

# **Do You Love Jesus or Your Sin?**

*A Foundational Question for Christian Living*

*By Steve Lehrer*

What should you say to your friend who says she is a believer but is unwilling to forgive? How do you care for the man in your small group who repeatedly says how sorry he is for his sin of looking at pornography, but week after week he continues to fall? How can you show biblical love to that person at church who shows up every Sunday, but seems to be consumed by making money and by the stuff of this world? Raising questions about someone's relationship with God is one of the most difficult things to do. It is particularly difficult to do when that person is in a difficult or painful situation because of his sin. In our present evangelical culture, using such a situation as an opportunity to question the genuineness of someone's profession of faith is thought of as misguided at best and unloving at worst. I love God and I love people. I desperately want to help people to grow in their knowledge and love for Jesus Christ. Over the years I have struggled with how to best care for people who seem to be bogged down in sin and yet profess to know God. I have read countless books on counseling and shepherding. I have talked to many people engaged in the same battle to care for people biblically. I have been in the thick of the battle giving counsel to those who are struggling with sin. In this process I have made many, many mistakes and one simple but important discovery. This discovery is clearly laid out in Scripture and so it is not a secret.

The discovery I made is so simple I feel a bit silly taking the time to write it down. Yet in my experience it is what is lacking in most Christian and biblical counseling and in the practice of most evangelical believers and churches. The discovery is simply that the most foundational and most important question we can ask and answer in this life is, "Who do you love?" In any life situation that you find yourself having to make a choice between sin and obedience to God, consciously ask yourself the question, "Who do I love?" Make it a clear, open, and honest matter in your own mind that when you sin you are choosing to love sin and hate God. It is a simple concept but the theology behind it is profound and crucial for everyone to understand. So, before I explain the question any further, let's turn our attention to the theology that supports it.

## **Is Jesus Expecting Too Much?**

I wish we regularly used different terms for someone who has experienced God's saving grace than "believer" and "Christian." These terms are too easily misunderstood today because they have become too common. It is a mistake to simply assume that people are Christians because they go to church regularly, don't commit any crimes or social disgraces in front of us, and they understand and say they believe the facts of the gospel. This is a far cry from the biblical definition of a Christian. The biblical picture of a believer in Christ is one who is so in love with His Lord that He is willing to do anything to obey Him and bring Him glory:

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will

lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? (Luke 9:23-25)

To take up our cross daily or to deny ourselves for Christ's sake is the very essence of what it is to be a believer. The word picture is of a daily execution of oneself in order to obey Jesus Christ. Anything short of this radical obedience, according to Jesus, is not authentic Christianity. Jesus has drawn a line in the sand for us. He has set the standard for what a Christian is. But how can you and I read this text to a frail and troubled person? How can we tell a person who is stuck in sin and who has made a mess of his life that if he is not willing to deny himself, even if that means death, then he is not worthy of Christ and may not be a Christian at all? Is Jesus expecting too much?

### **Salvation Is the Complete Package**

Although it seems like Jesus is expecting an unreasonable amount of loyalty from us when He tells us to deny ourselves and take up our cross or we are not worthy of Him, the fact is that Jesus doesn't expect anything from us that He doesn't provide. In Hebrews 10:11-14, the author of Hebrews (whoever he was) describes the saving work of Jesus Christ as the New Covenant. He begins by contrasting the ineffective work of the Levitical priests with the effective work of Christ:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool (Hebrews 10:11-13).

Christ's work actually accomplished something. His one sacrifice is all that is needed for those whom he represented on the cross. By His work on the cross, He did it all. But, what exactly is the "all" that he did? The answer is found in verse 14: "because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14). This verse gives a description of the *two things* that Christ purchased for all those whom He represented. First, he speaks of the forgiveness of sins that makes the believer "perfect" in God's sight. We call this justification. The believer is declared perfectly righteous, or sinless, because Christ paid the penalty for every sin that the believer has ever committed or ever will commit. Then the author refers to believers as "those who are being made holy." That is, Christ purchased a work of the Spirit of God in the life of every believer to progressively make him holy. We call this sanctification. The believer is motivated by God to put off sin and live for Christ. Another way to think about this is that Christ purchased a work of the Spirit to make the believer love Jesus Christ more than anything else in this world.

