

There Are No Victimless Crimes by Pastor Marty

I recently saw an article about an event at an American university. A speaker had been invited to receive an honor. However, it was then discovered that the person had previously made a statement that offended some others due to its political and moral nature. As would be expected, the school took the financially expedient route and changed its prior decision, deciding against bestowing the award. Such a situation is becoming extremely common in today's culture where being offended has now reached the moral—and in some cases even legal—equivalent of a hate crime. However, the speaker, the comment, and the school's choice is not the point of this newsletter. Instead, I want to reference something that I read about the incident. To summarize, it was stated that this was "a victimless crime." There was no obligation or broken contract involved, nobody was harmed, and nothing was stolen. A similar argument is used to justify certain positions on a growing list of controversial topics, such as drugs, speeding, copyright infringement, media downloads, cohabitation, pornography, insider trading, speeding, illegal parking, immigration, plagiarism, etc. Indeed, almost any offense can be contextualized in a way that fits this same argument. However, this raises one extremely significant question for true disciples: is there ever really such a thing as a victimless crime?

If we are truly disciples of Jesus, we must accept there is no victimless crime.

Now, I am not going to be arguing in this newsletter that the reason there are no victimless crimes is because all sins are offenses against God. There are several reasons I do not consider that answer sufficient for my current purposes: (1) it essentially defines God as the Ultimate Victim in our discussion; (2) it locates human beings and God on opposite sides of just

about every issue; (3) it places all actions in a gray area between grace and legalism where intentions easily cloud any distinction between the spirit and letter of the law; (4) it means that almost all actions and thoughts qualify as "guilty" when they are evaluated according to Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount; (5) it duplicates a large number of sermons regularly heard in most orthodox churches; (6) it isolates the argument to believers and ignores practical aspects that apply even to atheists or followers of other religions; and, most importantly, (7) it results in an extremely short newsletter for this month. Although there may be truth in some of those answers, they do not provide a practical and pragmatic perspective, and they can seem somewhat ethereal or unreal to everyday life. Living in reality means we must recognize that all of our actions have actual consequences.

Living in reality means we must accept that all our actions have consequences.

If we look at the book of beginnings, we find the first husband and wife walking in their backyard during a warm spring day. The story is pretty well known: serpent shows up to gossip, man and woman listen to serpent, man and woman eat from the forbidden tree, and the fall ensues. The human race has looked back at that event for aeons, wishing that our parents had not disobeyed God. More than any other, that is a moment that will be remembered as the worst event in human history. However, I want to temporarily imagine the situation with only the nearsightedness (i.e., foolishness) of our culture and the knowledge that the man and the woman had at that moment. If we put ourselves in their place, our perspective might be a little different than it is now. God had told them that if they eat of the tree, they would die. They likely understood His words in a

literal, temporal sense—hence Eve’s statement that even *touching* the tree would cause death. Apparently, she saw the tree as being somehow toxic in a physical sense. We don’t know exactly what Adam thought God’s warning about death meant because he just stood by and watched the conversation continue, never saying a word to Eve or to the serpent. However, Adam did have enough of an understanding of what he was doing that it is called “Adam’s sin” in the Bible. Nevertheless, all we know for sure is that they both ate of the fruit after hearing the serpent’s response, believing the tree wouldn’t cause death but instead would lead to their being like God and knowing good and evil. They both chose to believe what they considered to be a reasonable conclusion instead of following the instructions that God had given to them.

Adam and Eve opted for a reasonable conclusion instead of choosing obedience.

