

How far can Christians go in sinning?

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: QA166

I recently read a book about Christians and sin that began with an unusual account. The author of this book was acquainted with a pastor who had been sent to prison for robbing fourteen banks to finance his dalliances with prostitutes! The author was fully convinced the bank-robbing Lothario was a true Christian, and so he wrote a book to explore how such a thing could be possible.

Call me old-fashioned, but I think it is fair to raise the question of whether someone who regularly robs banks to pay for illicit sex is truly saved! That man's sin was secretly his lifestyle. There is every reason to believe that he would still be committing his crimes today if he had not been caught. Can we concede that this "so-called brother" is a genuine Christian, just because he was once an evangelical pastor?

True, we cannot judge the man's heart, but we must judge his behavior (1 Cor. 5:12). "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). In those verses the apostle Paul was describing sins of chronic behavior, sins that color one's whole character. A predilection for such sins reflects an unregenerate heart. Paul reminded the Corinthians, "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (v. 12, emphasis added).

But wait. Doesn't Scripture include examples of believers who committed gross sin? Didn't David commit murder and adultery and allow his sin to go unconfessed for at least a year? Wasn't Lot characterized by worldly compromise in the midst of heinous sin? Yes, those examples prove that genuine believers are capable of the worst imaginable sins. But David and Lot cannot be made to serve as examples of "carnal" believers, whose whole lifestyle and appetites are no different from unregenerate people.

David, for example, did repent thoroughly of his sin when Nathan confronted him, and he willingly accepted the Lord's discipline (2 Sam. 12:1-23). Psalm 51 is an expression of David's deep repentance at the end of this sordid episode in his life. The point, after all, is that this was merely one episode in David's life. He was certainly not predisposed to that kind of sin. In fact, 1 Kings 15:5 says, "David did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and had not turned aside from anything that He

commanded him all the days of his life, except in the case of Uriah the Hittite" (emphasis added).

Lot is a different case. Not much is known about him from the Old Testament account, but what is recorded about him is disappointing. He was a pathetic example of compromise and disobedience. On the eve of Sodom's destruction, when he should have fled the city, "he hesitated" (Gen. 19:16). The angelic messengers had to seize his hand and put him outside the city. Near the end of his life, his two daughters got him drunk and committed incest with him (Gen. 19:30-38). Lot certainly did seem to have a proclivity for sins of compromise and worldliness.

Yet the inspired New Testament writer tells us Lot was "oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds)" (2 Pet. 2:8). He hated sin and desired righteousness. He had respect for holy angels-evidence of his fear of God (Gen. 19:1-14). He obeyed God by not looking back at Sodom when God's judgment rained down (cf. v. 26).

Lot was certainly not "carnal" in the sense that he lacked spiritual desires. Though he lived in a wicked place, he was not wicked himself. His soul was "tormented," vexed, grieved, tortured with severe pain at the sight of the evil all around him. Evidently his conscience did not become seared; he "felt his righteous soul tormented day after day" with the evil deeds of those around him. Though he lived in Sodom, he never became a Sodomite. Those who use him as an illustration of someone who is saved but utterly carnal miss the point of 2 Peter 2:8.

What is the lesson of Lot's life as Peter saw it? Verse 9 sums it up: "The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment."

In Lot's case, one means the Lord used to rescue him from temptation was severe chastisement. Lot lost his home; his wife was killed by divine judgment; and his own daughters disgraced and debased him. He paid a terrible price for his sin, being "tormented day after day." If Lot proves anything, it is that true believers cannot sin with impunity.

God always chastens and disciplines His children who sin. If they do not experience chastening, they are not truly His children, but spiritual bastards. Hebrews 12:7-8 explicitly states this: "What son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." The specific purpose for which He disciplines us is "for our good, that we may share His holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

All of that flies in the face of the notion that millions of Christians live in a state of unbroken carnality. If these people are true children of God, why are they not constantly under His discipline?

Excerpted from John MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles*, (Dallas: Word Publishing) 1997, pp. 127-129.

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