

A New Covenant:
Biblical Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Purity
Presentation 4: But We're All Sinners

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick
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A Word From God to All

The first three presentations in this series generated much good will. Some are wondering when the “hard to hear” part will come. It may start today.

The pastor does not come here to preach to one group of church members, or against another group. You may self-identify as a certain “kind” of Adventist and see “the other kind” as being the main problem in the church. But we all have a distorted nature; all are prone to serve self; all of us are adept at justifying ungodly behavior. We all tend to become satisfied with our progress (that is, our lack of it). We begin to think that our understanding is about right and are not interested in going deeper. We stop short of hearing and applying the Word of God where it will touch things we hold too tightly. But the truth often cuts to pieces misunderstandings on both sides of the aisle.

Lazy Saints

As time draws on movements and people trend toward laziness. Excuses are made. There is failure to affirm God’s moral boundaries, a preference for accommodation. Instead of affirming, we choose to deny God’s definitions of, and treatment operations for, sin. Fallen human nature never stops at mere rebellion. Reflexively, even automatically, we embrace carefully reasoned justifications for our disobedience. Certain mysteriously satisfying arguments become platitudes. Good folk—well-meaning, godly, Jesus-loving Christian people, long-term, church-involved members of the congregation—take them up. Something in them sounds right.

Today, as a last step before advancing to the emotionally difficult topic of divorce—so capable of provoking us to our worst excuse-making behavior—one final pause. If you have uttered such arguments as we shall here think through, do not feel that we are trying to pick on

you specifically. It is because we take each other seriously that we can be honest with each other. Only then may we address divorce and sexual purity.

A Starting Place

Our starting place, before wading into these long-standing arguments, is found in Isaiah chapter five. Here are six woes: On materialism (5:8-10), drunkenness (11-17), high-handed sinning (18, 19), those who redefine God's morality (20), those who think themselves wise (21), and those who dispense backwards justice in drunkenness (22, 23). There is much going on. We zero-in on the fourth woe in 5:20 (unless otherwise noted, all Bible references are from the English Standard Version):

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

The larger picture here, is a wealthy people, satiated, reveling into the morning hours, sinning openly, celebrating sin and redefining it as good; a people satisfied with the intellectual power of their theological justifications—and blinded to justice. Hard judgment from God gathers; onward they stumble. God will raise up nations who will come and utterly overturn. His people will be sent into captivity.

At the fourth woe, two clusters:

evil
darkness
bitter

In contrast to:

good
light
sweet

God's people are here calling evil good, putting darkness for light, bitter for sweet. They are actively doing opposite His will. They construct arguments that suit their preferences.

There is good and there is evil; morality is not malleable. We are not left in darkness. God tells us where our sins lie. He asks His servants to cry aloud, to be unsparing in pointing out sin. Here is a mandate to clear the highway of misconceptions. In Isaiah five, the end result is predicted: If wrong trends are not arrested, God will come and utterly overturn. These high-handed sinners are found talking about God, even urging His soon return. In Isaiah 5:19 they say, "Let him speed his work that we may see it." They call for His instruction but they are not listening. (See also Isaiah 6:9-13.) They are ready to deflect, turn truth back against itself. They do exactly as Isaiah warned, calling evil good and good evil. We may be sure that their endorsement of evil was not without sophisticated reasoning. And so, our own goal must be not to fool ourselves as they did.

Two Arguments Examined

Argument 1: "But we're all sinners. . ."

Let's take this argument first. If some form of immorality is addressed, often the rejoinder is, "but we're all sinners."

Are We All Sinners?

Is this a true statement—that we are all sinners? Nowhere does the Bible say that man is born a sinner (we will study this later this year). But yes; by our own free choice we have become sinners.

Is Everyone Continually Sinning?

But let us now ask some telling questions: Is everyone continually sinning? When Israel was in her desert travels, was the whole camp actively guilty in the Achan incident (Joshua chs. 6, 7)? No, only Achan and his family. What about in Revelation chapters 7, 14, and 19? Are all those followers of God that are mentioned sinning? No, only those refusing to be sealed by God. Back to Egypt—How many Hebrews were faithful to slay the Passover sacrifice and put the blood on the doorposts of their dwellings (Exodus 12)? Thousands of firstborn were spared. In these cases, and more, only some were guilty of transgression.

I am told that everyone around us is engaged in secret sin. Really. How do you know that? Where are all the secret sinners in Joshua 6, 7, Revelation 7, 14, 19, Exodus 12? And, even if secret sinners were found, would it justify additional sinning on our part?

