

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Leviticus 4:1-3, New Living Translation

Then the LORD said to Moses, ²“Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. This is how you are to deal with those who sin unintentionally by doing anything that violates one of the LORD’s commands.

³“If the high priest sins, bringing guilt upon the entire community, he must give a sin offering for the sin he has committed.”

Romans 3:21,23, New Living Translation

²¹ But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. ²³ For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.

Romans 5:12-17, New Living Translation, abbreviated

¹² When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. ¹⁵ But there is a great difference between Adam’s sin and God’s gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God’s wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. Adam’s sin led to condemnation, but God’s free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. ¹⁷ For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God’s wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

Unintentional sin?

Most of us don’t believe that we can truly sin unintentionally. When we do something wrong out of ignorance alone, how can we be judged negatively? Our

civil laws don't provide any exclusion like this. Ignorance of the law is no excuse, we have always been told. But isn't God different? Surely God would never be unhappy with us if we do harm unintentionally. What's intriguing is that this isn't really what the Bible says. But before we get back to this issue of sinning without knowing it or intending to, I'd like to talk about a non-denominational Christian pastor I met recently. We'll call him Seymour.

We begin by looking at our first quote, from Leviticus, the book of the Old Testament that told the Chosen people how to live in accordance with God's laws:

Then the LORD said to Moses, ² "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. This is how you are to deal with those who sin unintentionally by doing anything that violates one of the LORD's commands.

³ "If the high priest sins, bringing guilt upon the entire community, he must give a sin offering for the sin he has committed."

The sin offering was for an unintentional sin – not an intentional one. It consisted of sacrificing a bull ox. I happened to walk into the office of a non-denominational pastor when he was reading this passage aloud. I asked why he was interested in it. He said that it was too bad that Christians had abandoned the notion of original sin. He then read to me two passages from Paul's letter to the Romans, the second of which makes an obvious reference to the Adam and Eve story in Genesis:

²¹ But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. ²³ For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.

Here is the second passage:

¹² When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. ¹⁵ But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. ¹⁷ For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

In short, sin came into the world through Adam and Eve. As we read in Genesis, when God created the cosmos, all that God made was good. God did not create evil. God did not create sin. Adam brought sin and physical death into the world – and when we read the allegory of Adam and Eve in Genesis it's clear that physical death was a metaphor for spiritual death, for a separation from God. But importantly, Jesus Christ came into the world to give us a way out, a path to total forgiveness, a way to restore God's grace within us. That's the basic story of sin and redemption. What's interesting is that while drawing on the Old Testament heavily, Paul has been credited with codifying the Christian notion of sin.

What we draw from his letters is this: Paul believed that sin was exposed when humans defied the laws of God. And it is the Holy Spirit within us that enlightens our minds and allows us to confront sin in our life – and thereby seek forgiveness. Paul was careful to make an important distinction: a person can be

superficially a devout keeper of God's laws, but in truth be a slave to sin. In other words, believe it or not, seeming to follow God's law is not sufficient to prevent sin. That's because he knew that sin begins in the heart, not in the law. It is his letter to the Romans that offers Paul's most elaborate treatment of sin. He argues for the universality of sin. All people are guilty. The depth of our guilt has to do with just how separated we are from God. He references Psalm 14:

*¹ Only fools say in their hearts,
"There is no God."
They are corrupt, and their actions are evil;
not one of them does good!*

He argues that sin, which is a result of our separation from God, is a passionate desire to satisfy ourselves or to optimize things for ourselves in a way that causes us to be blinded to what is right. That, my non-denominational friend explained to me, is why he believes that there is indeed seemingly unintentional sin. It's not that we broke a rule that we had no clue was rule, such as God saying we should never put our left sock on before our right sock. It's that we are complicit in our blindness. That's what the introduction of sin into the world did to us.

In truth, Paul is heavily influenced by both Jewish law and the surrounding intellectual Greek culture. The Greek notion of doing wrong is that we are guilty of doing wrong when we live in a dishonorable way or don't do what our destiny

demands that we do. In the Greek tradition, sin was the result of ignorance, but ignorance was the result of being sloppy or hasty or selfish. Sin therefore has a strong psychological aspect to it. When we merge this with the Old Testament notion of the dawn of sin through the actions of Adam and Eve, we get a notion that says that all of us must - at all times - pay focused attention on what God wants us to do in life. But when we fail, we don't have to worry about sacrificing a bull ox. As my pastor friend put it, Christ's sacrifice for us, his crucifixion, this gruesome, symbolic act, made it clear that God offers us unconditional forgiveness. That is the Christian take on Old Testament sin atonement. Jesus was slaughtered so we don't have to slaughter an ox. But Paul does urge us to live as blameless a life as possible. To do that, we must be proactive. We must belong to Christ. This is what Paul says in Romans:

