



## Through Rose-Colored Glasses

Kris Shermer - March 21, 2010

That image is not one to be taken lightly. How could it be? Someone sawing off one of their limbs is pretty serious stuff. We'll come back to that in a minute, but certainly, it is more serious than the way that we, in our everyday lives, view sin.

I am a fairly analytical person. And this particular aspect of my personality became apparent when I was very young. Just in minor arguments with my parents, I'd find myself talking my way around situations here and there, forcing them to play the "because I'm the parent, that's why" card, which always bugged me, because I saw multiple holes in their logic. Good examples of this would be when they asked me to do chores that I didn't feel like doing.

"Hey Kris, dinner's going to be ready in about 10 minutes, will you please wash the dishes that are in the sink?"

"But you just said dinner was going to be ready 10 minutes."

"Yeah, do it before then."

"But there will be more dishes after dinner, why can't I just do them all then?"

"It'll be easier if you do some now."

"But then I have to go through the whole process twice!"

"Kris, I asked you to do the dishes."

"Dad, I will, I will wash them after dinner when I can do them all at once."

"Kris, I asked you to do the dishes now."

"But I'm going to have to start all over after dinner! Why do I have to do them now??"

"Because I said so!"

Things like that. I'd just think to myself, 'That's a terrible reason! You clearly recognize my logic is superior and so you must default to your parental authority to win!' And the problem with this was that it led to a general mindset that I could outsmart my parents. Though I am

sure they knew that, as I entered my teenage years, I wasn't entirely truthful, I really, at this point, would feel pretty bad if they ever found out how much I lied to them. My logical mind was really, really good at fabricating stories and keeping them straight, which was handy when I started to get to a point where I had friends who drove, and especially after I got my license. I spent a majority of my leisure time either with people my parents didn't approve of or in places that they had no idea where I was. And I lied my pants off and got away with it. And you know, it was fun. It was an adrenaline rush. It felt sneaky and cool and though I knew, vaguely, that lying was wrong, that didn't seem to matter. It seemed harmless.

And I don't think that that view of sin is all that unusual. When we look at sin, sometimes we do think it's harmless fun. We like adrenaline. We like excitement and adventure, and sin often seems to offer us just that.

And that makes it hard to reconcile our attitudes with some of the things that Jesus had to say about sin. In a particularly vivid passage, he states:

Matthew 5:29-30 (NIV)

<sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

When we look at passages like this one in Matthew, we tend to think, "Um, gross. That would be ridiculous." And I agree. It is gross and a little extreme. But whereas our next step SHOULD be to ask what this passage actually means, we brush it off. Let's face it, that is disgusting and I don't actually believe Jesus wants me to cut my tongue out because I lie, so I'm going to tell myself he's not being literal. He's being metaphorical. Good. Metaphors. We like metaphors because they don't necessarily lead us to action. When we read something that is metaphorical, we don't actually think we need to do anything. Because it doesn't blatantly tell us WHAT to do, we aren't compelled to do anything at all. But we should be. Because what on earth could a metaphor like this mean?

Put simply, it means that sin is SERIOUS. It means that sin is not a game to him. It means that sin isn't a "be good when you feel like it" kind of a thing. His solution to sin was permanent. Eyes causing you to sin once in a while? Get rid of them forever. Hands a problem? Lose those, too. He wasn't offering us a blindfold or a band aid, his solution was to eradicate the problem altogether—to attack it at its source and not only stop our sin-in-progress, but stop the POTENTIAL for all future sins. It sounds like overkill, but that's because it's supposed to. People probably won't willingly admit that they don't take sin seriously, but there is a huge difference between "regular serious" and "cut off your hand serious". **To Jesus, sin smells**

**like blood.** That is how serious he is about sin. That is how much he is not messing around about this idea. Why would he come up with such a graphic, gory image to portray the “better alternative” to sin if he was not 100% serious?

And let’s remember, in Jesus’ day, they didn’t have sterile surgical rooms and morphine. Cutting off one of your limbs consisted of unimaginable pain. They literally sawed through your bones, ligaments, tendons, muscles, and whatever else you have in there. They used to try and tie something above the amputation site to slow bleeding, but a majority of the time that would result in hemorrhaging. And if you didn’t hemorrhage, chances are you’d be getting some kind of a disease from your open wound. Your chances of death were pretty decent overall.

