

Philemon 1:22-41

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[0 : 00] The numbers are 15 verses 22 to the end. I think this is the kind of passage that causes us some shock.

! Especially the way that it's worded for us, that a Sabbath bringer executed is the title of the middle section. Sometimes we're really inclined to turn away from it. People want to say that it's Old Testament, it has to do with the law.

It's rather strict, rather rigorous. I think there's two reasons why we're shocked with this particular passage. We're shocked firstly because the death penalty was enacted for a man that we may say was just merely gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.

And it shocks us. And you might think, well, we're going to hear a sermon on Sabbath observance. And we're all going to be sitting very carefully in our seats early next Sunday morning and Sunday night.

It's shocking to us, isn't it? What's the harm in gathering up sticks on the Sabbath day? It's just a small thing. And yet God's reaction is horrible. It seems to be utterly harsh.

[1 : 20] It's rather severe. And then sometimes we're tempted to say, well, that is the Old Testament for you, isn't it? Thank goodness we live in the New Testament. And we're shocked by it. But it also appears that we're shocked by it because what is said about this man, can you see what is said about him?

It says that he's not forgiven. And that he could not be forgiven. Look at verse 30. The 31, it says, because he's despised the word of the Lord, he's broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off.

His iniquity shall be upon him. And so with his iniquity upon him, he walks out of the camp and is stoned to death. And so what we need to understand is that we need to understand that there's a particular sin that's being described here.

There's a typical, a particular example is being given of that sin. And that particular sin that is being described is not Sabbath-breaking.

The Sabbath-breaking is just an example. The particular sin is what I'm going to call sinning with a high hand. A high-handed sin. We might think of that as a deliberate sin.

[2 : 43] Or an intentional sin. A premeditated sin. And the example of the man-gabar of the text is given to explain what it means to sin intentionally.

There's a contrast all the way through the passage, I know when you saw it, between sinning unintentionally and intentionally. The congregation here, they sin unintentionally.

The congregation, they fall into unintentional sin. Or an individual falls into unintentional sin. As a contrast.

And really what's being set out for us here is not the sin of gathering sticks on the Sabbath. It's what we might call in the New Testament language the sin of apostasy. Which really means, as we're going to see tonight, to walk deliberately, determinedly away from Christ.

And the sin of apostasy is very shocking to us. That anyone apostatizes from the faith, and it always causes grief. And grief, distress, and alarm.

[3 : 47] I expect that some people have lots of pressures after tonight's sermon. And particularly amongst, can I call this reformed folk? Particularly those amongst this who we would describe ourselves as Calvinists.

Calvinists, because we're not sure about the sin of apostasy. Could it mean that you can be saved at one point, and then at a later point be lost?

I don't think that's what the sin of apostasy means. The sin of apostasy is someone who knows the gospel. Or they understand the gospel.

And yet clearly and distinctly, they turn away from this faith. They know and they understand the work of Christ. They know and understand the gospel.

They know what it's all about. And yet actively and willfully and defiantly and with a high hand, they simply turn away from it. The sin of apostasy is not that of falling into sin.

[4 : 48] Because we're weak, or because we're tempted. Or because we're continuing to spread with remaining sins in our hearts. The sin of apostasy is not that of backsliding, of growing cold and wandering away from God.

So that God brings us back by His grace and His kindness. The sin of apostasy is to have the appearance of a Christian. It is perhaps to profess even to be a Christian.

And yet at some point to turn completely away from it and abandon it. And I think that's why it shocks us. And it shocks us because we are deeply afraid that we might commit that sin.

We're deeply afraid that after all the truth of the gospel and the evangelical religion, that that isn't really in us.

And that we're all going through a sham. And that one day we'll get up and just one day walk away from it. And that is why it shocks us.

[5 : 54] Because it sets out the terrible, horrible, dreadful sin of apostasy. And yet for all that, even though the passage is shocking, it intrigues me that it's actually only a couple of verses in the middle that address that.

On the one side you've got this really long section on sins we commit unintentionally. And how they should be covered. And then it's explicitly stating they shall be forgiven.

He, she shall be forgiven. So there's a big section on the joyfulness of forgiveness. And then there's a small section on Sabbath.

And sticks. And there's a long section at the end on how you've got to put tassels on your cloaks. And the important point there is that you have a blue thread in your tassel.

Which I'm going to save to the end to keep you tantalized. I'm sure you're all desperate to find out. This passage is full of the gospel. And yet it does contain a very solemn and a stern warning.

