
Missing the Mark

One of the most common words of the Hebrew Old Testament translated to the English word for “sin” is related to missing the target. In Judges 10:16, we read of soldiers who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. The same word is used of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who are accused of grievous sins (Genesis 18:20). Translators rightly have chosen the correct English words (miss and sin) so that we understand what was written. To the Hebrew ear, however, doing something wrong and missing the target had the same sound. Thus, when the people of Sodom refused to provide hospitality to Lot’s visitors and instead abuse them, they were “missing the target.” And when a soldier cannot hit what he is aiming at, he is “sinning.” We know the difference as did the Hebrews, but it is helpful to know that to the Hebrew ear, the words were the same.

There are a number of reasons that someone might miss a target, but there are two that are quite obvious. The first is inability. If you give me a sling such as the one the soldiers in the book of Judges used and asked me to hit a hair with a stone three times in a row, I can guarantee you that I won’t hit that hair even once. Even with good instruction and hours of practice, most of us would prove ourselves incapable of hitting the target perfectly every time.

When we think of sin, in Reformed circles, we are quick to talk about total depravity which leads us to understand why we are incapable of not sinning. We have sinful natures which cause every single thing we do to be tainted, at least a little bit, by sin. Total depravity keeps us from being capable, and even with good instruction and much practice, we still fail to hit the target perfectly even once let alone again and again.

The world would tell us that though we might not hit the bullseye, as long as we get close, that is good enough. It’s nice to think that, and maybe that is good enough for our friends and family, but it is not good enough for God. God has different standards than we do, standards that demand that we hit the target every time all the time. According to God’s standards, missing the target even once is enough to fail us, and when we fail, we are no longer qualified for eternal life with him. Thankfully, however, God does also correct things, and Jesus, who hit the target every time, sent from God the Father, gives us his results while he takes on ours. He gives us his perfection, and he suffers the consequences for our imperfections, and for that we must be thankful. This is the essence of the gospel, of course: we become righteous because we receive our righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.

The second reason someone might miss the target is because they don’t know what the target is. What am I aiming at? When I was a kid, a friend had a fairly good slingshot, and we used it to shoot small stones. At first, we chose our targets, but since we could never hit them, we decided to just shoot at random. It was a lot more satisfying to be able to exclaim, “Did you see me hit that branch and break it off?” I wasn’t aiming at the branch, but there was a certain level of satisfaction in seeing the impact of what I was doing. Of course, because I wasn’t aiming, I could not really say that I had hit the target. If we don’t have a

defined target, we might hit anything, and although what we do may appear impressive, we really haven't accomplished anything concrete. To hit the target, we have to identify the target first.

So, when it comes to our behaviour, what is the target? Who gets to identify the target? There are two options: either we identify the target ourselves, or someone identifies it for us. In Canada the various laws help define the target. Our laws, for the main part, are based on precedent: how did previous judges rule when they encountered a similar situation? The question is this: how did previous judges decide how they would rule if they did not have precedent? It is not difficult to determine that many of the laws in Canada can be traced by to standards set out in the Bible. In countries which have an Islamic history, laws can be traced back to the Qur'an, a book Muslims believe was written by their greatest prophet who received what he wrote from Allah, the god of Islam. The target, in both cases, was defined someone outside of this world, by God himself. At one time, we would see that many sins found in the Bible were also considered crimes within Canada. (Proponents of Sharia law of Islam propose that breaking Islamic religious laws should be considered criminal violations and punished as such.) Over time things in Canada have changed. As Canada loses its Christian roots, more and more kinds of behaviour that were at one time considered both sinful and criminal have ceased to be criminal. Thus, it is now possible to use drugs or have sex outside of marriage and not be accused of a crime.

This has become quite confusing for many, for the target seems to have changed. Those who are not Christians are quite happy to redefine the target according to their whims, and biblically prohibited behaviour now becomes acceptable and even desirable while it seems that some biblically sanctioned behaviour becomes criminal. (Speaking out against some kinds of sinful behaviour is deemed discriminatory and could be punished in the courts.) It is quite easy for a Christian, who is not aware of this change to come to believe that because a particular sin is no longer a crime, it is permissible. Thus, there is a new target to aim at, and when someone hits that target, they believe they have accomplished what they intended to do. In other words, while they hit a target (one set by us), they did not hit the target (one set by God). This new target in Canada is defined by us, not by someone else, in particular, God.

Earlier I mentioned that the standard many hold today is that we come close enough, and that is a problem, for being close enough it not good enough, at least not by God's standards. In that scenario, we have to convince people that God has higher standards than we do, something that is relatively easy to do. It is not hard to convince someone of their failure and guilt if they know and accept the standard given to us by God. Today, however, the real problem is that many people do not take into account that they have moved the target and they are aiming at the wrong thing and seem to be hitting it quite successfully. Many people think they are quite successful because they are hitting something. They are a little like I was when I hit the branch and claimed success because it broke, even though it was not identified as a target. So, before we convince someone that God's standards are higher than ours, we first have to convince them that God's standards are the target we should be aiming at. In other words, we must first convince people that it is not only the crimes that commit that God counts against us but the sins as well.

When we miss the mark because we are tainted by sin, we chalk it up to inability, and we put our trust in Jesus Christ to do what we cannot do. When we miss the mark because we have changed the target, that is called ignorance. To overcome ignorance, we first need to help people know, and what people need to know more than anything else today is that there is a God who created us and who loves us so much that he guides us in how we should live. When (since), we fail, we can also let people know that this same Creator God also cares enough about us that he will deal with our sin through Jesus Christ. People need

to know, for if they don't know, they will never know that the target they are hitting is not anywhere close to where they are aiming. Ignorance is never an excuse for breaking the law, so even those who have chosen to move the target are still guilty of sin. That too, thankfully, can be forgiven, but we must ask God for that forgiveness which is offered us in Jesus Christ.

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