

HIGH-HANDED SIN

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We find these words in Numbers 15:30-31: But the person who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the Lord, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him (NKJV). This passage is in a discussion of unintentional sin and presumptuous sin in the context of the Law of Moses. Among a number of fine thoughts expressed in the passage is the idea that greater knowledge engenders greater responsibility.

Both the King James and the New King James use the word “presumptuous” here. The American Standard Version of 1901 puts it this way: “But the soul that does aught with a high-hand....” The context leads me to conclude that presumptuous or high-handed sin is anything sinful done by someone who knows better. There is also the idea that such a sinner cares not at all what God has to say about the matter and intends to do just as he or she pleases. Sadly, this is descriptive of the contemporary attitude toward sin.

Indeed, high-handed sin is all the rage today. I heard a somewhat famous and fading actress on the radio last week preaching for abortion, anytime, anyplace, and under any circumstance. This is high-handed sin. People regularly take the Lord’s name in vain and dare anybody to rebuke their right to curse in the name of the Creator. This is high-handed sin. People preach and practice hatred of others. This is high-handed sin. Adultery is high-handed sin as are all forms of sexual immorality. We could go on and on....

Here is my point: God has made sure through the influence of natural law in general and the revealed Word of God, the Bible, in particular, that mankind can know precisely the difference between right and wrong. We do not live under the Law of Moses. God designed the new and permanent relationship between Himself and us in Christ to be a knowable one. In the New Covenant of Jesus Christ (see Jeremiah 31:31-33, Galatians 3-4, Colossians 3:1-17, etc.) we are able to know what is sinful and what is not sinful. We are responsible for that knowledge.

In this sense, most of the sins we commit in this time of grace and mercy is with a high-hand. We may pretend that we did not know any better, but is that really the case? I very well remember my little mother straightening me out with the expression: “You know better than this!” I might have pretended that I did not, but I did know better and she did, too.

Some may object that such a scheme is not fair. Fairness has little to do with it. This is the way things are; this is the spiritual reality in the age of Christ. We serve a righteous God. He will not hold us to anything that we should not be held to. His actions are the definition of rightness and correctness. It is not for us to quibble with Him. It is definitely not our part to complain to Him that we didn’t know any better. He made it so that we could know better. It is our fault if we chose ignorance given that the truth is manifestly available (see Romans 1:18-32). The very claim that God is not fair in holding man responsible is most presumptuously sinful.

Why is God this way? Why is high-handedness so bad? Two things: One, He wants us to face and admit our faults and sins to Him and ourselves, so He does not coddle. Two, He wants us to realize how desperately we need to rely on Him and obey His will (Ephesians 2 and Hebrews 5:8-9). Thus we are careful about high-handedness before the Lord.