[7 : 00] Beware of sinning with a high hand. And I think this passage has got parallel passages in the New Testament. One of them is in Hebrews chapter 6.

And the other one is in Hebrews chapter 10. Let me just read to you what it says in Hebrews chapter 10 verse 26. It says, For if we go on sinning deliberately, after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin.

But a fearful expectation of judgment. And a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who is trampled underfoot the Son of God? Has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified. And has outraged the spread of grace.

For we know him who said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay you. And again he said, The Lord will judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. So you remember that the book of Hebrews is written to a congregation like us.

[8 : 12] People who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. But they were in danger of going back. And they were wavering. It was beginning to cost them. They were beginning to suffer. And they were beginning to think to themselves, is it worth it?

Is it worth it to cling to Jesus when it brings sorrow and pain and suffering? Shall we maintain our profession of faith? And the right of the Hebrews is an exhortation, is it?

Don't give up. Don't go back. Don't give in. Remember the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I think that's what Numbers 15 is all about. There's this section about forgiveness.

And there's this section about the tassels with the blue thread in them. And it's saying, remember the law. And remember what holiness means. Because the warning comes and says, don't give up. Keep clinging to Jesus. Keep trusting in God for the pardon and the forgiveness that he's promised us. Because if you walk away from that, there is no hope.

[9 : 12] Well let me make two points and then we'll go to the tassels. The first point is this. We should grieve that we sin so easily. We should grieve that we sin so easily.

And I think we need to learn from the fact that there is in this long section of unintentional sin that truth.

If we'd studied the book of Deuteronomy, do you remember that? We did study that. And do you remember? There were four categories of people that might fall into unintentional sin. There was the congregation of the people of God.

And there was the individual. And there was the ruler maybe, a king. Or one of the judges. And then there are the priests. And that is given in the vindicates.

And so it's given, and it's happening here again. Number one is summarizing that. He's assuming that you already know it. You already know all the gospel themes that were built into this.

[10:10] You understand that there are sins that we commit unintentionally. There are sins that you and I commit without even being aware of it. Without even being aware that God said, don't do this.

So sometimes it's unintentional because you and I, we don't know the law. It's unintentional sometimes though because we don't know even what our mind and heart would do it.

Or how it contradicted God's law. And that grieves us, doesn't it? And so it should. It should grieve us that we sin so easily.

To sin unintentionally is a grievous thing. And God is saying to you tonight, he's not saying to you don't worry about it.

I know you didn't know it was a sin. But don't worry about it. God isn't saying that. In the same way the policeman used to say to me when I used to speed and he'd pull me over on those numerous times.

[11:12] He'd say you were driving a 40 mile per hour through a 30 mile per hour limit. And I say, but I didn't know. And he says, well that's okay then, carry on. And no, of course he doesn't.

He still broke the law, didn't he? He broke the law even though you didn't know you were doing it. He might smile at me at the policeman, he answered at me, and say I'll give you a warning this time.

But God never does that. But God never does that. He's saying it's sin. And it must be atoned for. And it must be covered by the blood.

And even though you didn't know anything about it, even though you'd done it and you didn't know it was contrary to God's law, you still need to be forgiven. And he gives the example of a whole congregation sinning unintentionally and an individual sinning unintentionally.

And the more I thought about it, I tried to think how can we sin as a congregation unintentionally. Unintentionally without knowing what we were doing.

[12:14] It's certainly possible to do that, isn't it, in the area of worship. There is rage at that, they didn't realise that they were sinning. We might say, but it's all the rage in churches all over the land.

They do things in this way, and we'll do things in this way. And we might say, it's great, actually people really love it. We've got great feedback from doing this, but God doesn't want it and God isn't pleased with it.

And we didn't understand. And we didn't know that it wasn't pleasing to God. There are examples of that out there with the golden calf.

And Israel falling into idolatry. And you might say, well it was unintentional with the way they behaved, without realising it. They didn't realise this is not what the Lord commands. Has the Lord commanded this of you?

Isaiah 1? Maybe in dealing with the things of God, isn't it? The holy things of God. Does David not remember that you're not supposed to move the Ark of the Covenant on a cart?

[13:24] Or Uzzah, who was put there when the Ark of the Covenant was being taken in Jerusalem, and the cart is rocking his neck, and the Ark is about to fall off. So Uzzah puts his hand to steady the Ark.

And he's immediately struck down dead. And they were unintentional. They just didn't think it through. They just happened. But God still, nevertheless, keeps his holy things holy.

