

Chapter 1

WHAT EXACTLY ARE SUBTLE SINS?

Ah, the joys of summer! Warm temperatures, bright sunshine, the smell of mown grass, the beauty of flower gardens, fresh fruits and vegetables, ice cream socials, picnics in the park, ball games, and restful days at the beach. What could be more perfect? How about warm temperatures without humidity, bright sunshine without sunburn, the smell of mown grass without allergies, the beauty of flower gardens without the threat of weeds, fresh fruits and vegetables without chemical sprays, ice cream socials without calories, picnics in the park without bees and ants, ball games without rain delays, and restful days at the beach without sand between your toes? But that is just wishful thinking. Nothing on earth is perfect—not even summer.

Not even human beings created in God's image!

According to the Bible, everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23). Fortunately, in spite of our sin God loves us and has provided forgiveness through His Son. Believers are forgiven but not perfect. This doesn't mean we have a *carte blanche* to sin; it means we have an obligation to avoid sin and to live in a way that honors God. As the apostle Paul indicated in Romans 6:2, “. . . we died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”

Of course, most followers of Jesus lead a moral life. Our names stay off crime blotters, and our photos stay off post-office walls. We don't hold up fast-food restaurants or convenience stores. We don't deal drugs, snatch purses, or forge checks. All in all, we are law-abiding citizens, good neighbors, and churchgoers. But do we commit subtle sins—sins that aren't clearly visible as blatant sins are? Subtle sins operate insidiously. They may smolder in our hearts before they erupt in our actions. They may appear small, but they cause big damage to us and to others. Left unattended and unconfessed, they will smother our love for God, sap our spiritual vitality, and mock our claim that we are Jesus' followers.

Are we guilty of subtle sins? The response to this question depends upon how we answer the following questions. Do we tell

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a *lie* occasionally? Do we *gossip*? Are we *resentful* or *bitter*? *proud* or *impatient*? *rude* or *haughty*? *irritable* or *closed-minded*? *envious* or *jealous*? *prayerless* or *apathetic*? Do we *take God's goodness for granted*? *Can we identify someone we just can't stand*? Do we entertain *immoral fantasies*? Do we dismiss such traits as harmless or inevitable or just a part of human nature? If we answered yes to any or all of these questions, we are guilty of subtle sins, and we need to revisit Jesus' teachings.

Jesus taught that evil originates in the heart. It is not the product of a bad environment or a dysfunctional family or a below-poverty rating or the construction of one's genes or an inferior education. Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:19). His words affirm what the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed to the nation Judah about 600 years earlier: "The heart is deceitful above all things . . ." (Jeremiah 17:9). His teaching also recalls the Lord's indictment of the human race in the time of Noah: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). Clearly, God knows our thoughts and emotions, and if they offend Him, we need to regard them as serious sins. They may be subtle, but they are as odious to God as murder and adultery.

Here's how Jesus characterized *some subtle sins*:

- He placed *spiteful anger* in the same category as murder. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment . . ." (Matthew 5:21, 22).
- He charged that *sexual lust* is a form of adultery. "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery,' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27, 28).
- He condemned a *vengeful attitude* (Matthew 5:38); *self-righteousness and hypocrisy* (6:1-5); *unforgiveness* (v. 15); *materialism* (vv. 19-24); *worry* (vv. 25-34); *judgmentalism* (7:1-5); *doubt*,

skepticism, and unbelief (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:25; John 20:24-29); *selfish ambition* (Mark 10:35-45); *indifference* (Matthew 13:15; Luke 7:31-35); *lack of affection and ungratefulness* (Luke 7:40-47); *immoral fantasies and slander* (Matthew 15:19); *deception* (Mark 13:5); *fear* (John 14:27); *egoism and haughtiness* (Luke 14:7-11; 18:14b; 20:45); *discord and dissension* (John 6:43); and *prayerlessness* (Luke 22:45, 46).

Jesus' teachings about subtle sins underscore several truths. First, sin is sin whether it is covert or overt, visible to many or visible only to God. Second, we cannot legitimately excuse our subtle sins. The Lord does not accept such lame defenses as, "I am only human" or "Everybody has a bad day now and then" or "I can't help it; I was born that way" or "Sure, I have a hot temper; after all, I *am* a redhead." He holds us accountable for our unconfessed subtle sins as well as our blatant sins. Jesus warned: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known" (Luke 12:2). In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul reiterated Jesus' pronouncement. He wrote concerning future judgment: "This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares" (2:16).

A person may feel that smoldering resentment or bottled-up anger or egoism or immoral fantasies or covetousness or idolatry are locked deep inside. He assumes they are his secret cache of wrongs and has no intention of confessing and forsaking them. But just as every web site visited on a computer can be tracked on a hard drive, so every unconfessed subtle sin leaves its mark on the soul. Someday God will retrieve it and judge it!