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. ² And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. ³ The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. ⁴ He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

Now, I asked my pastor friend why he was so concerned about sin offerings. Had he done something unintentionally wrong? Had he gotten sloppy in the way he

walked in the footsteps of Christ? He said “yes,” that he had become a reverend at a young age, and he’d gotten the idea that he was one of those very rare truly good people. Decades went by and he said that he coasted through life, assuming he was good, that he was not only saved, but that he was causing very little evil in the world, at least compared to most people. Then, he said he read the following in 1st Corinthians about a week before I talked to him. He had read it dozens of times before, but only then did its meaning really hit him. The passage is this:

15 *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*

This is the passage where Paul is warning the people of Corinth who are following Jesus that they need to make sure that they are mistaken about being saved.

Let’s look at the last two words in this translation: *in vain*. After talking to my friend, I looked at several major translations and they all translated it the same way, *in vain*. This is a reasonable translation of a single word in biblical Greek: Εἰκῆ (say ee-kay). But the word also means *without reason* or *without effect*.

That’s what Seymour said about himself. He told me that he has believed, believed with all his heart, but in part, he believed without effect. He said that he had gone through his past, and over and over, he realized how many things he had done for himself. In many instances, he realized it had a negative impact on

someone else. There was nothing terribly horrible. He had talked his wife into buying a new car and it meant that they had to abbreviate a vacation his wife had been looking forward to. He had convinced himself that she would enjoy the car as much as he would – and in fact, she would be safer in a new car. Hell, he had protected her by buying that car. He also had called the police when a teenager next door threw firecrackers out his bedroom window and lit some dry brush on fire. Why hadn't he, the pastor, gone over there and talked to the kid himself? Why hadn't he gone to see if the kid was troubled and needed someone to talk to? Later, that boy got arrested for arson. Maybe Seymour could have stopped it. If he had truly believed, and not believed without effect, there are many things he would have done differently. Now, Seymour is slightly older than me. I told him that at least you are still alive; this didn't occur to you on your death bed. He broke out in a big grin and laughed.

I don't believe that the minor offenses we commit by putting ourselves above another person means that we somehow are not true believers. Here's something that I didn't think of at the time, when I was talking to my pastor friend. It's from Paul's letter to the Galatians. In it, Paul refers to that tendency we have to do wrong by not going out of our way to do right:

¹³ For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.

There is something about this passage that I love. It's from a chapter, 5, in Galatians, where Paul is making a powerful statement. He's saying that the primary characteristic of how he had been raised in faith is that his life had been restricted. But now Paul is saying that this is not true about our life in Christ. He had been a devout, old school Jewish Pharisee. His job had been to make sure that Jews extended their faith practices from the Temple into their daily lives. Pharisees made sure that people lived with piety. They served a powerful purpose of making sure that the practices of the Israelites survived. Because of them, oral traditions were made permanent via written practices. We, as Christians, have benefited from this. Our faith is rich because of them. But they were indeed legalistic, and they did a lot to restrict the daily lives of the People of God. But Paul is saying that when you decide to follow God by following Christ, the major aspect of your life becomes one of freedom.

How did we get this freedom? Paul tells us that it's through the gift of the Holy Spirit that we obtain freedom: *"So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law."* Wow. That says it all. We are free. We're not here with a huge list of things we must do

every day, every Christmas, Palm Sunday, or Easter. We have traditions, but they are not the core of our faith. The core of our faith is the freedom to focus entirely on accepting Jesus and the lessons he taught, and focusing on the things we do voluntarily, not on a rigid system of practices. We decide how we are going to do good, how we are going to avoid unintentional sin. I don't know what Seymour did for his sin offering. I assume he didn't go buy a bull ox and then slaughter it. I imagine that rather than follow some specific ritual, he went out with the determination to stop and think every time he was about to do something for himself – and make sure it didn't negatively impact another person.

We should all enjoy the freedom that we have as believers. We can be creative in living out our faith. We can use our imaginations and find ways to follow Christ by finding ways to meet what Romans calls *God's glorious standard*. Please pray with me.

God, we do not want to live selfish lives. We don't want to be lazy about our faith. We don't want to rely on ignorance as an excuse for living in ways that contradict the teachings of Jesus Christ. Help us find a way – every day of our lives – to exercise our freedom as believers and to do what is good for other people, for our world, and for our own eternal futures. Amen.