

MARGINAL SINS
1 Corinthians 8:4-13, Job 13:23
By Raymond White

There are sins, and there are not sins. And then there are things that are sort of in between, that are really hard to tell if they're sins or not. And some sins are maybe not so sinful while other things which are not sins seem like they could be.

But then there's the principle of the excluded middle: It's raining or it's not raining, there's no in between. You're pregnant or you're not pregnant, there's no in between. Therefore, anything you can think of to do must either be a sin or not a sin, so deciding what to do and not to do should always be easy. We wish. But it's not that easy.

I'll toss a few examples at you from the bible and you can decide for yourself.

[1] APPEARANCE

2 Thessalonians 5:22 Abstain from all appearance of evil.

Alright, that seems clear enough. Some things are not technically sinful, but because they merely look sinful, someone who is observing might misunderstand. And if he's a gossip, bad things might happen. Or maybe his new found faith was shaken by what he thought he saw you do. There are many ways that the mere appearance of evil can cascade into actual evil.

Therefore, we conclude, it's best to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

Well, fine. But what if a woman (a young and pretty woman unfortunately) is stranded on a dark, lonely highway in the rain and clearly needs to be rescued? Do you give her a ride and risk the appearance of evil? Or do you leave her stranded and risk her being murdered? Jesus told the story of a Good Samaritan, and we understand its clear message. But let's tweak the story a bit and make the injured person a young, pretty woman, maybe your daughter. Now what is the Good Samaritan supposed to do?

Avoiding the appearance of evil is certainly good advice, but it can't be absolute. I don't subscribe to situational ethics, but really, it depends. As a general principle, avoiding the appearance of evil certainly makes sense. But as an absolute imperative, well, surely there are exceptions.

[2] OTHER PEOPLE'S SINS

Romans 1:32 Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

1 Timothy 5:22 Neither be partaker of other men's sin.

Doing sin is sinful. Of course. But what if you enjoy watching someone else sin? Well, that's sinful too. Well, is it? If we're talking about pornography, we would probably conclude that watching someone else commit sexual sin is itself a sin. But what about a war movie? Or a James Bond movie? Or a gladiator movie? The commandment

is: “Thou shalt not kill.” Does that mean we shouldn’t watch movies about people killing each other? Which is the worse sin: murder or promiscuity? .

And admit it. You love to watch the mayhem. It’s a guy thing.

But, you might argue, it’s only pretend. We’re not watching gladiators actually kill each other, they’re just acting. Well, then, what about animated pornography where no actual “sin” is happening? Is that a sin? If yes, then why is a war movie not a sin?

And, hey, how about that “Hunger Wars” movie? Did you enjoy watching children murder children? But it was only pretend. But you enjoyed it, didn’t you?

It gets hard to draw a line, doesn’t it?

[3] UNKNOWN SINS

Job 13:23 How many are mine iniquities and sins? Make me to know my transgression and my sin.

Teach me what my sins are? Don’t I already know? Apparently not. One can sin and not know he’s sinning because the sin is obscure. We need to know what our sins are so that we *can* refrain from doing them. Until then, we’re sort of stuck.

[4] SIN BY CONSENT

Proverbs 17:15 He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD.

In a court of law, if you are the judge, or a juror, or a defense attorney, this verse is a stern warning. If you acquit the guilty, his or her guilt rubs off on you because, in a sense, you have made yourself an accomplice to the crime — a sort of second-hand guilt, guilt by osmosis. Carry that scary thought with you the next time you’re on jury duty. And if you free a murderer, particularly someone who has murdered a child (Casey Anthony?), how are you going to explain yourself to God?

But if on the other hand, you convict the innocent then you have harmed an innocent person and you are guilty of that.

So either way, you’re at risk of being an “abomination to the LORD.” Jury duty is not a trivial responsibility.

And then there is this Latin maxim: “qui tacet consentire” which means “silence implies consent.” So if you see an evil and don’t object, you’re guilty. Ouch!

[5] NON-SINS BECOMING SINS

1 Corinthians 8:4 As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing ... :7 Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge ... and their conscience being weak is defiled. :8 But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. :9 But take heed lest by any means this liberty of your’s become a stumbling block to them that are weak. :11 And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? :13

Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.

Alright, what's going on here? I will explain it to you, and this is not trivial.

Here's the problem that Paul poses: A pagan sacrifices an animal to a pagan god (Zeus, Athena, whoever). Then he sells the meat to the local butcher shop. Then you, a good Christian, go to that same shop and buy some meat to take home. But then another Christian sees you leaving that shop and says, "That meat was sacrificed to an idol. Should you be eating that?" Now the "appearance of evil" principle is in play. Or is it?

Here is Paul's answer, and it's far reaching in its implication. Paul says that an idol is nothing but superstition. So if you want to eat the meat, eat the meat — there's no pagan curse on it, no sin attached to it. And if that were the end of it, that would be easy.