And sometimes we sin unintentionally because we do not grasp the holiness of God. And I think that works itself out not only in our worship, but in all kinds of other things that we do.

But there are many examples. But can you imagine that a whole body of people can be guilty of sin? And not even know it. What do we do when we discover that we've been sinning?

Well, we better repent, don't we? And we better go and ask for forgiveness. And we better go trusting in the blood, in the sacrifice that has been made. And we ask for the Lord's pardon. And thank God, that is what he tells us in this passage.

[14 : 29] He tells us, this is how I will respond. I will forgive your sins of ignorance. That's a glorious thing, isn't it?

When we're struggling to worship. And when we're struggling to walk with God. And when we're struggling to keep holy things holy. And when we're struggling as a church to understand what is our calling as his people.

And then we think in the realms of the individual. There are times when we do things and we don't realise it's contrary to God's law. John Calvin commented on this passage.

He said, nothing is more easy than for people to err. Nothing is more easy than for people to err.

This remedy was most necessary lest they who had sinned should fall into despair.

I don't know about you but my past in my teens and my twenties. I'm often ashamed of.

[15 : 36] People often ask, why don't you minister in Wales? And I said, I want to be the past like my new minister in Wales. But, um. There are sins that we look back on, don't we?

And, um. We think. Many of us think, I was such an idiot. How could I have been so stupid? And the remembrance of those sins is, I don't want to say for you, but it's very very painful.

And it's distressing. And it's filled with regret. And you see that you still sin. And we still struggle.

And I still struggle. And I say foolish things. I often sin my speech.

And I look back and it distresses me. And I want to forget. And I don't want to remember. This passage says to you and it says to me, it doesn't matter. Because God in Christ forgives you.

You look back on it and you smile. You can. And you think of I'm a chewer. I'm a chewer. That's often a depressing question, isn't it?

[16 : 38] But Christ has pardoned it. Christ has pardoned all the sins and the faults of your youth. And it stops us from falling into despair. And so when you fall into sin and you don't even know it until afterwards.

And it comes to your attention and you feel really, really foolish. And you feel stupid and you feel discouraged. You must say that the word of God in this passage is certainly for you the fact.

That God gives you the gospel right there. This is the very thing I've taken care of, God says. This is the very reason why the Son of God is governed. This is the very purpose for which I sent him.

And that is glorious, isn't it? Isn't that a glorious truth? Now with that in mind, let's come to my second point. My second point is that there is a solemn warning given to us.

That we should not turn away from this faith in this gospel in Jesus Christ. So listen carefully to verses 30 and 31. The person who does anything with a high hand.

[17 : 41] Whether he's native. Or a sorcerer. Whether he's an Israelite. Or whether he's somebody who's coming from outside. Reviles the Lord. Hates the Lord. And that person should be cut off from among his people.

Because he's despised the word of the Lord and has broken his commandments. And that person shall be utterly cut off. His iniquity shall be on him. That means it won't be carried. It won't be taken away.

And it will not be pardoned. It shall be on him. And the emphasis moves from grace and forgiveness to warning. Warning against pretentious sinning.

Warning against sinning that is intentional. Now, first you might say, well wait a minute. Because if I'm honest, much of my sinning is intentional. And you would say that if you will examine your heart.

You could clearly say that there are times when I sin and I know what I'm sinning. And I know exactly what I'm doing. And yet I still proceed to do it. And when I choose to say something cutting.

[18 : 46] Or sarcastic that is meant to belittle someone. I know exactly what I'm doing. And when I choose to gossip. I know what I'm doing. It's not unintentional. You could say in a very strict sense, it is intentional.

Is that what he means? Sinning with a high hand? I don't think so. I think that what he's saying before you and I is willful and deliberate. And defiant turning away from God and his truth.

It's a deliberate and malicious disowning of God and his gospel. It's not simply saying to myself, I know I shouldn't say this but. Or I know that I shouldn't kick you in the shins.

And then I proceed after the service to deliberately kick you in the shins. And I hope it really hurts.

They're really mild examples of sin aren't they? But they're willful. But it wasn't with a clear defiance of the gospel.

And a clear rejection of the truth of God as it is in Jesus. It's not just saying, I am going to deliberately sin this sin. It is saying, I'm going to deliberately sin this sin because I don't care about

you God.

[19 : 56] And I don't care about God's glory. And I don't care about God's gospel. And I don't care about the blood of the lamb. And I don't care about the work of the Holy Spirit. I'm going to do it anyway.