Before we examine the man and the woman’s actions, let us consider the birth of their first son. We can probably imagine Adam and Eve sitting with him near a fire right after he had been born. (Yes, I am taking some literary license here). After they were expelled from the garden, their life became hard. He had to toil for food, constantly pulling weeds and being cut by thorns, and she had experienced horrible pain while giving birth. They begin talking about the life he will have, and they both become choked up with emotion. They look at the trees and hills around them, drastically more wild and harsh than the garden was, and they suddenly realize for the first time that the fall is not just theirs—it is everyone’s. Their son would also have to toil and sweat, fighting to make a living from the earth, and he would eventually die. His wife is also going to suffer pain. All of their children will experience the consequences of their sin in the garden. If we fast forward another hundred years, we see the man and wife huddled together in grief and

sorrow. They have just learned their son Cain murdered their other son Abel and has been banished to a faraway land. Suddenly, they realize that even their choice to sin has been replicated to their children, and worse than that, they suddenly understand the concept of a victim—a person who made no choice to sin but suffers by another’s actions. As the years go by, they learn what it means to fear the future, knowing that their children and their children’s children will suffer because of their individual choice. It is easy to imagine that the man and woman lamented over their sin for the rest of their lives. I think it is very likely that Eve often said something like, “I did not know it would affect our children and their children. I had no idea.” Likewise, Adam probably said to her, “I didn’t realize the ground itself would suffer and be changed. I thought it would just be you and me.” They never expected their sin would make a difference beyond the context of their choice.

They never expected their sin would make a difference beyond their own life.

By the time Adam and Eve died, sin had started to spread throughout the human race in increasing frequency and intensity. If we were to fast-forward several hundred years, we find the earth so corrupted by sin that God had to baptize the entire earth in holy water in order to cleanse it enough for human beings to have another chance. How did corruption spread so quickly that God had to take such drastic measures? If we go back to the moment of the fall when the man and woman are considering the serpent’s advice, we need to stop and take a moment to think about their perspective on things. From what they knew at that moment, their choice was not going to have any effect on anyone except themselves. Nobody else would be hurt by their actions. In other words, *there was no victim!* There was no other person to be impacted by their choice—and even if there had been, they wouldn’t have understood how

their sin could actually affect and corrupt the world itself. They never would have guessed that in several hundred years, sin would spread across the earth like a pandemic until even nature itself was crying out in agony. Because they did not see a victim, they falsely assumed that it what they did was a victimless crime.

Because they saw no victim, they falsely believed their act was a victimless crime.

If we consider using biology as the framework, we recognize that all living things multiply. People and animals multiply by joining together and giving birth to new life. However, some types of life multiply differently. Some of the simple organisms divide—one single form becoming two, two becoming four, and so on. This type of process starts slowly but picks up speed very quickly. However, there are others that are much more pernicious, such as certain bacteria, that spread by tossing out thousands of spores. It takes very little time for spores to spread and infect more and more hosts. Sin is very much like a type of bacteria, mutating as it spreads. If we look at the first sin, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit, it had a profound and world-changing effect; everything in creation was changed. However, the next sin, when Cain killed Abel, did not seem to have very much of an effect on anyone except a handful of human beings; compared to the change wrought by the first sin, the second sin seemed relatively minor. The third sin recorded for us, when Lamech killed a man, seems almost a footnote in comparison; God does not even speak from Heaven to curse him for it. However, we begin to see that although individual sins seem to be weaker in their isolated effect on creation, the spores of sin were now spreading and mutating everything they touched. Within 9 generations, sin went from a single event in a couple's life to so fully infecting the whole earth that only 8 people were not completely consumed by it. Even though there were some righteous people

during that time, such as Enoch, the darkness of sin was covering the face of the earth. Sin was more than an action people could take; it was a force of death infecting everything in its path.

Sin was a force of death that infected everyone and everything in its path.