You are welcome for the disgusting mental image.

But do you understand a little bit more what Jesus was saying? Losing one part of your body (which would be excruciatingly painful and might have potentially life-threatening complications) is still better than sin.

Because sin-is-serious. It’s life-and-death serious.

To us, in this day and age, sin hardly seems real. It’s hard to conceptualize what it actually means to sin, I think partially because it’s hard to know what the opposite of sin would be. We can usually know the difference between things that are sinful and things that are not sinful, but what about the world we live in? If we live in a sinful world, what would a world without sin look like? The reality is, we have no idea what it was like in the Garden of Eden before they ate the fruit. We have no idea what a sinless world looks like. We imagine it as something beautiful and perfect, something awesome, but it’s hard to conceptualize. And so to understand the magnitude, just how awful a sinful world is, all we have to go off of is Jesus’ teachings about what sin is and about what it is like to sin.

There is a distinct difference between knowing what is sin and knowing what it is like to sin. We can know what sin is with relative ease. Adultery, murder, lying... these are sins. They are easy to define because they have been written out for us. But when it comes to *what it is like* to sin, we stop. Because how could you put something like that into a neat little packaged definition?

In the original Greek, the word used for “sin” was “harmatia”. Now, harmatia, when translated, means “to miss the mark”. Missing the mark, let’s be honest, sounds simple. It sounds low-key and casual. If you miss the mark, you can probably try again later when you have a better view, are more rested, or can see more clearly. But the point isn’t to see the mark better and

ask what it looks like, or what it doesn't look like. Arbitrary lines don't do us much good in this case. The point is to know what it is *like* to miss the mark. What actually happens?

Art Package:

“Robin Hood” clip

“Wine Red” by: The Hush Sound

Missing the mark means someone dies. The Hush Sound described it as the death of beauty. In the video clip the child would've been strangled to death if the shot wasn't just right. The stakes are high. And the thing about sin is that the stakes are high for us, it is our own lives we are risking. We're the ones who die. And it is our spiritual life that is on the line. It isn't a simple physical injury we're risking. It's far more than that. It's our souls, our relationships with God, our eternity. It's everything.

And I think before we can really absorb what this means, we need to be honest about what we think it's like to miss the mark. Most of us don't automatically think of it as a life-and-death situation; it is more of a “Meh, I'll try again later” situation. We need to really evaluate what we think of sin before we try to contrast that to what Jesus says. And that's a difficult process. It's asking a lot of us, really.

It's asking us to be honest about the fact that we don't take sin seriously. We don't take Jesus' powerful images or passionate sermons seriously. We're not bold enough to verbalize it, but we've been conditioned to dismiss his teachings on sin. Subconsciously, we think he went a little bit overboard.

If we really think about the place sin has in our society, most people do treat it like myth. Not in that we don't think bad things exist, but in that we don't really understand the magnitude of our sin and so we create other analogies of what we think it is like to sin. We convince ourselves that the effects of sin on our lives are trivial at the most. Our opinion on sin is influenced gradually over time by the things we encounter in our lives. And what is influencing us is a dangerous lie.

Paul warned the Colossians (2:8), “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” (NIV)

Our culture is constantly feeding us the lie that sin does not exist, that it's not a big deal, and we take that in. People who indulge themselves and live exciting lives full of sin are idolized and held up on pedestals in our culture.

There is a guy named Tucker Max who has made a fortune building off of a book he wrote called, "I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell". It's a collection of short stories and anecdotes from his life that detail his drunken nights and sex life. His mini-bio on his website says this: *"I get excessively drunk at inappropriate times, disregard social norms, indulge every whim, ignore the consequences of my actions, mock idiots and posers, sleep with more women than is safe or reasonable, and just generally act like a raging moron."* His fans are people who wish they had the audacity to live lives like his. Women have created "I slept with Tucker Max" t-shirts and written to Post Secret saying "I wonder if Tucker Max would think I was pretty." Men wish they could get away with some of the ridiculous and obscene things he does. He is absolutely idolized as this godly figure who, for whatever reason, has transcended the limitations placed on the rest of us and lives the ideal life.