But there's a catch. What if that other Christian's faith is not as strong as yours, and *he* feels that the meat is somehow tainted having been sacrificed to an idol. Now if you eat that meat you may injury *his* weak faith. Should you eat it or not? There is nothing wrong with eating the meat, but there is something wrong with injuring your brother's fragile faith. So Paul is saying that maybe it's best not to eat it.

So, does that mean that what is not sinful becomes sinful to me because of someone else's opinion? Am I now to be judged by someone else's conscience?

1 Corinthians 10:29 Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience? *:30* For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that which I gave thanks?

That is exactly the right question. Why indeed should someone else's conscience circumscribe my liberty? Here is Paul's answer.

1 Corinthians 10:31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatever ye do, do all to the glory of God. *:32* Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.

Well, okay, Paul, we get it. We have liberty, but we should not use that liberty to offend others. Fine. Alright.

But wait a minute. That may make sense when we're talking about something as trivial as meats sacrificed to idols, but what if we're talking about something not so trivial, like for example, marriage; or for another example, circumcision. Would Paul then be so willing to abrogate his conscience to someone else?

1 Timothy 4:1 ... some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils. *:2* Speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron. *:3* Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving ...

Galatians 5:2 Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.

Oh, wow. Now Paul takes quite the opposite stand. When the issue really matters, he will not acquiesce to someone else's conscience. Some extreme Christians might believe that sex is wrong even in marriage and would have us all believe that. Sorry, we can't bend our conscience far enough to accommodate that absurdity. Some Christians think we should all be vegetarians. Sorry, we can't accommodate that either. And some Christians, Jewish Christians (back then anyway), thought all Christians should be circumcised. Sorry, no can do.

So, none of this is absolute. Paul is willing to circumscribe his liberty *in some cases*, trivial cases, like eating meats sacrificed to idols, but this does not a rigid principle. Paul is not saying that we should allow people with higher sensitivities to define our conscience for us.

So now we have the two extremes: the trivial and the not so trivial. What about all the in-betweens? The church was caught up in just this kind of mess.

Acts 15:7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them :10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we are able to bear? :11 But we believe that though the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved [circumcised Jesus], even as they [uncircumcised gentles]. :13 And after they had held their peace, James answered ... :19 Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble them not, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God. :20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutants of idols, and from fornications, and from things strangled, and from blood.

The issue is this: Should gentile Christians be circumcised, follow the Jewish dietary law, and submit to the Jewish law in general? In other words, do gentiles have to become Jewish to become Christians? And the answer is, well, no, generally. Grace overrides all that. But that's not absolute. There are some Jewish principles James cannot quite abandon. Sex sin is still sin. And have nothing to do with idols of course. And even some of the dietary law James slips in.

So grace is not license. Sin is still sin. But then what sins exactly do we still have to worry about? Ah, that's the rub. It depends on which sort of Christians you ask. As I said at the beginning, there are sins, and there are not sins, and there are in-between sins, and it's not always so clear what is and is not a sin.

What about today? Thank heavens that at least we don't have to worry about meats offered to idols. But what about tattoos? R-rated movies? Short skirts? Spiky hair? How about artificial insemination? Should men wear white shirts and a tie to church? Is wearing jeans to church a sin? If the goal is to not offend, how can we possibly respond to all the many ways people might take offense? Do we have to conform absolutely?

I was amused to hear the story of some British Baptist ladies and some American Baptist ladies who got together at a convention. The British ladies liked their alcohol but thought dancing was a sin. While the American ladies liked dancing but thought alcohol was a sin. That must have been a very entertaining convention.

I met a woman who was offended at church *because* everyone was dressed nicely and looked alike. It seemed to her, she told me, that everyone "was in uniform." She was offended, of all things, by the conformity! And never went back. So we offended

someone by trying to not offend. Now that's a catch-22. (That's why I wear a blue shirt to church and not a white shirt, which has drawn some fire at me.)

At some point our efforts to not offend just gets silly. And where is there sin in all this? Who knows. You tell me. Just be weary of the letter of the law.

[6] A MORMON VARIANT ON A MARGINAL SIN

Here's a Mormon conundrum. Mormons have a health law. It's called the Word of Wisdom and it has served them well — Mormons average life expectancy is about seven years longer than the rest of the country.

The Word of Wisdom is documented as Doctrine and Covenants section 89.

But there's a problem. While the Word of Wisdom wisely forbids alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea (and Mormons abide by all those restrictions religiously), it also says that meat is "to be used sparingly" and "only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine."

So the instruction (if taken literally) is to be if not vegan at least sort of vegan-ish. In other words, eat meat, but not so often. Which is actually pretty good advice. That's just what my doctor tells me.

But that part of the commandment is ignored by the church and its members — no bishop ever asks any member about his meat eating.

Here's my question: Is it a sin for a Mormon to eat meat regularly? And the answer is: I hope not, but really, I have no idea.

Here is a story that I told to a Mormon audience: A Mormon man died young of heart failure and meet Saint Peter at the pearly gates. Peter asked him, "Did you live the Word of Wisdom?"