If God had simply provided forgiveness of sins without a work of the Spirit to make us holy, then Jesus would certainly have been expecting too much of us when He asks us to lay down our lives for Him. But the reality is that Jesus provides everything he asks us to give Him. Every believer gets the complete package of salvation, consisting of both justification and sanctification (or complete forgiveness of sins and an incurable love for God). If you claim to know Christ but you don't see this love for God that Jesus

purchased for all of His people that is greater than your love for sin, then you must question whether you actually know Him at all.

### **Spiritual Slavery**

When I was younger I thought I knew everything. My views on the world were passionate, strong, and black and white as only a young man who does not know much about the world or life can hold. But as I got older and had a chance to travel and go to college and graduate school, I realized the multi-faceted nature of many issues and just how vast my own ignorance was. I am now very careful to allow for shades of gray when I speak of politics, love, money and many other issues. But when speaking about true spirituality, true religion, my understanding of the issues has only become more black and white with each passing year. According to Scripture, the world is divided into two types of people, God-haters and God-lovers:

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend to the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely (James 4:4, 5)?

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (1 John 2:15-17).

Notice the clear contrast that these Scriptures bring out concerning believers and unbelievers. If you love the world, you must hate God. If your loyalty lies with the world you must be God's enemy. Jesus tells us this same truth in Matthew's Gospel in the terms of both a love/hate and a slave/master relationship:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (Matthew 6:19-24).

The point Jesus makes is that the one you serve is your master. But the world (that is the pursuit of self satisfaction and all that that entails) is opposed to God (who is pursuing His glory, honor, and power) and God is opposed to the world. We need to pick a master and we need to pick wisely because the masters are at war with one another. The danger is that we will be like the Jews of Jesus' time, not knowing that we are enslaved:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" (John 8:31-33).

Not only were the Jews rather oblivious to their political history and surroundings (having been constantly enslaved by various people politically and living under Roman

rule at the time), but also they did not understand that Jesus was speaking about their spiritual state. Jesus proceeds to have an extended dialogue with them on the topic:

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father." "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" (John 8:34-47).

Jesus is telling these Jews that they are unbelievers. They are slaves of sin and they are children of the devil. Regardless of their pedigree, Jesus knows whose children they are and what master they serve by their actions. They characteristically sin and therefore they emulate their father and master, the devil. This is exactly what is said by John to help us understand the difference between believers and unbelievers in his letter when he wrote:

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother (1 John 3:6-10).

An unbeliever is a slave to his sin. He will live a life characterized by self-centeredness and lack of concern for glorifying the true God of heaven and earth. He is helpless and dead in His sin without God through Christ setting him free from sin. In the same way, once he has been set free from sin, as John says, "he cannot go on sinning." That is, he

cannot go on living a life characterized by the quest for self-satisfaction. He cannot go on living a life that is disobedient to His new master. He is a slave of God now. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the church in Rome:

Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:15-18).

Paul makes it clear that Christians and non-Christians are in the same spiritual state. They are both slaves. They are slaves to different masters, but they are both equally enslaved. I think this is a hard concept for us to grasp because we typically think of slavery as a master forcing his slave to do labor against his will. But when we are talking about slavery in this context we are referring to a slave willingly serving his master, and at the same time unable to do otherwise. Some real life examples might help to clarify this slavery.

