God? Does It Mean The Same To You?

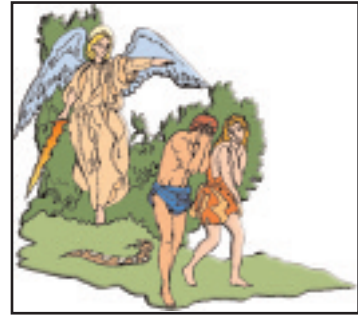
Many Christians think of sin as *doing something wrong*. But in keeping their definition of sin simplistic, they're failing to grasp how encompassing the concept of sin is from *God's perspective*. Scripture's description of sin helps us understand why we're unable to pay the penalty our sins deserve. The guilt of our sin is so severe that the Son of God had to become human as we are, but without sin, so He could pay on our behalf the punishment justly due us for our violations.

Various biblical terms denote sin: failure, error, trespass, lawlessness, unrighteousness, unmitigated evil. But sin's true essence is that it's ***directed against God***. Any definition of sin that does not con-

tain its true motive—rebellion against God—is deceptive and misses its gravity.

Most teaching on sin today (what little instruction there is) focuses on **what** you've done wrong. But this approach avoids the reality of your full responsibility for **Whose character and laws were violated** by your sin, and for the consequences that unconfessed sin draws from our holy God.

Willful rebellion against God existed *before* the fall of Adam and Eve. That's evident because of the presence of Satan in the Garden. He had been cast out of God's presence down to earth before man was created. But because of Adam's sin, dire consequences have befallen all of us since. We address these in our workbook, *Demolishing Strongholds*.



Sin:

1. Harms our **Hearing from God**
2. Harms our **Belief in God**
3. Harms our **Desires**
4. Harms our **Actions**
5. Harms our **Relationships with Others**

Sin also produces:

- **Shame** (Condemnation)
- **Rationalization** (Hiding from God)
- **Fear**
- **Blame** (Inability To Take Responsibility for Your Actions)
- **Curse Instead of Blessing**
- **Rejection**
- **Vulnerability to Satanic Attack**

Sin is far more sinister than our decisions to transgress God's righteous laws. Every sin we commit is an expression of

our depraved hearts. As we've written previously, all of us were *conceived with a sin nature*, a dark propensity to sin.

Most of us also inherited demonic strongholds from our parents that have filtered how we view both our life and our relationship with God. You may remember from *Demolishing Strongholds* that these spiritual forces attract us to others of like demonic influence. People generally marry others with the same prevailing strongholds because they feel they *understand* each other. They attend faith communities with others of like strongholds because they feel so *accepted and comfortable* among those folks. These unclean spirits, however, are determined to guide us into *unholy relationships*.

Is the depravity of our current world any different than at the time just before the Flood?

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

The intense drive of our sin nature urges us to sin: *the unredeemed heart wants to do evil all the time*. Our depravity is so great that without the power of God at work in us, we can't consistently resist sinning. The witness of Scripture hammers home this crucial point: *"The carnal mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so"* (Romans 8:7).

If we're truly honest with ourselves, we can identify with Paul in his struggle against sin. Put yourself within his lament and see if you're both as grieved and as grateful as the apostle is:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not

understand what I do. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If then I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I who do it, but sin living in me.

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but to do what is good I do not find. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? I thank God God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin (Romans 7:14-25).

It is *Jesus in us* Who enables us to resist sin (see James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9). Another way to say this:

The Spirit of Jesus in His followers enables them to resist anything that's against God. Jesus alone is the true power against our dark, sinful desires.

Does God Hold Us Accountable For Our Sins?

Unless we can grip with all our strength the *utter depravity* of our natural sinful heart, we will wink at our willful sin and grow complacent in all that Lord

Jesus has accomplished on our behalf. Let's review just how vile sin is.

Sin is never impersonal, confined within a vacuum of space and time. Sin is very real, an outflow of our human sin nature against a holy and righteous God. His just wrath is a deserved consequence of the sin that's been enacted by every person on earth (Psalm 53:2,3; Romans 3:10-12).

While other people are indeed impacted and hurt by our sin, our violation is *against God* — and He's neither inattentive nor indifferent about it (Psalm 51:3,4). It doesn't matter how much *we* excuse our sin; our holy God holds us guilty, worthy of eternal damnation. THIS is how our holy and caring God reacts to our sin. And as Scripture makes terrifyingly clear, the Judge is standing at the door (James 5:9).

The frequency with which the Scriptures mention the *wrath* of God should compel you to take account of its reality for those apart from Jesus.

- **The wrath of our God is not the fitful passion so commonly associated with human anger. His holy wrath suits His purposes. (Jude 1:15)**
- **His wrath is a deliberate and resolute displeasure which His holiness demands. (Nahum 1:2)**
- **His wrath is neither vindictive nor malicious, but rather His righteous indignation against our sin. (Romans 1:18)**

The reality of a God who executes wrath upon the unrepentant is not confined to the Hebrew Scriptures as so many today erroneously believe! The Newer Testament makes plain that God's wrath is *always* against those who reject His Son as well as those who *claim* to be His but continue to violate His law:

*He who trusts in the Son has everlasting life; and he who **does not trust the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him** (John 3:36);*

*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who **does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who **practice lawlessness!**'**" (Matthew 7:21-23).*

Grievously, those who reject God's mercy and fail to trust in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus remain under God's wrath forever. *And consider this:* those who *claim* to be His but are law-less predominate western Christianity.

The Holy Spirit has come, among many reasons, to convict the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment (John 16:8). If your heart is still of the world, you need to cry out to Him in repentance that you may not be judged along with the unrighteous of the world.

We can rejoice with Paul that Christ has paid the just penalty that our sins deserved! Now may you and your family not be among the lawless who live as though He is *not* your Lord and King. It truly is a fearful thing to be in the shoes of the ancient Israelites and blaspheme God through compromise with evil. He purposes to lead His own in paths of righteousness for *His Name's sake*.

Our next Teaching E-mail will clarify sins as described throughout the Bible. Don't be ignorant of the righteous standards of our God! Ignorance of His commands doesn't make you innocent in His sight. *Presumptuous unrepentance* leaves you under His wrath.

- Put an 'X' below indicating the level of your fear of God.

None *Some* *At times* *A holy fear*
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

- How does your “fear of God” affect your spiritual life?

- God’s wrath remains against those who refuse to walk in *His Lordship*—those who choose to live apart from His commands. Examine your own life (2 Corinthians 13:5). Will you be among the disqualified who abide in lawless sin?
