

What Does the Bible Teach About Sins of Ignorance, Weakness, and Inadvertence?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

Introduction:

A. Hosea 4:6

1. What is something everyone possesses, but no one can afford?
Ignorance!
2. Ignorance of history dooms people to repeat tragic mistakes.
“Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it.” (E. Burke)
3. “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge. You are not entitled to your opinion. You are entitled to your informed opinion. No one is entitled to be ignorant.” (Harlan Ellison)

B. In religion, ignorance is catastrophic.

1. Survey of mainstream Protestants revealed that 49% of them believe in the Devil, but 56% believe in UFOs.
2. 29% believe in an eternal hell for all sinners, but 34% believe astrology.
3. After a poll, Gallup referred to America as a “nation of biblical illiterates.”
 - a. 39% know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount.
 - b. 68% believe there are no moral absolutes
 - c. 71% cannot name the four Gospel accounts
4. Pop religion is a major contributor: “Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous, ineffectual, inoffensive, and bland. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love of God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain.” (Thomas Reeves, historian, University of Wisconsin)

C. Ignorance of the law is not an excuse.

1. This is true in civil government; citizens are accountable to keep the law, even if they are unaware of the law's existence or do not understand its meaning.
2. This is also true with regard to God's law; ignorance, accident, or weakness do not excuse violating the law
3. However, the reason for committing the sin may have an impact on the mercy that God may or may not choose to extend, or on the ease with which the sinner may be penitent
4. One who commits great sin, presumptuous sin, or prolonged secret sin will be much less receptive to and moved by the word of God, will find it far more difficult to humble and change his heart, and virtually impossible to be entirely sincere in his repentance and confession, than one who sins in ignorance, weakness, or inadvertence.
5. In short, God's word and compassion can reach those who sin in ignorance, weakness or inadvertence; He finds that His word and compassion do not have much effect on the deliberate, willful sinner. Such persons require more drastic measures to reach - Jude 22-23.

I. THE BIBLE SPEAK OF SINS THAT ARE NOT DELIBERATE OR DEFIANT

- A. Sins committed unintentionally or inadvertently
 - 1. Num. 15:22-36; Lev. 4:2, 27-28
 - 2. The sins were not ignored; there were less burdensome offerings to be made for unintentional, as opposed to purposeful, sins.
- B. Sins committed accidentally - Num. 35:22-25; Joshua 20:1-9
 - 1. There were consequences for sins committed by accident. While the punishment differed from intentional sin, nevertheless there was a sentence for the sin.
- C. Sins committed in weakness - Matt. 26:41; Rom. 7:15
 - 1. Sins committed in weakness are not overlooked; however, God offers mercy in a few forms
 - a. He may give more time to allow the weak to become strong - 2Peter 3:9
 - b. He sends strong brethren to help build up the weak ones - 1Thes. 5:14
 - c. He occasionally sends chastening to awaken the weak - Heb. 12:9-12
 - d. While God looks at the rebellious or deliberate sinner with wrath; He looks upon the weak and ignorant with compassion - Heb. 5:2
- D. Sins committed in ignorance - Lev. 5:14-19; Jonah 4:11
 - 1. Matt. 11:21-24; Luke 12:47-48; Acts 3:17
 - 2. Sins committed unknowingly, undiscerningly, in ignorance. They are secret or unknown to the sinner.
 - a. "Known" - Strong's H3045 - "yada" - "to be made known, perceived, instructed."
 - b. "Secret" - Psalm 19:12 - Strong's H5641 - "sawthar" - "to be hidden, concealed."

II. GOD DOES NOT ACCEPT THESE MOTIVES AS EXCUSES FOR SIN

- A. However well-meaning one may be.
 - 1. Many intentionally avoid learning
 - a. "If I don't know how, I can't be required to do it."
 - b. "Ignorance is bliss."
 - c. "What you don't know can't hurt you."
 - 2. Willful ignorance is intentional sin - Heb. 10:26
- B. Some excuse sin, because "They didn't know any better."
 - 1. This attempts to attribute something to God that humankind will not accept.
 - 2. God's will has been taught in all of the world and remains consistent
 - a. If ignorance of God's will is an excuse for sin, we do others a disservice when we teach them the Gospel
 - 3. The apostle Paul thought he was serving God by killing Christians - Acts 26:9