Comparing ourselves with those whose sins seem larger than life may convince us that we live on higher moral ground and our subtle sins are nothing to be concerned about. Criminals and nasty neighbors deserve condemnation. On the other hand, we deserve commendation. Criminals and nasty neighbors are the bad guys. They wear black hats. We're the good guys. We wear white hats. We reason that we have favored-class status with God.

A proud father and mother attending Parents Day at a military academy watched the cadets parade past them and hundreds of other parents. Catching sight of her son, the mother pulled on her

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husband's shirt sleeve. "Look, Dear," she blurted, "everyone's out of step but our son Jimmy."

Are we like Jimmy's parents? Even when the Bible parades our subtle sins past us, do we fail to see that we are woefully out of step with God's will? Others may see our egoism or irritability or anxiety or judgmentalism or skepticism, but we may not see it because we choose not to. Sadly, we will never experience the blessings and joy God wants to give us until we see our subtle sins as God and others see them and repent.

Robert Burns, the revered 18th-century Scottish poet, must have understood the significance of viewing ourselves from a more reliable perspective than our own. He wrote:

*Oh would some power the giftie gie us
To see ourselves as others see us.*

The King James Version uses the words "sincere" and "without offence" in Philippians 1:10 to describe what kind of people believers ought to be. *The New International Version* uses the words "pure" and "blameless." Both translations are based on the Greek word *eilikrineis* derived from the words for "sun" and "to judge." Therefore, it indicates the purity of a substance or object that is tested by sunlight. Clearly, *eilikrineis* provides clear notification that our character, as well as our conduct, must bear God's presence and activity. We are, after all, His workmanship (Ephesians 2:10).

Have you known anyone who purchased a "previously owned" car, only to learn later that its outward shine betrayed a faulty engine or transmission? More than a few first-century consumers experienced a similar fate at the hands of crafty, unscrupulous, merchants who hid the cracks in their pottery by filling them with wax and coloring over the defective areas. After purchasing a doctored piece of pottery and setting it outdoors, a buyer soon discovered he or she had been deceived. Strong sunlight would melt the wax and reveal the vessel's cracks.

Fortunately, honest craftsmen could be found in the first century, just as honest car salesmen can be found today. Many honest first-century pottery vendors placed signs at their marketplace stalls, advertising in Latin: *sine cera*, "without wax." Our English word

“sincere” comes from *sine cera*. If we are sincere, as Philippians 1:10 instructs, God’s workmanship will be clear to all. There will be no bad surprises!

Philippians 1:10 also summons us to be “without offence” (KJV) or “blameless” (NIV). The Greek word is *aproskopoi*, meaning *not causing anyone to stumble*. The same word appears in 1 Corinthians 10:32, where we read, “Do not cause anyone to stumble.”

Can a subtle sin like discord cause anyone to stumble? In answer to this question think of the damage discord has inflicted on more than a few professing believers. Some refuse to get involved at church because of the “politics” there. Others have stopped attending church altogether, because they grew tired of seeing Henry snub Bill because Bill’s choice of a color scheme for the church offices clashed with his; or they became exasperated because church members bickered over items in the church budget or over worship styles.

No, it doesn’t take an act of adultery on the part of a church leader to cause someone to stumble. Nor does it take an act of embezzlement on the part of the church treasurer to weaken the faith of the faithful. Any number of subtle sins can trip and injure those who are trying to walk along the straight and narrow road.

After hearing glowing reports of the Welsh Revival, an American believer traveled to Wales to investigate the phenomenon. He approached a police constable in the first city he visited and asked, “Officer, can you tell me where the revival is?”

The constable put a finger on one of the shiny buttons on his uniform jacket and replied, “Under these buttons, sir.”

Revival is always an individual matter. When it reaches the heart, subtle sins flee; then blessings and joy move in and overflow to family, congregation, and community.

For Personal Reflection and/or Group Discussion

1. Why do you agree or disagree that subtle sins are just little, unimportant sins?
2. If God convicted someone of subtle sins, how should that person respond? If He convicted your congregation of subtle sins, how do you think your congregation would respond? Why?

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3. If you were to compare the spiritual condition of the human heart to a color, what color would you choose? Why?
4. How can a believer help another believer cope with subtle sins?
5. How do subtle sins manifest themselves in family living? How can families learn obedience to Jesus' teachings?
6. What link, if any, do you see between discipling oneself and discipling our nation?
7. What do you believe are the three most frequently committed subtle sins?
8. How can obeying Jesus' teachings help His followers overcome anger, hatred, prejudice, and resentment?
9. What might a place of employment be like if the employer were an obedient follower of Jesus? If the employees were obedient followers of Jesus?
10. How might a righteous life persuade others to be obedient followers of Jesus?