#### **A Look at Three Slaves**

He came in for counseling and he was dirty. His front teeth were missing from recent brawling. As he told his sad story he was scratching his skin raw and constantly moving his feet. He was a drug addict. His drug of choice was crystal met amphetamine. In the wake of his love for drugs was a shattered marriage, broken relationships with family, lost jobs, and financial ruin. As we talked about the gospel he said that he had heard it a thousand times. He said he was a broken man. He wept as we discussed his life. I recounted all of the pain and misery that drugs had brought into his life. He nodded in agreement that all I summarized was accurate. Then I told him that I could guarantee him a life of joy and substantial healing to the pain and brokenness that dogs him every moment. I guaranteed him complete forgiveness now and forever. "I promise you a change from this second on. But," I said to him, "You must choose between Jesus Christ and drugs as the one that you follow. You must turn your back on drugs forever and be willing to do anything it takes to follow Jesus as your new master." He hung his head and said, "As crazy as this sounds, I can't do that. I know drugs have caused me a lot of pain. But they are my life and I cannot give them up." He was amazingly honest. This man gives us insight into the heart of the "addict." There is no better term than "slave" to describe the relationship of the "addict" to his drug of choice. He was radical in his commitment to drugs. If he were as committed to a religion as he was to drugs, people would call him a fanatic.

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He was clean and well dressed. He was the picture of success. You would never have guessed that he had any troubles. But as he began to describe his life he quickly broke down into a quivering mess of emotions. He said it began as a boy when he got hold of some pornographic magazines. The small fire that was started in his youth was given

fuel by premarital sex and later by the Internet. He described the temptation to view pornography as being as great as any drug addict's desire for drugs. The crushing guilt and emptiness he felt was no contest for the burning desire to see more and feel more. Eventually his uncontrollable lust nearly ordered him to satisfy his desires at adult bookstores. The experience was powerful but the emptiness and guilt weighed him down once the immediate excitement faded. More sex was always needed. He emptied his bank account in order to satisfy his desires. The next stop was prostitution. He maxed out his credit cards. His marriage drowned in a pool of lies and deceit. Life was spiraling out of control and he saw everything he once cared about falling apart. But the only thing he could think about was the next sexual encounter. He knew it was wrong. He wept when he got the slightest glimpse of what he had become and what he had lost. I shared the gospel with him and he too had heard it before many, many times. I told him that he could be freed from this slavery to his desires and he could build a new life in Christ. "But in order to have Christ, you must not only see all of your sexual exploits as sinful and condemnable, but you must be willing to do whatever it takes to not go back to it." He claimed he was willing, but when it came to changing his life to honor God...like giving up the Internet for Christ, going the longer route to work to avoid temptation for Christ, and being accountable to others for his time so that he would not dishonor God, he was unwilling. He continued to serve sex regardless of the consequences because he said he was powerless to do anything else. Sex was his master.

The sex addict is no different than the drug addict. They both are utterly committed to their god. They are willing to die to continue to experience sex or drugs. They worship their respective masters.

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He looked desperate and unhappy. His story was not uncommon. He was a married man and he had had an affair with a woman at work. Early on in his Christian walk he had struggled with the temptation to look at pornography on the Internet, but he moved his computer out into the family room (even though it was more difficult for him to work there). He also told some fellow believers about the issue and they regularly prayed with him, encouraged him, and asked him the hard questions. He quickly got to the point where the temptation to look was no longer in his life with any strength. But he had fallen deeply into sin this time. He told his wife that the women at work were a temptation. They had prayed together but there was little more that they could think to do. He said that the women at work dressed provocatively and often flirted with him. The very nature of his job made it necessary to work long hours with some of these women and to often grab lunch or dinner with them as well. One thing led to another and he found himself in bed with one of these women. In tears he admitted his guilt. He sought his wife's forgiveness as well as the young lady he had sinned against. He and his wife were in the process of reconciling, but he was still in the same tempting situation at work. After exploring all of the options with him it became clear that his particular weakness in dealing with sexual temptation made it impossible to keep the job he had and not put himself in constant jeopardy of sinning against his wife and against God. Once this was clear to both of us, I said to him, "If keeping the job makes it very difficult if not impossible to remain faithful to Christ, you are left with a choice between having Christ

and having this particular job. It would seem that you must choose which you want more.” He handed in his resignation the next day. He had to get a job that paid only half as much and the work was much less interesting. He had to sell his home and move into an apartment. Even then money was very tight. But it was no contest for him. Once he understood the situation clearly he knew that he wanted to, that he *had* to, serve his master. Jesus Christ was his master as surely as drugs and sex were the respective masters of the other two men.

