

Anthropology and Hamartiology 7 The Distinction Between Sin and Unrighteousness

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Introduction

Every word of the scriptures is inspired in its original writings. When God chooses a word in a particular scripture, it has significance and meaning. For a long time, the main word for something that is offensive to God has been “sin”. This fact is one reason why this class is called hamartiology or a study of sin. A better word to describe the major category of things that are offensive to God would be unrighteousness. There is a distinction between the words sin and unrighteousness. Why should the believer make this distinction? For one reason, God makes the distinction so it should be important to the believer. Another reason would be the fact that there are things the believer is commanded to do when sin takes place, yet not when unrighteousness takes place. These things will be explored in a later lesson. The word unrighteous or unrighteousness is only used 30 times in the Bible. The adjective is used in the OT more predominantly and the noun is used more often in the New Testament.

Definition of Unrighteousness

Unrighteousness can be defined as that which is not right according to God’s standard, but falls short of God’s measurement of sin. Strong’s lexicon defines unrighteousness as: “(legal) **injustice** (properly the quality, by implication the act); **moral wrongfulness** (of character, life or act): translated as - iniquity, unjust, unrighteousness, wrong. Thayer’s lexicon defines it as “**injustice** of a judge; unrighteousness of heart and life; **a deed violating law and justice**, act of unrighteousness.” It is a broad word that includes many different types of behavior that is considered offensive to God. Many of these different words will be explored in the next lesson. Paul describes the group at the Tower of Babel in Romans 1 with many words that fall under the broad umbrella of unrighteousness.

In Romans 2:8 and 1:18 Paul describes unrighteousness in relation to the truth. In chapter 1 Paul states that the unrighteousness of men “keeps back” or “hinders” the truth. The word truth with the article here could be defined as the way things really are as opposed to the way things have been made to look by Satan in the World System. God is seeking to reveal the way things really are, and Satan has veiled this revelation. Man’s unrighteousness is hindering the process of God revealing the way things really are. In chapter 2 Paul says that men actually obey unrighteousness, wrath, and indignation instead of the truth.

Use of Unrighteousness in the Old Testament

In the OT the Hebrew word for unrighteousness is “*eh-vel*” which means injustice, wrong; violent deeds of injustice (of speech). Unrighteousness is used four times in the Old Testament to describe unright behavior in judgment by the nation Israel.¹ Unrighteousness is used to describe the behavior of one in the nation of Israel who uses underhanded methods to accomplish personal ends.² The word is used in Ezekiel 28 to describe the thought in the mind of

¹ Leviticus 19:15,35

² Jeremiah 22:13

Satan before he actually acted upon it. It is our word “eh-vel” translated iniquity. Unrighteousness was found in Satan before he sinned. Lucifer’s thoughts were offensive to God before he acted to overthrow God’s authority and led the portion of angels astray.³

Use of Unrighteousness in the New Testament

The greek word for unrighteousness “*adikos*” is defined as to act in a way that is inconsistent with a standard of right behavior. This word describes things or people that are contrary to God’s character or offensive to God. It is used in the gospels to describe wealth that is obtained in unjust ways.⁴ It is used in Romans 3:5 to describe behavior that is not consistent with the character of God. God’s character is used as the standard here for what is right. It is used in multiple passages to describe the unbeliever.⁵

The Distinction Between Sin and Unrighteousness

In 1 John 5:17 the lack of the article tells us that all unrighteousness has a quality of sin. They are not equal, but one has a form or quality of the other. In Hebrews 8:12 Israel is accused of committing both unrighteousness and sin. Both of these terms being in the same verse draws attention to the distinction between them. In the following passages the word for sin is used in conjunction with different terms, marking it as distinct from unrighteousness - Eph. 2:1; Lev. 6:2; 2 Chron. 33:19; Job 13:23; Matt. 12:3.

In Romans 1:29, Paul is describing the group at the Tower of Babel. He uses many different words which we will define next week in conjunction with unrighteousness.

The Significance of the Distinction

When studying a topic, it is wise to see what marks it as different from other topics. Just because something is similar, doesn’t mean it is the same. Similarity is not identity. In order to fully understand something, one must grasp what makes it unique and different. Sin and unrighteousness are similar but not the same. The Bible does not ask the believer to confess unrighteousness, even though it is offensive to God. Unrighteousness in the mind can keep the believer from the benefits associated with present tense salvation, and it should be forsaken. But sin is to be confessed to restore fellowship according to 1 John 1:9. When the believer agrees with God about the action taken, not calling it a mess up, or a faux pas, or a misstep, God will cleanse the mind of the believer of the unrighteous thoughts that led to the sin. The attitude will be adjusted along with the restoration of fellowship. There is so much that falls short of God’s standard of holiness, yet does not quite meet the standard that God sets for sin. God’s gracious actions take care of this mess. God has made a decision to put the sin of the believer behind Him.

³ Ezekiel 28:15

⁴ Luke 16:11

⁵ Matt. 5:45 (God lets rain shine on) Acts 24:15 (will be a resurrection of); 1st Co. 6:1 (believers not to take arguments before) 6:9 (they shall not inherit the Kingdom of God); 1st Pet. 3:18 (Christ suffered for); 2 Pet. 2:9 (reserved to a day of punishment)

Hebrews 8:12, 10:17, Psalm 103:12, Isaiah 38:17, Micah 7:19 all describe actions that God has taken regarding the sin of man. Some of these passages apply to Israel, and some are prophetic. But they describe how God chooses to look at man when the blood of Christ is applied. Jesus's blood is said to have taken away the sins of the world.⁶ This blood is applied to all who will believe. Romans 1:16 says that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. God has said that he will remember the sins and iniquities no more. So judicially these have been taken care of. But sin has a residual stain and corrupts. God does not see this stain, because the blood of Christ cleanses the believer from all sin - positionally.⁷ The believer still faces consequences for sin in this life. His body will face the results of bad choices. The mind is contaminated with unrighteousness that leads to sinful actions. However, when the believer confesses his sin, the Lord will cleanse the mind of the unrighteousness that led up to the sin. This is significant.

Conclusion

When the Bible uses a different word to describe something that seems similar, the believer should sit up and take notice. There was a good reason for the use of the different vocabulary. Unrighteousness is a broad term that is used to describe anything that is offensive to God, anything that will fall short of God's holy character. Sin however, is describing action that crosses a boundary. Sin is acting as if God has placed no restraints upon the behavior of man. Sin fits inside all unrighteousness. All sin is offensive to God, but not everything that is offensive to God can be defined as sin.

⁶ John 1:29 John the Baptist's cry.

⁷ 1 John 1:7