

Explore: Whatever happened to sin?

January 5, 2013

This LifeWay Explore the Bible Series lesson for Jan. 13 focuses on Amos 1:1-2; 2:4-8; 3:6-8.

Something is missing in our world today. It seems no one talks about sin any more. It is not that sin does not exist in our world. Our world almost is overrun with it. It is that we no longer call it what it is.

Even within churches there is sometimes a hesitancy to talk about sin. We talk a lot about the saving work of Jesus, but the focus often is on the blessings and eternal effects of salvation rather than the reason it was needed and our personal participation in it. Certainly those inside and outside the church see the evil in the violence and oppression we hear about every night on the news, but in our efforts to understand it, we avoid calling it sin and focus instead on the societal or genetic causes that lead individuals to act in such immoral ways.

And in light of such obvious evil, we certainly fail to see the sin in our own lives. We convince ourselves that as long as we are trying to be a “good person,” God is happy with us for doing the “right things.” We will overlook our “slight” shortcomings as part of being human.

The truth is, we simply do not like to think about being accountable to what we easily can see as an outdated standard of right and wrong. The Bible, however, does not let us off this hook. It is clear sin not only is real, but lies at the heart of humanity’s problem is we are all guilty.

Amos’ apparent wealth likely put him in position to see the reality and results of sins such as greed and oppression of the poor. In his prophetic messages, we clearly see sin through the eyes of God.

Hearing God's declaration (Amos 1:1-2)

One of the leading reasons for the lack of talk about sin today is the widely held belief that there is no universally applicable standard of right and wrong. The fact something may be "wrong" in your mind does not mean it is "wrong" for me.

There are at least two significant problems with this belief. First, it robs all significance from any particular law. If "right" is relative, literally nothing can be called "wrong." Second, it fails to account for the fact that there are certain acts (such as murder and stealing) that universally are considered to be wrong. Every system of laws humanity ever has composed (regardless of how "civilized" a group was) has made these actions illegal.

The truth the Bible proclaims is that there is an absolute moral order which God designed as part of creation. God has declared there is right and wrong and from God's position as Creator and Judge. He holds all of creation accountable to live in line with that order.

Recognizing it in ourselves (Amos 2:4-8)

Amos makes the universal application of God's moral order clear from the beginning of his book by announcing God's judgment on each of Israel's enemies. One almost can sense the mood of those who first read or heard these prophecies as each of these enemies are judged and punishment is announced upon them.

Then in Amos 2:4-8, the same indictments and punishments are announced against Judah and Israel. The mood must have suddenly changed. It often is so easy to see the sin in "them" while ignoring or refusing to see the sin in ourselves. We certainly never would do the kinds of things they do.

Why is it that when we compare our lives to something, it almost always is to the most sinful among us? Israel took pride in their worship of the true

God and looked down upon those who refused to acknowledge him and worshipped idols (although they had added pagan idol worship to their worship of God). Yet as we read the Old Testament prophets, we find that by far the sins for which the people of Israel most often were judged was not idolatry, but social injustice and empty religious ritual. Jesus told us to take care of the log in our own eye before we point out the splinter in someone else's (Luke 6:42).

Heeding God's warning (Amos 3:6-8)

One of the characteristics of the pagan gods that surrounded ancient Israel was they acted in secret and even their worshippers constantly were unsure of how they might act or react. The God of Israel, however, was in a relationship with the people who God desired to know him. It was God's desire that the people know his actions, so he sent the prophets with his message. God never capriciously reacted to the people's disobedience, but always proclaimed his displeasure and sought to encourage the people to return to God by announcing judgment would come if they did not return.

Today, many simply live life as they choose and are surprised when adverse consequences or divine discipline occurs. Yet God clearly has given ample warning that sin cannot go unpunished.

Although God must punish sin, God's greater desire is that each person repent and seek God. God always is warning, and there always is opportunity to heed the warning and return. But first, we must identify the problem for what it truly is—it is called sin.