4. Whether one is aware of his sins or not, every unforgiven sin will be punished - Nahum 1:3; Ez. 18:4, 33:6; Col. 3:25
- C. Everyone sins - Ecc. 7:20; Rom. 3:23, 6:23
 1. American man with persistent sore throat goes to a doctor. He is diagnosed with throat cancer, treated, and survives.
 2. An aborigine man with a sore throat goes to the village shaman. He is diagnosed with having an attack by an evil spirit and is treated with the sacrifice of a chicken and a spirit dance. He grows worse and walks miles to an outstation where an unlicensed medical practitioner diagnoses him with a goiter, treats him with medical iodine, and sends him home. A few weeks later he died of throat cancer. The shaman and the unlicensed medical practitioner meant well, they were just ignorant. So, the aborigine should have lived because they were ignorant.
 3. Sin is always terminal, and Jesus has the only cure for it
 - a. John 14:5-6, 8:24; Mark 16:15-16
 4. It is important to understand that while repentance and confession are conditions of forgiveness, they are not acts that merit forgiveness. It is the gracious mercy of God, demonstrated in the shed blood of Christ that pays the price necessary to merit forgiveness. God is the One who forgives; our duty is to obey.

III. THESE SINS ARE DANGEROUS FOR BOTH CHRISTIANS AND SINNERS

- A. Everyone is ignorant about something
 1. I can preach, make a garden, play golf, and cook, but I cannot sew, draw, understand electronics, or help someone who is sick
 2. A gifted engineer who doesn't know how to check oil in his car
 3. A talented surgeon who cannot fry an egg
- B. No one fully understands everything written in the scriptures.
 1. I know a preacher who has memorized the entire New Testament, but he is a mess doctrinally
 2. The scriptures are written to teach us to discern God's will, but they have the miraculous quality of providing us with an endless supply of wisdom, meditations, learning, and wonder
 3. One must never be satisfied with his level of understanding.
- C. "But how can I discover and avoid sins of ignorance?!"
 1. Be aware of our potential for this kind of sin.
 2. Like David, pray to God about them, asking His help in discerning them
 3. Be diligent in self-examination - 2Cor. 13:5
 4. Be a dedicated student of God's Word - 2Tim. 2:15
 - a. The word of God is the instrument by which we discern sin - Rom. 7:7, 3:20
 5. Be persistent in avoiding any known sin, for sin habitually committed ceases to be recognized and acknowledged as sin.
- D. "How does this principle relate to infants, children, and the mentally disabled? Infants and children sin in ignorance."
 1. They cannot yet discern between good and evil - Deut. 1:39
 2. They cannot yet refuse evil and choose good - Isa. 7:15-16

IV. SINNING IN IGNORANCE: UNDERSTANDING CONSCIENCE, GUILT & TRUTH

- A. People sometimes do what is sin, without realizing it is sin. They do wrong, yet in their ignorance they believe that they do right. They are guilty of sin in practice, but innocent in conscience.
- B. At other times, people do what is not sin, under the impression that it is sin. They do right, yet in their ignorance they believe that they do wrong. They are innocent in practice, but guilty in conscience.
- C. The question, of course, is how they stand before God: are they guilty or not guilty in His eyes?
- D. God regards a certain matter as a sin, but what if someone thinks otherwise and does the thing in good conscience, ignorantly believing it not to be sin? Will God's verdict be "Guilty"?
 - 1. In former times, when people did wrong in ignorance, it was still held against them. Although people sinned unintentionally and did not know it, they were still held accountable and were "certainly guilty before the Lord". As soon as the sin was brought to their attention, they had to make a guilt offering, to be forgiven - Lev. 5:17-19
 - 2. God certainly made a distinction between one who sinned in ignorance, and another who sinned in defiance (Num. 15:27-31). But that distinction was not between innocence and guilt, but between different kinds of guilt.
 - 3. God's way of dealing with sins of ignorance was very simple and sensible. He caused the sin to be brought to the offender's attention, so that the guilt might be realized, and the path to forgiveness taken. Paul is an example of this. He regarded himself as "chief among sinners". Yet he claims that the terrible things he did were done "ignorantly in unbelief". God took this ignorance into account and showed mercy. By the love, the power, and the grace of Christ Jesus, Saul the ignorant sinner was enlightened, and became Paul the apostle - 1Tim. 1:13-15
 - 4. Ignorance is not a desirable state. Nor is it a state of being excused. God deals patiently and kindly with the ignorant, but he wants people to learn of their guilt and repent - Acts 3:17-19, 17:30-31; Matt. 7:21-23
 - 5. Likewise, evangelists and elders deal gently with the unlearned. But they do not leave them ignorant; they enlighten them - 2Tim. 2:24-26
- E. God looks on ignorance as blameworthy - Eph. 4:17-19; 1John 4:1
 - 1. While ignorance may not always be as bad as that, and in some cases it may appear to be not very far from innocence, we should never think of ignorance as good. Ignorance is the lack of knowledge. Wherever we find that want, we are responsible to enlighten or be enlightened by the Gospel - 2Cor. 4:1-6