As we saw when we considered the sin of Adam and Eve, they could not see a victim in their crime. They did not realize that sin was much more than performing one specific act of disobedience—it was opening a vial of bacterial death and pouring it out on the earth they had been given. God audibly spoke to Cain about his attitude, suggesting that sin had not become so widespread or constant in his life that it had yet become the norm. Nevertheless, he killed his brother and brought even more infection to the world. After Seth had a child, it says that people “began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen 4:26). The implication here is that due to the condition of the human race on earth, God had stopped speaking with people personally. Of course, we cannot be sure, but it is not too fanciful to consider that sin had so infected the earth between the time that God spoke to Cain and when Seth had a child that God withdrew His Presence so that this world would not be consumed by it. We must realize that sin is not just an action people take. If it were an action, forgiveness would be all that is needed to erase it. However, sin is a spiritual force that affects everything around us, whether we identify a specific victim or not. It spreads beyond itself. Sin is like a nuclear bomb, giving off a cloud of radiation that continues to spread outward far beyond the blast radius; it is like static, clogging the airwaves and preventing any clear signal from being sent or received; it is like mercury that has been poured into a river, spreading infinitely beyond the point of the original act until it taints every living thing in the ocean. In the ecosystem of planet earth, there are no sins that do not in some way affect everyone else.

In the closed ecosystem of planet earth, there are no sins that don't affect others.

Returning to the original subject of this newsletter, I mentioned a school that decided against giving an award to a person because of something that was said. My reaction wasn't to the event as much as to a comment that this is a "victimless crime." As discussed, just because we think there are no victims doesn't mean it is the case. We may not be able to see any way in which anyone else—past, present, or future—is affected by our decision, but that doesn't make it true. C. S. Lewis once stated that every time we interact with another person, we are having an effect on the person's life, pushing them a little closer to Heaven or a little closer to Hell. I think it actually goes beyond that. Every single time we make a choice to do the right thing, even if nobody else ever knows about it, we are doing something eternal: we are making a choice to follow God and say, "Yes" to His Holy Spirit. As we do that, we are making ourselves more and more into the temples of His Spirit that He calls us to be. His Presence infills and inhabits us just a little bit more, and since we are living on this earth, we are helping to fulfill a prophecy of His Presence covering the earth as the waters cover the seas. In the same way, each time we choose to do the wrong thing, we are aligning our human wills with the prince of the power of the air, strengthening the cloud of darkness upon this planet. As Christians, we do know that God redeems even our failures and is able to do miraculous things in our lives. Still, if we considered what things would be like if we had made only good decisions since we chose to follow Him, we would have to admit that a lot of things in life could be extremely different.

If we had only made good decisions in life, things would be very much different.

What this means is that even at the very least, our sinful actions have slowed down and

hindered our becoming who and what God has desired us to be. Even if we consider a thing to be trivial, its effect on us is not. John tells us, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and whatever we ask, we receive from Him" (1 John 3:21-22). In Hebrews, it tells us that confidence is important to "draw near to the throne of God" (4:16) and "enter the holy place" (10:19). The flipside is an inability to have this confidence leading to faith in prayer because our hearts condemn us. We forget that our hearts remember some things we've done even when our minds conveniently forget them. Jesus is the final authority on human nature; He made it clear that just being angry at someone can be as serious as murder. Our opinion of the seriousness of a sin is often not accurate in the eternal scheme of things.

Our opinion of the seriousness of a sin is often not accurate in light of eternity.

The point of this newsletter is to stress that all sins have an effect on us, on others, and on the world around us even if we cannot see the connections. Sin affects our ability to have faith in God, and it contributes to the darkness surrounding our planet. There are no victimless crimes. This may help us understand why God ordered the total destruction of some nations to the point that not even their animals or the buildings should remain; they were all mutated with sin. However, there is good news! If sin is so infectious that it can spread like the plague, then the power of the Spirit of God Who raised Jesus from the dead can spread even more. We are able to take part in fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah and Habakkuk, who said that the glory and knowledge of God would cover the earth as the waters cover the seas. Every single time we choose to obey God and do what is right, true, and loving, we are offering our lives, hearts, and bodies as living sacrifices; we then become channels of His Presence and of His Spirit to the world around us. We can help heal the victims.