Some want to say that everything that we do is tainted with selfishness. Does the Bible support this? What about those who follow Jesus wherever He goes (Revelation 14:4)? Is there a suggestion that any taint of selfishness remains in them? None. Or again, in Revelation 22:11, what do we read? “He who is righteous, let him be righteous still.” But, you say, these are all out there somewhere at the end of the end-time. Fine, then how about Jesus’ assessment of Nathaniel as “an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile” (John 1:47 KJV)? “All of our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6 KJV), right? But Isaiah 64:5 KJV says that God meets him “that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness.” In 1 John 3:3, “Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” And, that “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). We could continue. The point here is that—in God’s strength,

and God's strength alone—if our measure of truth is the Bible, we will have to agree with God that a man can do righteous deeds; he can be righteous.

There are those who want to compare God's infinite moral perfection with our finite imperfection, declaring us evil because we fail to equal God's moral behavior. But does a teacher condemn a four year old for failing a PhD-level examination? God will help us to be mature at each stage of development, but He never condemns us for not being God.

Analysis

So, let's go back now and analyze this argument ("But we're all sinners"), taking it apart carefully so as to discern what the theory really is.

1. "But we're all sinners" is actually another way of saying, "but we're all guilty." Or, depending on your theological viewpoint, "but we're all habitual sinners who are incapable of overcoming."
2. Since all are incapable or guilty, therefore, it is unjust for any one person to be singled-out for particular condemnation. It is hypocrisy to judge one when all are guilty; it is hypocrisy to judge one when all are incapable. Judgment on a particular person for sinning—if all are sinning—is arbitrary.
3. Arbitrary condemnation is unfair. Therefore, God—or the Christian, or whoever judges—is being unfair.
4. God's violent condemnation of hypocrisy is bent back against Him via this argument. Because hypocrisy is unfair, in judging sin, God is being hypocritical.

An Argument Never Made

But wait. The Bible does not make this argument. Jesus never used this argument. He did not say to the woman (John 8:1-11), "Well, we're all sinners; now go and try not to sin

anymore.” In the whole Bible, in fact, when someone is guilty of sin, this argument is never offered. Even Achan did not dare to make this argument.

Secret Sin, Public Sin, Public Reproach

There is a difference between open sins and secret ones. Open sins publicly and directly bring reproach upon God and His cause. Secret sins are very offensive to Him but remain in God’s wisdom to deal with. Sometimes, He exposes them. In the case of Achan, Achan and his family members doubtless knew. God may or may not choose to expose sin publicly at this time.

The sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later (1 Timothy 5:24).

If the covenant community does not know about a secret sin, no public reproach is cast upon God and His cause. Sins of ignorance are atoned for, not forgiven; no guilt ascribed to the perpetrator. But when a sin of ignorance becomes known to the perpetrator, then it must be confessed and forsaken.

Satan is ingenious. We all have an innate appreciation for fairness. He uses this, turns it against us, takes God’s wrath against hypocrisy, and bends it back into a charge of unfairness against God. “Sinner” is not the primary designation of God’s followers in the New Testament —“saints” or “holy ones,” is. Another person’s sin does not justify your own sin. Will we be more high-handed than Achan?

Argument 2: “Judge not.”

Let’s work through a second argument. Matthew 7:1, 2 is our text.

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.

What's going on here? After all, when God sends angels on a mission to save Lot and to judge Sodom, the Sodomites, intent on immorality, condemn Lot for judging them. When Moses tries to mediate in a dispute between two Hebrews in Egypt, the person in the wrong accuses him of making himself a judge (Exodus 2:14; Acts 17:27, 35). Is Jesus siding with the Sodomites and the wrongdoing Hebrew?

Biblical Exhortations to Judge

We have to put Jesus' call that we not judge, side-by-side with many other places in the Bible where God does call His people to judge. The Scriptures are filled with situations where believers in God are called to judge.

In Genesis 31, Jacob, accused of theft, urges that any allegedly stolen goods be brought out and that those present judge between him and Laban. In Exodus 18, a system of judges is implemented in which the two million-plus Hebrew nation is organized into groups of tens for purposes of dispute resolution. In Leviticus 19:9-18, believers are called to judge their neighbor justly, with no preference shown to rich or poor. In Numbers 35:24 the congregation shall judge. Judging is mentioned several times in Deuteronomy (e.g., 1:16; 16:18; 17:8-13; 25:1-3). In 2 Chronicles 19:5-7 judges are appointed in the land and the people are told, "You judge not for man but for the Lord. He is with you in giving judgment."

But what about the New Testament? In John 7:24 Jesus says, "Do not Judge by appearances, but judge with righteous judgment." He does not say not to judge, but that when we judge we must not do so superficially.

In 1 Corinthians 14:29 members of the congregation are called to judge what prophets say! In 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, Paul complains bitterly about believers going to unbelievers

seeking judicial action against other believers. The saints will judge angels and judge the world. He asks them why they have not been able to find in the congregation someone who can sort out a matter?

Finally, if any question remained, 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13 is unambiguous:

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you.'

More Context

So let's return to our text. This time, instead of two verses, get five:

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' (Matthew 7:1-5).