### **Whose Slave are You?**

Socrates once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Christians should hear Socrates’ words loud and clear. The unexamined life will become a sinful life. Our job as believers is to examine every situation in our lives and consider how we can love and serve Christ. When you are confronted with a situation in which you have the opportunity and the temptation to sin, you must ask the question “Do I love this sin, or do I love Jesus?” It is that simple. You have to make a choice who you desire to follow; who you desire to worship. This choice will let you know whose slave you really are.

Years ago I met a man from Africa. I sat in a room amongst many of his countrymen and we got acquainted. His life had been painful. Much of his family and many of his closest friends had been butchered at the hands of Muslims in that country. His friends all had similar stories of horror and sadness. He said that they were all Christians and that they believed the Bible. We talked about the gospel and they all agreed that they believed that they were sinners and that Jesus had died for their sins. “I must ask you something important,” I said. “It is about those men that were so cruel to you. Those men that killed those you loved, tortured your friends, and drove you from your home. Are you willing to pray for them? Are you willing, given the opportunity, to show them kindness and love? Are you willing to lay down your life for these men?”

He looked at me for a moment, clearly trying to control his emotions, and he said, “This is a hard thing you are asking. These men did terrible things. I am willing to do many things for God, but this thing is too much. Perhaps it is impossible.”

He was right. What I was asking of him was impossible without a supernatural work of God in his life freeing him from slavery to hatred against those who had sinned against him. I wanted to weep for this man and all that had happened to him. The men who did this to him did not deserve his love. It was tragic. But what was even more tragic was that he was deceived about his spiritual state. He thought he was a child of God and yet he had lived for many years with an intense hatred in his heart that he was unwilling to repent of.

As you ask the question “who do I love?” and answer it in various life situations you will begin to see clearly where your heart truly is. You will find out without any doubt whose slave you really are. The question helps you to put your situation and your heart under the microscope. It will expose you for being either a God-lover or a God-hater.

### **The Way Sin Works**

“I don’t know what happened. I was doing fine. I was reading my Bible and going to church and then I was back to my old ways.” I have heard this said so many times, but it is wrong. It is not really the way sin works. It may have seemed to you like you were doing fine and then “Wham!” you went whole hog back to your sin, but in reality sin

begins with small steps and starts in the mind. James describes the process this way: “but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:14-15). Consider the man whose sin began when he was in the supermarket checkout line and he innocently glanced at the magazine rack as he was waiting to check out. There he saw a picture of a woman dressed provocatively and that got his mind started. He could have stopped it there, but he was enjoying the fantasy. Then on his drive to work he saw a young woman jogging and went back to the fantasy again. This time he lingered longer and imagined more explicit things. He knew it was wrong but he blocked out the voice of conscience. Then, being the self-disciplined person that he is, he purposely arrived 20 minutes early to work to read Scripture. He opened his Bible and began to read, but his mind was racing with lustful fantasy. He closed his Bible and thought, “what’s the point?” The rest of the day he felt “pressure” to follow his lusts. After work he pulled into the adult bookstore because he felt compelled. The next day he came to his senses and as he thought back over his sin, he said: “I don’t know what happened. I was doing fine. I was reading my Bible and going to church and then ‘all of a sudden’ I was back to my old ways.”

### **Killing Sin Quickly By Asking the Question**

Since we know that sin begins in the mind and it starts small, we need to kill it quickly before it grows and kills us. In the illustration above this man could have repented the moment he saw the magazine and began to lust. He could have asked God’s forgiveness and could have begun putting on thoughts that honor God. And since the magazine rack is always in the same place in the supermarket and the covers always have women dressed provocatively, perhaps he could have briefly prayed for strength and wisdom about where to put his eyes so that he might honor God and not sin. Thinking ahead and having a strategy to live for the glory of God is a good thing that not only helps us to kill sin early, but to avoid it altogether. But once you have made that first misstep, that first sinful decision, it becomes more difficult. Sin is pleasurable. If it weren’t pleasurable, it wouldn’t be tempting. But since it is, I naturally want to continue sinning. What can I do to get out of this kind of a mess? Considering the fact that a believer has a supernatural work going on inside him making Him love God more than sin, then I must see my choice to sin for what it is: choosing to sin is choosing to love sin more than God. This will be intolerable to any real believer. So, in the midst of my sin I must learn to ask the question: Who do I love?

