

A Sin And A Mistake: Do You Know The Difference?

Introduction. In recent years, I have noticed an increasing tendency for people to admit mistakes rather than sins. It happens at every level, whether someone is caught cheating on their spouse, filing false insurance claims, or shoplifting from a clothing store.

After the National Enquirer broke the news about Senator John Edwards' affair in 2008, he said, "Two years ago I made a very serious mistake, a mistake that I am responsible for and no one else. In 2006, I told Elizabeth about the mistake, asked her for her forgiveness, asked God for his forgiveness. And we have kept this within our family since that time."

On the surface, this admission seems humble and contrite. What more could you want? But when people refer to this kind of behavior as a mistake rather than a sin, they are either consciously or unconsciously evading responsibility. Why? Because of the fundamental difference between the two. Many people assume they are synonymous. They are not.

The term "mistake" implies an error in judgment — something done unintentionally. For example, a legitimate mistake might be turning the wrong way onto a one-way street or pouring salt instead of sugar into your coffee. These happen because we get distracted or are careless.

But a sin is more than a mistake. It is a deliberate choice to do something you know is wrong. It is a transgression of God's will (1 John 3:4). The word "transgression" implies deliberately stepping over a boundary. The word "trespass" is similar. It implies entering onto another person's property without permission.

Unlike a mistake, we choose to sin. Therefore, we must accept responsibility for it — and the consequences that follow. This is the measure of maturity and marks the transition from adolescence into adulthood. It is the foundation of a civilized society. So what can we do to make sure we preserve this distinction between sins and mistakes?

I. Choose Your Words Carefully

- A. Never minimize your sin by calling it a mistake. The meaning of the Greek word *homologeō* — translated confession in 1 John 1:9 — is "to say the same thing as another, i.e. to agree with, assent" (cp. John 9:22; 12:42).
- B. In other words, agree with God. Say about your sin what He says about it. One vivid word the Bible uses to describe sin is the English word "abomination," which occurs 76 times in the Bible and means something that stinks or is detestable to God (Leviticus 11:10-13; Deuteronomy 27:15; Luke 16:15; Revelation 21:27). You cannot be cured of the disease if you continue to ignore it (Jeremiah 30:12), or consider it a part of our genetic or cultural makeup (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

II. Take Responsibility For Your Behavior

- A. If you have sinned, own it. In fact, if you have made a mistake, you need to admit that too. Take the hit. Even if someone provoked you, admit your response. If they were 90% responsible, accept 100% responsibility for your part.

- B. When it comes to sin, there is never a legitimate excuse (John 15:22; Romans 1:20), although people try to excuse themselves (Exodus 32:21-24; 1 Samuel 13:11-12). The Bible thankfully has several instances of people admitting their sin (Joshua 7:20; 1 Samuel 15:24; 2 Samuel 12:13; Luke 15:21). You should take responsibility for yours!

III. Acknowledge Your Guilt

- A. It is normal to feel guilty when you sin. Guilt comes from our conscience (John 8:9; Romans 2:15; 9:1), and it is God's gift, designed to motivate you to initiate reconciliation. The sooner you acknowledge your responsibility, the sooner you can resolve the problem. And never follow your confession with the word "but," and never preface your confession with "if". It negates everything you say.
- B. Everyone commits sins for which he is guilty (1 Kings 8:46; Psalm 51:5; 58:3; 143:2; Romans 3:9-23; 1 John 1:8), and the Bible gives several examples of the emotional anguish caused by sin (Psalm 32:1-5; Matthew 27:3-5; Luke 22:62). Even one violation of God's law brings condemnation (Galatians 3:10; James 2:10-11), and the Bible teaches that no sin goes unnoticed or unrecorded by God (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Matthew 12:36; Luke 12:2-3; Romans 2:16).

IV. Change Your Behavior

- A. Words are cheap. Some people are very adept at saying they are sorry — but then nothing changes. Repentance is not only a change of mind; it is a change of direction (Luke 3:8-14; Acts 26:19-20).
 1. Repentance is a prominent theme in Hosea (Hosea 6:1; 14:1-2) and the result of Jonah's preaching to Nineveh (Jonah 3:8-10).
 2. Unless you change your behavior, you have not really repented, no matter how many tears you may have shed (2 Corinthians 7:5-12).
- B. The message of repentance was at the heart of Christ's preaching (Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32; 15:7; 24:47). Jesus warned of serious consequences for those where His preaching of repentance had been rejected (Matthew 11:20-24).

V. Ask For Forgiveness

- A. You cannot demand it. You are not entitled to it. A Christian who sins is commanded to pray to God, confess faults to one another, and pray for one another to receive forgiveness (Acts 8:22; James 5:16). God will faithfully forgive us of our sins (1 John 1:9).
- B. Jesus places enormous emphasis on human-to-human forgiveness. Matthew 18:21-35 details the parable of the unforgiving servant, enclosed by the divine demand to forgive. You can only ask and hope that the person you have sinned against will extend grace. In Jesus' model prayer, the forgiveness the individual receives is dependent on the forgiveness the individual gives to those who sin against him (Matthew 6:14-15).

Conclusion. Yes, we all make mistakes. But more importantly, we all sin. We need to understand the difference between the two and be willing to call it what it is. Until we do, we cannot repair what has been broken.