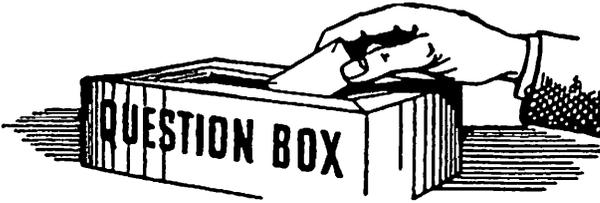


THE SCRIPTURE STANDARD



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"Are there 'big sins' and 'little sins'? The N.T. seems to indicate that some sins are worse than others. Jesus said, "*It shall be more tolerable*" for some than others on Judgement Day. Would you comment, please?"

Anything which is 'tolerable' means that it has to be, or can be, endured. The mother may say to the child, "I'm not going to tolerate this sort of behaviour any longer", meaning, of course, that she isn't going to **endure** behaviour which she finds to be unsatisfactory. The machine engineer, when producing components on his lathe, has to work to certain 'tolerances'. This means that the piece of apparatus into which the component will eventually be fitted, will 'endure' a greater or lesser degree of accuracy; the drawing from which the machinist works will determine what accuracy is necessary. Therefore, I believe we can say that if something is tolerable, then we mean that it may be difficult or painful, but it can be endured. If, on the other hand, something is 'more tolerable' than something else, then in the second instance the thing to be endured is more difficult and more painful than in the first instance. I think we may be able to proceed from this point.

ASSOCIATED WORDS

The Greek word for 'tolerable' is *ANEKTOS*, and this is akin to *ANECHÔ* which means 'to endure'. The use of this word in the N.T. is quite specific. Paul says to the Thessalonian Christians, "**We ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure**". 2 Thess. 1:4. In 2 Tim. 4:3. Paul speaks of the intolerance of those who will not heed the teaching, "**For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine**".

Another associated word is the word 'bear', signifying to support or endure as a burden. In Matt. 20 we have the account of the householder who hired labour for work in his vineyard. When the time came for the payment of wages there was grumbling from those who had worked all day because other late arrivals had been paid the same amount. In v12 it is said, "**These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne (endured) the burden and heat of the day**". Now that we have looked at some of the scriptural implications, we can perhaps press on.

THE CITIES OF THE PLAIN

The scriptures referred to in this question are to be found in Matt. 10:15; 11:20-24. Also Luke 10:12,14.

We should not compare our cities with the cities of the days of Lot. In the Hebrew usage any collection of permanent human habitations, whether few or many, comprised a 'city'. Such cities were usually walled, and sometimes had a king. There were evidently five cities on the Plain of Jordan, of which Sodom and Gomorrah were two. When Lot separated from Abraham, he chose Sodom for his residence, and even at that time there was much wickedness in the city. Both of these cities had kings, and were probably walled with a gate. Gen. 19 says that when the two angels came at eventide, Lot was sat in the gate of Sodom. At the gates of cities, business was usually transacted.

The record states that the wickedness of Sodom must have been extreme. Lot pleaded with God to spare the city, and God said that if but five righteous people could be found then

He would spare the city; but evidently not even five righteous people could be found. The account in Gen. 19 states that when the two angels went in to lodge with Lot, the men of the city gathered outside Lot's house and demanded that the two men be sent out to them. Lot even offered his two daughters to them but that wasn't satisfactory. Consequently, the two angels told Lot to gather his family and possessions and to flee the city. As they fled, Lot begged that they would be allowed to go to another city on the Plain called Zoar; this was a small city (Zoar means 'littleness'). His request was granted. When they arrived at Zoar, God rained fire from Heaven and consumed the other cities of the Plain and the people who dwelt therein. Such was the judgement of God against their wickedness. Could there be anything greater than that punishment to endure in the days when Jesus taught?

WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?

Readers must keep the scriptures in Matt. 10 and Luke 10 before them as they study the answer I shall give.

Matthew's account speaks about the Twelve being sent out. Luke, on the other hand, speaks about the Twelve being sent out (ch.9), and the seventy-two being sent out (ch.10). In Mark 6:7-12 we have a significant difference in the account. Jesus sends out the Twelve, and the scripture says that He **"commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only"**. He then tells them, "But be shod with sandals" vv 8,9. Matthew and Luke records that Jesus said, "No staff, no shoes". I once heard someone say that the staff and the shoes would be symbolic in reminding the Jews of the Passover. We read in Ex. 12:11, **"thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand: and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the Lord's Passover"**. Would it be wrong to suggest that Jesus saw His whole mission as a pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem for Passover? Be that as it may, it is true that Jesus, in His denunciation of the people of His day, is saying something fundamental. So why did Jesus speak as he did?

Let's pause for a moment and consider the advantages these people had to whom Jesus was speaking. Down the ages the prophets had told about the coming Messiah; they had even indicated that He would not be a warrior king. Then in due time the Messiah had come among them, and even though He told them who He was, they didn't recognise Him; even after the crucifixion and the resurrection some of His closest followers still doubted. Now He was giving them, we might say, a final chance by sending the Twelve among them with the Message: and Jesus doesn't mince His words here, **"He that heareth you heareth me, and he that despiseth you despiseth me, and he that despiseth me, despiseth him that sent me"** Luke 10:16. To reject the Message was to despise the Heavenly Father.

The contrast that Jesus makes now seems to make some sense. On Sodom, and on Tyre and Sidon (by-words for wickedness also), God has passed a summary judgment to death without, so it seems, the people having **any opportunity to repent**. But the people to whom Jesus was speaking were given every opportunity to repent, therefore, their culpability was **greater** than those under the Old Covenant. The people had also seen the miracles which had been done among them, and it seems quite clear that Jesus looked upon the miracles not as a means of astonishing people, but He linked them firmly with repentance. **"If the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes"** Luke 10:13. The summary judgment passed on Sodom was seen by Jesus to be more bearable than the judgment which was to come; **"Fear not them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"**. Matt. 10:28.

A FINAL THOUGHT

I don't know what God had in mind for the souls of those summarily dealt with by him under the Old Covenant; I may speculate, but I don't know what His ultimate plans are for

such souls. There is one thing which is very clear; it must be far easier to die and enter some sort of oblivion, than it is to die and enter eternal punishment; perhaps the words of the Saviour indicate something like this. However, one thing is abundantly clear: people who are unrepentant and consequently unsaved **do know** what will happen to **their** souls. This is why the acceptance of the Gospel is so important, and the preaching of it, from our point of view, so urgent. I believe that when God dealt with people as He did under the Old Covenant His intention was to wipe wickedness off the face of the earth, and in this way to demonstrate His utter abhorrence of wickedness and rebellion against His will.

As regards 'big sins' and 'little sins' I have never quite understood the distinction. If I contravene God's law then I am guilty of sin. We Christians also ought to understand the teaching of the Bible, "**To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin**". Personally, I know nothing of big sins or little sins; everything which goes against God's revealed word is SIN, SIN, SIN.

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