It is such a simple concept and yet it is the hardest work you will ever do. You have to train yourself to ask the question. When you find yourself angry with your spouse and you are ready to zing her with a nasty comment you need to train yourself to have this automatic inner dialogue begin: “When I sin I am showing that I love sin and hate God. Who do I really love? Do I love Jesus who has showed me so much mercy in spite of my terrible sin, or do I love myself and this sin I am about to commit?” When no one is watching you and you have the temptation to look at pornography or something provocative, you must discipline yourself to ask the question: “Am I willing to forsake Christ to indulge in this sin? To sin like this shows my contempt for the Lord. Is that truly where my heart is?” This should cause you to begin to reflect on the cross and the terrible cost of your sin. This should then lead you to see that your sin is a personal

offense to the God you love and that you want to deny yourself sinful pleasure to follow the God you love instead.

### **When the Answer is “I Love Sin, Not Christ”**

As you train yourself to ask the question “Who do I love?” there will be times when your answer will be “I love sin, not Christ.” This should frighten you. It should literally put the fear of God in you and cause you to think of Scriptures like Hebrews 10:26-31:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

When your life-style is marked by decisions to follow your sinful desires rather than Jesus Christ you should have no assurance of your salvation but only fear of God. The reason you should have fear is because when you choose to sin over following Christ you choose to take up arms against the God of Heaven and earth. If God is your enemy, you truly have something to fear. This warning should cause you to repent and humbly submit to Christ, thanking Him for His mercy. But if it doesn't cause this reaction and you continue to sin, at least you know where you stand with God. You are exposed as an unbeliever. You can at least live in that little bit of truth rather than in a state of self-deception.

### **Obedience: There is No Substitute**

He wept bitterly over his sin, confessed it publicly, and raised his hands to Jesus in emotion-filled worship. I asked him if he loved Jesus and he told me in a shower of flowery phrases how much Jesus means to Him. When speaking of his sin he would shake his fist and talk about how evil it is and how much he hates sin and Satan. Tears welled-up as he spoke of the pain he has caused others by his sin. Despite all of this, he was a God-hater. His life was characterized by sin. He was a slave. His sorrow over his sin never led to significant change. He is the person John is speaking about when he writes: “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4).

If you are willing to take a close look at your own life or the life of someone else, it's simple to determine whether you or he is lying. It is difficult on our emotions, but the facts are not that hard to discern. The key is to make sure that you never allow yourself to think that there is any substitute for obedience to Jesus Christ. Jesus makes it clear what love for Him looks like and does not look like: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me” (John 14:23-24). There are no excuses

for continuing in your sin. If you continue in your sin, you don't love God and you are not a believer- no matter what you say or do. Paul tells us that there are no special circumstances that make disobedience to God tolerable: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). You can cry your eyes out, you can sing worship songs all night long, you can embarrass yourself publicly on a weekly basis by confessing your sin to a group of people, but without the actions of denying sin and obeying Jesus Christ these and other emotional outbursts are meaningless.

### **Conclusion**

God is all-powerful and he gives us a salvation that is an example of that power. He not only forgives our sins but he changes each of His children into an incurable God-lover. But even incurable God-lovers get stuck in sin. The question "Who do you love?" will wake up the Christian who has fallen asleep at the wheel. It will allow him to quickly reassess his life and his true priorities. We need this not only as a wake-up call, but also as a way of helping those who are self-deceived about their spiritual state to learn the truth about themselves before it is too late. The true answer to the question "Who do you love?" will not be finally decided by words or emotional displays, but in our willingness to deny ourselves by turning from our sin and following Christ no matter what the cost might be.