This is definitely an extreme example, but lifestyles like this are idealized in our culture. Our minds are constantly bombarded with messages that say that sin doesn't really exist. Over time, our minds are taken captive and reshaped to think of sinful things as trivial things. Instead of understanding what a big deal sin is, and what far-reaching consequences it has on our lives, we're told it's not really a big deal. And there is no reason to concern ourselves with getting rid of a problem that doesn't really exist, right? Why would we worry about something if it doesn't have actual repercussions? In our culture, sin is simply an idea. A concept. It's imaginary. We act like it's not a real, concrete, part of our lives. Except Jesus tells us that it is.

So let's use an analogy that we can all, in some way, relate to. Think of yourself in some kind of pre-college school setting. To a lot of us, sin is a situation we define within the walls of a classroom. **Sin smells a lot like chalk.**

It's the first day of school. You walk into a classroom and there are posters all over the wall. A very official-looking, laminated list of rules is hanging in the front of the room, free for all to see. And everyone is expected to abide by said rules. We can consider the rules to be "the mark", and not following the rules will be "missing the mark".

[THE LIST]

Now, I don't honestly believe any child waltzes into school on day one, takes a look at The List, and says, "Yep. I plan to break every last one of those." But somehow, our awareness of The List gets weaker as the school year wears on. All of the kids having fun are breaking at least one of the rules on The List.

The kid who folds up the assignment into a paper airplane and sends it flying at the chalk board always gets a few laughs. The kid who talks out of turn usually has some clever comment and his friends eagerly await their chances to nod and agree. The kid who brings his iPod to class is clearly enjoying himself more than those of us listening to the lecture. And

the kid who is eating? We're all jealous of his goldfish crackers and wish we had the gall to bust out a snack in the middle of class. The kids breaking the rules are clearly having the best time. Us? We're just sitting in our desks, wishing we had something funny to say or an iPod to listen to. Clearly, we are bored. The only kids who are having a good time are breaking the rules on The List. How could we possibly have fun sitting in our seats and staying on task? So perhaps we start to bend the rules a little bit. My favorite rule to break was always the staying on task one. I was a note-writer. And, because I plan ahead, I wrote notes and passed them inside of pens. I'd get the kind of pens that were really easy to take apart. I'd simply unscrew the end, replace the ink tube with my note, and reassemble the pen and "loan it to a friend". It was cake.

And you know, when we start bending the class rules, we get along with our classmates more than ever. We can't imagine how we went so long being rule-followers. And really, we're only breaking a few of the harmless rules from The List. We don't even really feel bad about it anymore. And if the teacher caught us, surely she'd understand. "Yeah, I know I broke a rule. Yes, I see The List at the front of the classroom, and I'm sure you spent a lot of time thinking about what rules would be important for our class... but you have to understand, it's a tough world out there. And it's really important that I fit in." Try telling this to the guy who suggests gouging out our eyes if they're the source of our sin.

Now, we are far too timid to tell Jesus something like this, but this is where many of our hearts are. We really do think of this whole situation with sin as The List. We want to please the Teacher, but you know, it is, after all, just The List. For so many of us, missing the mark takes place in a classroom setting. It does carry with it the faint scent of musty chalk. It's a casual distinction between the hitting the mark in the center of the target, which seems boring, and moving one ring out and missing the mark "just a little".

The problem with thinking of sin in a classroom setting is that it means that breaking the rules on The List really is trivial. There will be some sort of predetermined punishment in place and we'll either shape up or try to hide our notes better.

Thinking that sin is like breaking rules in a classroom completely destroys what Scripture tells us a relationship with God is like. The two aren't compatible. God is not a teacher who hovers over our desks as we take our tests. He isn't waiting for us to screw up. He isn't working his way through a progressive discipline model that begins with a warning and ends with expulsion from his classroom. He created us for a relationship with Him and that kind of relationship does not exist in the cold, oppressive classroom with the laminated List.

