

COVERING SINS

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Readings:

Proverbs 10:11-12

“The mouth of the righteous is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked. Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins.”

Luke 17: 1-4

“And He said to the disciples, it is impossible that no offences should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It will be better for him for a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day he returns to you, saying, ‘I repent’, you shall forgive him.”

James 5:19 & 20

“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (‘Cover a multitude of sins’ is taken from Proverbs)

1 Peter 4:8

“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins.”

Covering Sins

Love will cover a multitude of sins. I’m sure we all have our own ideas about what that means, particularly when you read that phrase from the first letter of Peter, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” The person who designed this program picture, obviously had her own idea of what this text means. It seems to be that she is thinking of sins as that evil water that creeps into the boat and we have to cover these sins by putting a patch on the boat so that the water doesn’t get in. Well, I want to take the opportunity this morning to do something in church which is very rare and in any other context be considered to be quite liberal. What I’d like to do is engage us in some women voting.

Here is someone else’s idea of what covering sins means. The caption under the cartoon says, ‘it was a mistake, it’s not like the whole world has to know.’

What I wanted to do is to consider then, what we might think the meaning of that text in 1 Peter is: “Love will cover a multitude of sins.” I’m going to give you three options, and you are not allowed to sit on the fence, you have to choose one of the options and then we are going to vote with a show of hands to see which interpretation of this text is most popular among the women of the churches of Western Australia. I’m not sure if there is actually anybody from Tasmania here; indeed if you are, raise your hand please. No, we truly are Western Australian churches.



Right well, here are the three practical applications according to your interpretation of “Love covers a multitude of sins.

- a. Your next-door neighbour, a sister in the church and a prickly person, skips afternoon church as she leaves early on holidays. You want to keep good relations with her and generally she is a good Christian, you decide love covers a multitude of sins; in other words, you do nothing and say

¹ This is the text of a speech delivered to Women’s League Day 2015.

nothing.

- b. You have had a serious tiff with your husband earlier that day, frustrations were running high, he walks into the bedroom and you romantically wrap your arms around him and embrace him in a loving kiss. You decide love covers a multitude of sins.
- c. You catch little Johnny seriously beating up his younger brother, you give him a decent spanking and send him to his room. After 5 or 10 minutes you talk it over with him, he repents and asks for forgiveness from his brother. As mum you forgive him too. You decide love covers a multitude of sins.

Each of these scenarios involve a different interpretation of the text, so I want you to think about that and I want you to decide which one you think is most appropriate to what Peter is trying to say, "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins."

Let's see a show of hands for 'a'What? Nobody? There is no sitting on the fence this morning and I promise not to tell your elders.

Ok, 'b'. Who thinks 'b'?OK, we have a good show of a number of hands.

And who thinks 'c'?..... Oh wow, that is obviously a majority view. 'C' has it. Well that's really interesting. I will tell you why. When I was at youth club sometime last century and even growing up after that, I would have gone for interpretation 'a'. Love covers a multitude of sins, in the sense that there are some situations and certain times when it can be appropriate just to overlook a sin; when there are more important things at stake. That would have been my interpretation at the time. And that was what I was trying to get with 'a'. It's interesting and I would have thought a lot of people would have had that idea. Maybe I wrote that a little bit the wrong way; in any case it is interesting that it is not represented here this morning. The scenario I definitely wouldn't have made as a youth would have been 'b'. Sorry girls who put your hands up. I would also never have gone for 'c'. Love covers a multitude of sins in the sense that you actively seek that the other person repents of their sin. Then you are enabled to forgive them of that sin.

However, that is certainly what I'm going to argue for this morning. When we look at a metaphor like *covering*, in "*covering sins*" we need to be able to take a step back from our own experience and immerse ourselves in the context and situation of scripture. In many cases metaphors used in scripture (and *covering* is obviously a metaphor), are used in particular ways that related to society's manner of speaking in those times. In fact at the moment I'm working at writing a chapter for a book to be published in Canada on Paul's use of language. Because he often used the Greek language in a very Hebrew way, I think it may even have been difficult for a Greek to adequately understand what Paul was trying to say. In fact here's an example of *covering sin*. Paul uses the word *cover* in the sense to *cover sin* once and it's in Romans chapter 4 where he is quoting Psalm 32. We sang that this morning... "Blessed is the person whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." In the context of course you can get the meaning from the previous phrase "transgression is forgiven". Therefore covering sins must surely have something to do with that.

