

Who is Affected By Sin?

By Rod McDonald



The beginning of my loss of innocence came the day I discovered that a toy plastic disk fit nicely into a gumball machine — never mind that the toy disk was worth more than a penny. The value of the theft was small, but the resulting guilt was more than a penny’s worth. It pressed on me like a gentle wind, rattling against the window of my soul. Eventually, I sealed the window with bricks and mortar so that I would not hear the wind’s voice.

Why this mystical experience? The gumball was worth only a penny. It’s not like I stole a Cadillac Eldorado (an expensive car in the mid-60s). If restitution were demanded, I could easily repay four stolen gumballs and throw in a fifth for additional compensation. Done.

If only things were so simple. I hadn’t thought of the poor gumball owner, who, upon opening his machine to collect his meager profit, found a few worthless plastic disks. My offense was more than stealing; it was a personal affront.

Let’s explore this personal aspect of the crime a little further.

Suppose you had a dog named Moose, and you said to him, “Moose, do you want to go for a walk, old boy?” Then you decide not to go on a walk. Most would not judge you for it, and even your loyal old dog would overlook the offense.

But say the same to your child and then break your promise. This is far worse than lying to your dog, and may damage your relationship with your child — and even your wife. But the consequences, though more serious, are limited.

Take it another step. If you were to perjure yourself before a Senate committee or in a court of law, the consequences to you would be yet more severe, with the threat of jail time.

Now, if it were possible to lie to — or, more likely, lie about — the holy and infinite God, the Creator of heaven and earth and the Judge of all the earth, what consequences would you expect? Far more severe. Indeed, infinitely more severe.

You may say, “All right then, as you say, sin is a legal matter (mere repayment) AND a personal affront. Well, I’ll make sure to stand clear of those higher courts. And I’ll never dare do or say anything to offend such a person as God.”

But then there’s this troubling verse:

If anyone causes one of these little ones — those who believe in me — to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (Matt 18:6)

All this business about a millstone around your neck seems a little extreme. Why are the consequences of causing one of these little ones to stumble so great? You may think, “She’s just a ‘little one.’” But not to God, to “those who believe in me.” This makes all the difference.

It’s not unjust for God to inflict such severe punishment. You may estimate the offense of causing a little one to stumble as a small thing, judging by the stature or importance of the little one. But you fail to reckon with the infinitely holy and glorious God who loves this little one more than a mother her child and has sent his Son to die for her. It is against him you have sinned.

David confessed as though the ones he had wronged faded into insignificance: “*Against you, you only, have I sinned.*” (Ps 51:4)

Paul learned this on the Road to Damascus: “And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you *persecuting me?*’” (Acts 9:4)

Joseph, when tempted by Potiphar’s wife, knew that God was to be feared above Potiphar or his wife. “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin *against God?*” (Genesis 39:9)

Achan’s sin led to the defeat of the army at Ai, and eventually to the destruction of himself and his family, yet in a moment of clarity, he confessed: “Truly I have sinned *against the LORD* God of Israel” (Joshua 7:20).

In time, by his great mercy and in the giving of his Son, the Lord dismantled the bricks in the window of my conscience. I came to see that God was behind my profound childhood experience of being troubled by what seemed such a small thing. He was the one I had ultimately sinned against. And I lost my appetite for gumballs.