Jesus said himself that he came so we might have life abundantly (John 10:10). He came so that we might have a relationship with him and our lives might be changed by it. And that's

where this idea of “what is it like to sin” challenges us, because if it does not exist in a classroom, it is something more serious. It is something that gets in the way of our relationship with Christ. It separates us from him. It prevents us from having that relationship that exists only because of his sacrifice for us. It is an ugly, awful, painful thing and we need to believe that. We need to reassess where our hearts are and figure out whether or not we believe separation from God is more than simply breaking the rules on The List.

It’s a heart condition. It is us refusing to accept what God invites us to in a relationship with him. Sin is us deciding to separate ourselves from God, to sever that relationship and live apart from him. We choose pain and suffering apart from God instead of abundant life with him. We allow ourselves to die alone instead of accept the life and relationships he offers us. God offers us life, and we choose ***death***. We choose to miss the only mark, the only target that can save our lives. Who chooses to miss a target? Who sets themselves up for some kind of shot and doesn’t aim for the center? And the consequence is death. We miss the mark, and ultimately end up hurting ourselves.

The author of Hebrews made this point pretty clearly. He wrote:

Hebrews 10:26 (NLT)

Dear friends, if we deliberately continue sinning after we have received knowledge of the truth, there is no longer any sacrifice that will cover these sins.

Jesus was the only sacrifice offered for our sins. He didn’t give us other options just in case we didn’t like what he said about loving God and loving others. He didn’t give us a loophole just in case we’re really attached to lying or some other sin. We have Jesus, who offers us a sacrifice that will cover our sins and who offers us a relationship with him, or we have nothing. And this relationship is contingent upon us doing our best to follow him. It’s not that he doesn’t expect us to make mistakes, but most of our sins aren’t accidents. Most of our sins are the results of situations we’ve deliberately put ourselves in and choices we’ve deliberately made.

And so we have to know what sin is like. Because if it is as trivial as we make it out to be, who cares anyways! If it’s just The List, it’s easy to work around. If it’s just The List, it isn’t about the relationship at all. And this idea, that we would demean what God did for us and opt instead for The List, is an incredible perversion of Jesus’ sacrifice. It is a huge deviation from the purpose of his death on the cross. The List isn’t what he had in mind when he offered us a relationship with him. No healthy relationship functions solely off of a list.

Can you imagine any kind of relationship that began with, “Okay, so here’s The List of things I need you to do. On it you will find ways to behave, things to think, and the general parameters of all of our interactions. If you do not comply, there will be consequences...” That

would be absurd. I personally would not be at all interested in any kind of interaction with that individual. It's not much of a relationship at all. And yet that's what we turn our relationship with God into when think that it functions off of The List. There has to be more to it—and there is.

Following Jesus isn't about following some set of laws, it's about loving God and loving the people around us. It's about this relationship that we should be experiencing. And what matters within this relationship is our heart.

Jesus, in his multiple encounters with the Pharisees, alluded to the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. The Pharisees followed a literal interpretation of the law, and they severely lacked an understanding of the reasoning behind the law. Paul wrote to the Corinthians (3:6), "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (NIV). This life that Jesus offers us, this relationship, is seen in the context of the Spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. It's about knowing what you should do, not focusing on what you shouldn't do. Keeping the right things in mind so we shouldn't even be inclined to do the wrong things. If we focus on making the most of our educations, we probably wouldn't be tempted to pull out iPods in class. It's a pretty straightforward concept.

And that's really the core of our faith and what God wants for us. It isn't about getting as far away from the dead center of the target as possible without actually skipping to the next ring. It isn't about walking on eggshells and getting as close to sin as possible without touching it. We should be running in the other direction.

Missing the mark isn't breaking the petty rules on The List in the classroom. It's a flat out rejection of everything that Jesus has done for us. We become settled in our sins, they become comfortable and familiar, and it really will take a complete reversal of our attitude to realize what this means for us. Thinking about sin like we think about breaking rules in class belittles everything that has been offered to us. It is a heart issue. And the condition of our heart is far more serious to Jesus than we realize, especially when it comes to sin. Because sin is why he came. So we need to begin really considering what he told us about sin and its effect on our lives and our relationships. We need to quit believing the lie. We need to quit pretending that things don't matter when we know that they do. Sin needs to actually take on the character of something more serious, something that is more worthy of our thought and energy than a simple list.

Because if we don't, we really are just shooting ourselves.