

Sin: Choosing to Act in Accordance with Ideas That Don't Match Material Reality

Description

A study related to the SDA
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 2nd Quarter
The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant
Week 8
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This week's lesson is entitled, "Covenant Law" and asks, "Why is obedience such an integral part of the covenant relationship?" Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, May 15, 2021.

Monday's lesson is entitled, "Ties That Bind," and takes a look at the role of law in a relationship. Monday's lesson reads,

"When you think about what a covenant is, the concept of law as an integral part makes sense. If we understand the covenant as, among other things, a relationship, then some sort of rules and boundaries need to be drawn. How long would a marriage or a friendship or a business partnership last if there were no boundaries or rules, either specifically expressed or tacitly understood?" Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, Monday, May 16, 2021.

The basic point here is that in any relationship, there are things that must be done, and things that can't be done if the relationship is to last. These rules could be expressed clearly as a law or declaration, or they could be unspoken rules. In either case, if we violate them, we really are discarding and trampling upon the conditions of the relationship. But this leads to an important question: What determines the dos and the don'ts? Or, to put it another way, what are the rules, or laws, based on?

Ellen White answered this beautifully in the Review and Herald, July 22, 1890, paragraph 7, which says,

"With reverent hearts we should bow to God's expressed will. We are not left in uncertainty; for in all the varied circumstances of life we may walk according to the instructions of God, which are based upon golden principles of truth, and revealed in the precepts of his law."

So let's break this down. What we have laid open before us is the precepts of God's law. These are the instructions of God and they express his will. But while they express his will, they are based upon golden principles of truth. In other words, the thing that God's instructions are based on isn't his will that would mean that God is just choosing whatever he wants and telling us what we should do by arbitrary decisions. Instead, the basis for God's instruction is actually truth. God always aligns his will with truth, and since his instructions express his will, they are based on truth.

Truth is obviously central to everything God does, and he has taken great pains to communicate the truth to us. But practically speaking, how does truth benefit us? Knowing that the rules of our relationship with God are based on truth is one thing, but how does that help us to improve our relationship with God?

Ellen White said,

“In order to lead the youth to the fountain of truth, to the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world, the teachers must not only be acquainted with the theory of the truth, but must have an experimental knowledge of the way of holiness. Knowledge is power when united with true piety.”—Ellen White, *Counsels to the Church*, p. 211.

Notice here that the Lamb of God is the fountain of truth. Jesus gives us the theory of the truth, but we must gain an experimental knowledge of the way of holiness for ourselves. No one, not even Jesus, can do this for us. We must taste and see, or experiment and know, that the Lord and His ways are good.

In other words, if the law is truth (Psalm 119:151), and Jesus is the fountain of truth, then Jesus gives us the law, the truth, but just being given the truth, and even acknowledging that it is true, can't itself save us. The words and the principles of the law cannot save us in and of themselves, we have to move beyond theory to practice. It is the application of the principles of the law that will save us in the end.

And this is just a fact of reality. Do we want our teenagers (or anyone) not to speed because they are afraid of getting a ticket and the car keys getting taken away, or because speeding puts themselves and others in danger? Of course, the latter. So, the law, “do not speed,” does not save anyone unless it is put into practice. And to keep the law without understanding the rationality behind the law is not going to get us very far either since there may be circumstances where the letter of the law allows something but where the principle of the law requires us to not do it. And once you understand the rationality behind the “no speeding” law, it ceases to be an imposition and is instead just a helpful communication.

When a well principled (or principle-based) driver sees a speed limit sign, they see it as information that is useful for ultimate safety for themselves and others when put into practice. After accumulating a lot of driving experience and understanding the rationality behind speeding laws, a driver should be able to follow the speed limit out of a love for keeping themselves and other safe rather than out of compulsion. If we know the streets of an area and live by right principles, we should drive within the speed limit anyway, even if there were no speed limit signs, but since not everyone knows the streets of every area, it sure is helpful to have the speed limit posted. We keep the laws of the road, with the help of the knowledge that the speed signs give us, but we do it because of relationship — we care about the safety of ourselves and others.

The speed laws are really ultimately dependent upon the laws of physics, or upon on material reality. If you take your car too fast around a curve, you will lose control of your car and fly off the road or crash into a tree or oncoming traffic. Consider a school zone. Again, physics applies. If a small child runs into the road and you are driving too fast, you won't be able to stop your vehicle in time. Material reality, basically, is really the thing that should determine the speed limit.

This is not unlike any of the “moral laws.” We know that God's law is truth (Psalm 119:151), and that sin is transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). Therefore, sin is simply transgression of the truth. And what is truth? Truth is that which comports with material reality.