And that's a different matter altogether. Many of our sins are intentional. But you wouldn't put them in this particular category of sinning with a high hand.

John Owen. He died in Ely. And he's probably the greatest English theologian that has ever lived. And he lived in Ely. John Owen. Dr Lloyd-Jones. Or Levy. No. That's not it. That's not it. But John Owen was one of the few men who have really studied apostasy.

And I spent Friday wading through his book on apostasy. Let me give you how he describes apostasy. It's really, really humble. It's not easy to read. He says, When any important principle of evangelical truth is forsaken, run away from, and renounced.

[21 : 08] Especially when many of those principles are renounced. When the road of obedience which the gospel prescribed is habitually and deliberately neglected. When men or women believe otherwise than the gospel teaches and live otherwise.

Then that it requires that there is apostasy from the gospel. And the guilt and danger answer to the degrees and measure which each kind of this apostasy assumes.

You're not going to get that in the crotch. It's not an easy crotch. But I think what he's getting at, he's getting at the heart of it. He's saying you gather up the gospel, you take all the strands of it.

You recognize that to follow Christ is to live for God's glory. That Christ has died on the cross to pay for the sins of his men and women and boys and girls.

And you realize that for those who trust in Christ, God's Holy Spirit dwells within them. And you say, no, I'm going to go anyway. I'm going to walk away. And I don't want it.

[22 : 16] And in fact, I'm not the least interested in it. And it's not simply giving in to temptation. It's not simply continually struggling with sin, which we all do, or the weakness of our flesh and our corruption.

It's not the result of an attack of the evil one by one of his cronies. It is a deliberate rejection of the blood of Christ. And his finished work on the cross. And so it's not the right to have a grievance of Christ.

And so it's not the right to have a grievance of Christ. And so it's not the right to have a grievance of Christ. It's because you haven't committed the sin of apostasy. But I have to warn you to make sure that you keep clinging to the Lord in his grace.

Because if you walk away from Jesus, there is no hope of salvation. Now let me give you John Owen's arguments. They're really, really helpful.

Five directions. How to help you not fall into this grievous sin. Okay? Number one, you labor, you work for a true sense of God's glory.

[23 : 20] Labor for a true, real sense of the glory of God. When John Owen knew that he was dying in the evening, he set to work to study one subject.

The one subject that John Owen studied when he knew he was dying, he set himself to understand more closely was the subject of the glory of God. The work was punished after his death.

I find it nearly unreadable, right? But that's another point. But that was the exercise that he put his heart through. He prepared for his dying day by thinking about the glory of God.

And he is here giving it as an example of how to live each day. To labor for a true and real sense of the glory of God. And that will stop you from rejecting the gospel. It will stop you from turning away from God's good word.

The second thing is he says, keep a due and careful watch on your heart. There are several things that you need to remember about your heart, he tells you.

[24 : 27] He tells you two things. He says, number one, your heart is deceitful of all things and it's desperately wicked. Who can know it? It's tricky one, your heart. So is mine.

And so you have to labor, you have to work on keeping a watch over it. Number two, your heart is not only deceitful but it easily sinks into sin. And that's what we are being told in this chapter.

There are those sins that we will commit without even knowing it. We can call them as the urgh sins.

You know those urgh sins. I can't believe I was done it. And that's because our heart sinks. It sinks into sin.

The third lesson about your heart that he gives you is your heart is weak. You might think your heart is strong. But it's knowing that you're as strong as you think. And because you know the weakness of your heart, you are ready to see it.

[25 : 32] And when it's ready, you trick you and deceive you. So labor for a true sense of the glory of God. Keep a dear and careful watch on your heart. And direction number three is do not rest or trust in the outward privileges of the church.

Don't rest or trust in the outward privileges of the church. You see, I think what Owen is saying, and I think he's right, but the closest step we are to apostasy is when we're simply resting in the outward form of worshipping God.

And he goes on to give this a really pointed rebuke. To say, even if your worship is the most pure worship, don't you rest in that. There's a point at which your worship may be really pure, and you can be very close to the edge of apostasy.

Because you come to rest in how you do things. And you come to be satisfied. And you look down on other people, we are Prosperteens.

We believe in the regular principle. And you miss the heart of the gospel. And the Lord Jesus and his grace. And it's a serious warning not to trust in outward privileges of the church.

[26 : 49] Do you remember Israel? They kept saying, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. Because they thought, because they had the outward privileges, that that was okay. But it wasn't.

And you might say, I've been baptized. I didn't have a sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I used my gifts in the service of the church. All those things are wonderful things.