We cannot but notice that this statement also, like the first question we studied today, has as its central point Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy. Consider the parallel passage in Luke:

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37).

The Matthew and Luke passages are both dealing with reciprocal action—how you treat others and how they are to treat you. There are two kinds of reciprocal action: proportionate and disproportionate.

For example, Luke 6:28 deals with those who curse you. A proportional response would be to curse them back. You cursed me, so I curse you. But Jesus advocates a disproportionate response: If one curses you, you are called to pray for that abusive person. If one takes away your coat, instead of taking it back, you offer him your shirt as well (Luke 6:29). In many places

Jesus tells us to make a disproportionate, surprising response. Other times we are called to behave toward others in a proportional way, acting toward them as we would prefer that they act toward us.

It is beyond the scope of this message to enter into a full study of the sermon on the mount; a brief summary must suffice. Core passages are Matthew chapters 5-7 and Luke 6:14-49. Central in Jesus' teaching is what to the hearer sounds contra-intuitive, a reversal of our expectations. He demolishes widely-held misconceptions, offering "You have heard this, but I say this." He takes the listener beyond superficiality and calls to a higher standard. He asks us to question our motivation; challenges us to move from ritual to relationship.

Highlighting reciprocal behavior, He turns us away from a mere material views of things. He urges us to learn deeper trust of our heavenly Father, pointing us away from self-serving to other-serving. The bottom line is whether or not we do God's Word.

He calls the listener to transcend prescribed human standards, to beware of selfish and narrow criticism, to change behavior so as not to stifle the more generous emotions. He is urgent to point us in a different direction than the trajectory of the Pharisee or Sadducee that can only generate self-centered judges and petty spies. You and I are not the standard; God's Word is.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is fairness. What Jesus is getting at with His "Judge not" command, is that intruding into the private place of conscience and judging one another concerning matters which are between that soul and God, is not our business. My views of duty, my interpretations of Scripture, are not the criterion for others.

If I want to be treated with fairness I must treat others with fairness. Throughout the Bible the Christian is told that he must be discerning, he must exercise judgment. But his first subject must be himself, and his criterion must be God's Word. He is at risk of being sure he is right when he may be altogether wrong. Jesus' warning "Judge not that you be not judged" is an urgent caution that the closed mind cannot fairly weigh the private things of others. To judge others while we engage in the same sins, would be hypocrisy. God will have none of it.

Reflections on Self-Justification

Self-justification seems to be at the root of many of our problems. It not only harms our relationship with God, but with our fellow man and with our spouse. How much energy is spent justifying self that could instead be invested in seeking the closer walk with God. The tearing down of the law of God is usually the result of someone trying to erase the obligation to keep the seventh-day sabbath. It is probably less intentional and more the result of a vague attempt to justify failure to practice biblical Christianity. It is a quick-fix to a larger theological problem of internal inconsistency. So what do we Seventh-day Adventists find ourselves doing? Perhaps it is not sabbath-breaking, but we find ourselves Justifying other behavior which we do not want to change, either. We fail just where other Christians fail. We can have more sympathy for them, but we had better set our own house in order in any case.

One more thought; what is the alternative? If we choose not to obey God, what are we endorsing? Co-habitation? homosexual unions? child-molestation? domestic violence? bestiality? In the church? If we refuse to affirm God's moral boundaries, there will be no church, no dividing-line between God and the world in the world. Then our Jesus died in vain. God forbid!

Summary and Conclusion

The arguments reviewed today are variations on the same theme: Perhaps the chief strategem Satan deploys against spiritual people, is an attack aimed squarely at their conscience. God attacks hypocrisy, then Satan attacks God and His followers as being hypocrites. God is relentlessly opposed to hypocrisy, but He cannot give sin a pass.

The first argument, “But we’re all sinners” is an excuse offering us no refuge. Everyone is not sinning, and, were they, it would offer us no relief from guilt. The second argument, “Judge not” must be seen in its true meaning among scores of Scripture passages which plainly call us to judge. We can never judge motive nor read the heart, but we must be faithful in dealing with outward acts which degrade God’s high standards and good name. While we are not to judge inward motive, we are to be faithful in affirming God’s moral boundaries.

Satan is aggressively seeking to deceive us so that a place can be found for sin in the camp. The church is God’s outpost that He holds in a revolted world. From God’s true believers the world is to have its one collective example of non-hypocrisy. Sin must have no dominion over us nor over God’s church. Indeed, if we are faithful the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Jesus commands us to judge according to right judgment (John 7:24). His vision for His church is seen in Ephesians 5:25-27:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

This is our charge as well. When we accepted the name “Christian,” we pledged ourselves to make God’s purposes first. We allied ourselves with the ultimate foe of hypocrisy—not its ultimate practitioner. Wash us O Lord, and strip away all of our excuses for sinning Amen.

Next time: Divorce.

Biographical note: Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.