

The Contention: Literal or Figurative?

I suppose you could say this whole issue is an academic argument and not worth dealing with, particularly in any in-depth manner, simply because if you sin, you sin – that is, if you ‘miss the mark,’ you have missed the mark, and in a certain sense it really doesn’t matter with whom you missed the mark. However, this issue does become crucial when we arrive at the point of needing forgiveness. If we seek forgiveness from the wrong source, or believe that someone can forgive us when they have no real power to absolve us of the responsibility for the transgression, then we have a real problem. That real problem centers around the fact that, if man has no power to forgive (which is to actually absolve of wrongdoing ((Sadly, there are those who argue this point as well, even though the parable is clear in its meaning in Matthew 18:23-35. To forgive is to release from or absolve of, all responsibility and culpability.))), and we seek forgiveness from man and not the LORD God, we will have missed the mark entirely, and will still be held liable by the LORD God. When we observe the problem in this light, it becomes an issue of importance to everyone, regardless of what any particular individual’s beliefs are.

With that understanding, the passage that raises the issue states clearly:

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done *this* evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, *and* be clear ((The word “clear” as it is used here, means to be “cleared” or “overcome” the judgment.)) when thou judgest. (*Psalms 51:4*)

That we should sin against our fellow man, and simultaneously sin against the LORD is a view that is held by many. Hence, I

should note that the majority of opinion is that this passage is to be taken figuratively simply because it states "Against thee, thee only" in relation to sin. As a factual matter, this is the predominate view of the above verse in Christianity, as the following two excerpts from different commentaries illustrate clearly. The first is Wesley's and the second is by Mark A. Copeland. ((It really would not matter much who I picked as all have some variation of the same theme. The point here is to show the general line of thinking about the concept of who we actually sin against.))

Verse 4

[4] Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Thee only – Which is not to be, understood absolutely, because he had sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, and many others; but comparatively. So the sense is, though I have sinned against my own conscience, and against others; yet nothing is more grievous to me, than that I have sinned against thee.

Thy sight – With gross contempt of thee, whom I knew to be a spectator of my most secret actions.

Justified – This will be the fruit of my sin, that whatsoever severities thou shalt use towards me, it will be no blemish to thy righteousness, but thy justice will be glorified by all men.

Speakest – Heb. in thy words, in all thy threatenings denounced against me.

Judgest – When thou dost execute thy sentence upon me. ((John Wesley's Explanatory Notes, <http://www.christnotes.org/commentary.php?b=19&c=51&com=wes>))

And from Mark Copeland:

3) The Use Of Figurative Expression

The Psalms are filled with figurative expressions, and as such it is important to keep certain principles of interpretation in mind...

a) The figure must be accepted and dealt with as a figure of speech, not as a literal statement

For example, in Ps 18:31, the Lord is called "a rock." He is like a rock, but not one literally. In Ps 51:4, David says "Against You, You only, have I sinned." Yet he is confessing his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, in which he sinned not only against the Lord, but against his wife, against Uriah, and many others. David was speaking figuratively for the sake of expressing his deep grief in sinning against God, and we must allow for figurative expressions including hyperbole in poetic writings. One needs to be careful and not develop doctrinal beliefs upon what may be figurative expressions not intended to be taken literally. ((*"THE BOOK OF PSALMS" Introduction to the Psalms* http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/psa/psa_00.htm))

However, it is evident from Scripture that such interpretation lacks understanding of several principles and commandments. We do know, despite what some argue, that the verse is a valid verse, as the second half is quoted in Romans.

God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. ((Though it seems to say something different in the last phrase from what is stated in Psalm 51:5, it is simply the other side of the same coin, as it were. Both Satan and man have attempted to judge the LORD God and His ways, and they will fail, even as the LORD will be successful and overcome when He judges both Satan and man.)) (*Romans 3:4*)

What remains to be seen is why all transgressions and sins are against the LORD God and Him only, and not against our fellow

man. To arrive at that understanding, it is imperative that we comprehend several principles that bear directly on the issue at hand. Moreover, we must do this prior to addressing the issue itself. Failure to accomplish this will lead to a misunderstanding of how the LORD God sees the issue as compared to our limited perspective of this same subject. Thus, we begin with the principles:

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