But don't rest in them. Make sure that you're clinging to Christ. Direction number four is, watch the culture that you're a part of. It's really interesting, isn't it? John Owen would say that.

A Puritan. He tells us that each culture has its own way of pulling us into sin, isn't it? We're from different cultures, but we live in this culture. Every culture, every place has a way of pulling you away from the grace of God that is in Christ.

Of making you rest in outward things. And our culture is pushing us, isn't it? Again and again and again, to view religion as something private. It's really okay if you want to be an evangelical in private.

[27 : 55] It's really okay if you want to be a Bible-believing or a former Christian in private. Just please don't tell us anything about it. And our problem is, we certainly conform to the culture of giving what we want.

And we need to be aware of the pressure that your own culture puts on you to compromise the gospel. And direction number five is so challenging, isn't it? Avoid all those who pull you away from Jesus.

Owen talks about controversies in the church and difficulties in the church. He says stay away from people who cause division. Stick with people who bring you to Jesus. Stay away from those who aren't bringing you to Christ.

So, children, there are people out there in your playground that can draw you away from the Lord Jesus. And you know that. You know that in your little heart.

And those people, you pray for them. And you want them to come to know Jesus. But you know that if you hang around with them, they will draw you away from Jesus. And I think John Owen is right.

[28 : 59] You avoid them. We all sing. I sing, you sing. But we don't want to fall into this sin.

Let me conclude with the tassels. I'm sure you've all been waiting. Beat it for now. Tassels on the ham of a garden. You know those kind of little bits of cotton or bits of cloth or whatever it is.

And we don't think that it really means anything. It can't be significant. What is this blue thread about? We'd be far happier if it said a scarlet thread. That would be easy, wouldn't it? Rahab and the scarlet thread.

We could easily go red. Blood of the cross. Covered by sin. That would be great. Make my life easy. But do you know anything that was blue in the Old Testament?

Anything particularly that was covered with blue? There was only one object that was wrapped in blue cloth. Everything else was wrapped in a fabric of a different colour.

[30 : 00] But there was one object, and one object alone that was wrapped in blue. When the priests and the Levites were getting everything ready to transport the tabernacle, there was one thing that was to be wrapped in blue.

Do you know what it was? It was the Ark of the Covenant. The very centre of the Holy of Holies. Blue was the colour. And it was one of those colours that was woven into the fabric of the chief priest.

It was woven into the fabric of the Holy of Holies. And so when people saw the high priest, and they saw what he was wearing, they immediately thought, Ah, the Holy of Holies.

And the glory of God. And the Gospel was proclaimed to them. And when they put this one blue thread in their chassels and their cloaks, they are being reminded of the very thing of the Holy of Holies.

They are being reminded of the greatness and the glory of God in his Gospel, that he will cover our sins. In the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant, where there was angels carved on the lid, looking at one another over it, with outstretched arms.

[31 : 06] And what was in the box, in the box was the broken law. And God looks down upon us, and what does he see? He sees the broken law. Broken sins.

So what does the high priest do? The high priest goes in once a year, and he goes in to make an atonement from sin, and he puts the blood on the Ark of the Covenant. And so when God looks down on the Ark of the Covenant, he sees a broken law covered by the blood.

And that is all Gospel, isn't it? And it's all pointing forward to what the Lord Jesus Christ, would do the little loom throughout in your castle. And as I've worked on it, I think it is an everyday reminder, in an everyday way, that you must not ignore the Gospel.

And you must never ignore it, and you must never forget it. Anyway, doesn't Paul say exactly that the blue tassel was to remind them of the law? Yeah, I know that. It was to remind them of the law, and to remind them of their holiness, and their need to be holy.

Verse 31. Sorry, verse 37. And the Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corner of their garments throughout their generation, to put a gold of blue on the tassel of each corner.

[32 : 24] And it should be a tassel for you to look at, and to remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart, and your own eyes, which you're inclined to whore after. So you shall remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.

I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord, your God. What are those words? Verse 41.

They are the words of grace that preface the law. They are the words of redemption that preface the law. The law is not obey it, and I will save you.

The law is I have saved you, now obey me. And that is what God has given us in Christ. And so, you don't have to go home tomorrow and put a blue thread in your tassels.

You might do if you want to. But don't think that you don't need the gospel every day, in every way. And so remember the grace that comes in Christ and cling to Jesus.

[33 : 36] Because to walk away from Jesus is only the first judgment. Let's pray.