The man replied, "Oh, yes. No alcohol, no tobacco, no tea, no coffee, and no illicit drugs my entire life. Never touched the stuff."

Peter continued, "But you ate prime rib every Friday, and hamburgers and hot dogs every day for lunch. That kind of diet is forbidden in the Word of Wisdom, isn't it?"

The man asks, "Oh. I didn't know that. My bishop never asked me about my meat consumption. Is that a problem? Will that keep me out of heaven?"

Peter answers, "Oh heavens no. You're welcome here, glad to have you. I'm just asking because I'm curious, why are you here so soon?"

Is meat a sin? Well, if it kills you, I suppose it is. You decide.

Somewhere I read: "Red meat is not bad for you, green meat is bad for you." Well, there is that too.

[7] DEGREES OF SIN

It does seem that there are degrees of sin: some trivial and others serious. And there is a difference between repented sins and not-repenting sins. An Evangelical (a born-again Christian) might feel uncomfortable with even that distinction — if you're saved you're saved, they'd say, from all sin, period, so why do we need a distinction? But for the rest of us Christians, it does feel that some sins are more heinous than others, and doing something really bad (murder?) would put us out of grace, while other less injuring "sins" (glance at a pretty woman?) would not. So maybe the Catholics are right to talk

about mortal sins (those that will damn you) versus venial sins (those that won't). That's how most of us probably feel though we don't use those words.

And so we have different kinds of sins and maybe in-between sins.

[8] WHAT TO DO

A simple (but not easy) solution would be to not ever do anything that even *could* be a sin. But how can you do that? That would put us right back in the situation that the Jews found themselves in: building a hedge around the law, creating so much precision that they would never accidentally violate the law, but at the same time being ridiculous.

And that drew criticism from Jesus. In his view, they were being too picky, trying too hard, and “gagging at the gnat.” Peter called that kind of precision —

Acts 15:10 ... a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers, nor we were able to bear.

So then, what are we to do?

Jesus' point to the Jews was they can't get it right. And the more they try to struggle with the precision, the sillier and hypocritical their efforts became. What they needed was grace. That was their only escape from a law impossible to live flawlessly.

Imagine you're a grocery clerk and a customer asks you for a carton of Marlboros. You turn and pick up a carton and just then your pastor or bishop walks in and says, “Ahah! Caught you with a case of cigarettes in your hand!”

Well, what are you supposed to do? Are you supposed to tell the customer, “I'm sorry, but I can't sell you cigarettes because of my Christian faith”? How long would you last at that job? And do Christian accountants work for gambling casinos in Las Vegas? Of course they do. Does balancing the cash accounts for casinos and making payrolls for their dealers make Christian accountants accomplices in sin? Maybe, I don't know.

So, if you sin you're in trouble. But if you try too hard to not sin, then you're also in trouble because you can't avoid it and you've snubbed grace. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't

What's the escape? This might help. Jesus said —

John 17:11 ... these are in the world ... :16 They are not of the world ...

I know it's a stretch, but taken literally this text removes a lot of the tension. We have to live here in this world. We are not angels. Our souls want to be somewhere else, away from sin, not interacting constantly with things that would separate us from God. But here we are, and we have to make the best of it. And we have to recognize sin as best we can and avoid it as best we can.

Sometimes we can't avoid sin, not entirely. It touches us daily. But we do the best we can, and pray as Jesus did, “Deliver us from evil.”

Thank God for an infinite atonement. Let's accept that grace, live our lives as rightly as possible, and trust God.

At the last supper, Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and he used to illustrate some important principles, one that is useful to us here.

Peter objected. And Jesus had to set him straight.

John 13:8 *Peter saith unto him, thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. :9 Simon Peter saith unto him, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. :10 Jesus saith unto him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.*

We always get the bigger point, which is that the greater is the servant of the less. But we generally miss the smaller point, the subtle point, which is this: When you are a Christian, you are clean, just as though you've taken a bath. But following the bath, the conversion, you have to walk in the streets, dirt streets. And with only sandals for footwear, you pick up dirt, but only on your feet. So when you come in, you don't need a bath, you just need your feet cleaned.

That is the perfect picture of your spiritual life. Yes you are clean, and yes your feet get dirty. How can they not? In this world you are surrounded by sin, you live in it, and some of it clings to you. And much of it is so subtle, that you don't even know it's there.

But that's okay. Because once a week you go to church, take your sacrament or communion, listen to the messages, get your head back on straight, and resolve, once again, to do better this week. In short, you get your feet cleaned.

So, what about subtle sins, marginal sins, those sneaky little sins that you don't even know are sins? How do you deal with them? They're really no so big a deal, if you're living right. After all, Jesus is —

Hebrews 12:2 *... the author and finisher of our faith.*

So, what do we have to worry about? I mean, really? Just be a good person and believe. You're okay. That's the promise.

Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*

Trust that! After all, it is a holy walk, not a holy arrival that God expects from us. And don't worry so much about marginal sins. Well, maybe a little.