So, material reality is therefore the foundation of morality. If we want to determine if an action or thought is moral or immoral, we must test it against the standard of material reality. For example, the reason that lying is wrong is because it goes against what is true in material reality. The reason why stealing is immoral is because the object being stolen does not belong to the thief in material reality. Murder is wrong because the murderer is making a choice to act on false ideas, like the idea that the victim's life is of no value. To be moral is to choose to act in harmony with material reality, and to be immoral is to act contrary to reality.

The word translated as "iniquity" in the King James Version of the New Testament means "lawlessness." If the law is truth, then iniquity is acting without truth, which is acting based on ideas that you don't know to match material reality.

2 Thessalonians 2:7 reads,

"For the mystery of iniquity [or lawlessness] doth already work: only he who now letteth *will let*, until he be taken out of the way." 2 Thessalonians 2:7 KJV.

It is no wonder that iniquity or lawlessness is a mystery, because who could rationally choose to act in accordance with ideas that don't match material reality?

The rest of that paragraph in 2 Thessalonians 2 makes this more clear. Verses 9-12 read,

9 The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, **10** and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. **11** And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, **12** that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12.

Here we can see that to be saved, we must have a love of the truth, a love of what is true in material reality. To take pleasure in unrighteousness is to take pleasure in lies. Sin, as we can see here, is completely irrational. It is a mystery. Those that sin are deceived and think and act according to Satan's delusions.

According to Ellen White, Satan's delusions were the main reason Jesus came to earth. She said,

"Cherubims and seraphims, angels and archangels, are watching the battle that is going on in this life. Between whom? The Prince of life and the power of darkness. And what does God do? He shows us how we must do, how we must conduct the battle. He left the royal courts, laid aside His royal robe, and clothed His humanity with divinity. He became a man among the sons of men, and here He walked the world as what? A representative of the love of God, an example that we may study, a character that we may imitate every phase of, that we may see that He did not live to glorify Himself, but He lived to point to God. He came to live the law of God, because Satan was bringing his power to bear upon men, and his lying fallacies were all the time pressing upon them." Ellen White, Sermons and Talks, Vol. 1, p. 241.

Again, here the law of God is held in contradistinction to lying fallacies. A fallacy is an error in reasoning. A lying fallacy is an error in reason that leads to a belief that is not rooted in material reality - a belief with no substance behind it .

So, what is the solution to immorality? What is the solution to the sin problem? Well, if it is immoral to choosing to act contrary to material reality, then we must strive to become knowledgeable about what reality is. This may sound strange, but if we find ourselves stuck in sin, it is actually because we do not know the truth about reality, or that we know the truth about reality but choose to ignore it.

2 Thessalonians 2:9 says that if we don't have a love of the truth, we cannot be saved. It really is that simple. The Law, of itself, cannot save us, it is our schoolmaster, instructing us in the ways of truth and reality. The crucifixion, of itself, cannot save us, it teaches us the lesson that sin leads to death, even the death of a perfectly sinless, loving and innocent man, Jesus Christ. The truth of the end result of sin, as can be seen in the crucifixion of Jesus, should repulse us so much that we turn from every falsehood, every sin, and act only according to truth as it is in material reality. And we should also see in the crucifixion the love of Christ which should inspire love in us. This is what can save us. Only a love of the truth can save us. The Holy Spirit can GUIDE us into all truth, but we are the ones that have to apply the theory of the truth to our lives.

And if you find yourself struggling with sin, you may be asking yourself if you really know what the truth of reality even is. This is a good thing to be thinking right now, and if you are, we have good news for you. As Ellen said, Satan is pressing his lying fallacies on you, that is what he does. He is the father of lies. But Jesus has sent us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, to GUIDE US INTO ALL TRUTH! The only reason we would need a guide, obviously, is because we don't know the truth. The only reason we would not want a guide is because we think we have need of nothing, no need of guidance, no need of progressive and present truth.

This guidance into all truth occurs specifically through the gift of the Spirit of Prophecy, which is the Holy Spirit speaking to us through a living prophet. Just like Isaiah in his day, Paul in his day, Ellen White in her day, we believe there is a prophet among God's denominated people in our day, for the purpose of guiding us, through the Holy Spirit, into the truth of reality. No wonder the remnant church is the only one who can keep the commandments of God. It is because they are the ones who HAVE (present tense for the present truth) the testimony of Jesus the Spirit of Prophecy active in their midst, guiding them into all truth present truth for today.

In closing, John 8:31-32 reads,

31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. **32** And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

For more on the solution to sin, see "The Lost Gospel of Christ," by Trent Wilde, and for more on the Spirit of Prophecy, see "What is the Spirit of Prophecy? SDA Edition," also by Trent Wilde.