However what if you used that metaphor without any other explanation next to it? What would covering sin really amount to? To cover something of course is to put a lid on it. But you can think of that in various different ways, putting a lid on sin might just be shutting your eyes to it; explanation 'a'. When you put a lid on it you are pretending it is not there, you are covering it over, you are pretending it doesn't exist as far as you're concerned and that is surely one reasonable way of looking at that metaphor. Cover it up, pretend it doesn't happen. Well indeed that is one of the possibilities, theoretically, we could have for covering sin; putting a lid on it. You know in Dutch we might say 'zand erover', that is an expression that, when I was a pastor in the Netherlands, was used time and time again. Especially if as elders and a consistory you're wrestling with a particular problem and there is a brother who may have done something, either long ago or more recently, and people are just saying 'well we have got more important things to deal with; zand erover.' In other words: 'cover it with sand'. That's what the expression means. Literally *cover* it, pretend it is just not there. Yes, there are more important things to deal with. This is a common way of thinking, perhaps not so much here, given that we had no show of hands for that interpretation (a).

There is another possibility. If you “put a lid on it”; you can also make it “unseen”. For a Hebrew, and that is my point this morning, *covering sins* means dealing with it so that it never again has to surface. That is what is in the Old Testament, where this image comes from, and what is meant when we talk about covering sins. A Greek, just as much as an English speaking person or Dutch for that matter, would not necessarily have come to that understanding, with respect to that metaphor. But in Hebrew, that is certainly what we are talking about. Deal with it, so that it never again has to surface.

So what we want to do this morning first of all is to have a look at some of the other Hebrew images for forgiveness, because when we are covering sin, essentially we are dealing with sin so that it never again has to surface and we are ensuring that that sin has been dealt with; it has been repented of and it is forgiven. What kind of other images do we have in the Old Testament for forgiveness?

Let’s look first of all at some texts; Psalm 65:3. (I’m using the New King James here as I think that is the bible that most of you have, but occasionally I’m going to correct it.) “Iniquities prevail against me, as for our transgressions you will provide atonement for them.” That is what our translation says; literally the Hebrew says “you will cover our transgressions”. And the translation has correctly seen that that metaphor *cover* has to mean ‘provide atonement’ in the context here. Deal with them so that they never again surface. In this case the translator may have thought, “If we leave *cover* there, people reading the translation may not adequately understand what’s intended”. Therefore they’ve changed the metaphor and made it specific by saying “you will provide atonement for them.”

In Psalm 32 they have not done that, possibly because of the parallelism. “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” This is parallel to forgiven. It doesn’t have to mean that *covered* has to be exactly the same thing as forgiven, but it is in the same line. Sin is dealt with so that it never again surfaces and in this sense, repented of and forgiven.

In Nehemiah 4:5 he is praying to God, “do not cover their iniquity and do not let their sin be blotted out (literally “wiped clean from before You”).” So Nehemiah is asking in this prayer that the Lord does not deal with their iniquity in such a way that it doesn’t again surface. In other words, have them repent and that iniquity forgiven. Don’t let their sin be blotted out.

Here on the board is a list of the most popular images of forgiveness in Hebrew (the Hebrew words on the board are for me, so that I know what I’m talking about). We have the word ‘*to forgive*’. That is not a metaphor, that is just straight out telling you what it is about; forgiving. But in the Hebrew Bible we often have other metaphors for the same thing, *to lift up or carry away*. To lift up or carry away one’s sins is to forgive them in Hebrew. So you have this idea of picking up someone’s sins and taking them away. We also have the image ‘*to wipe clean*’. We just saw in one of the previous texts that to wipe them clean or to wipe them out, is a way of talking about the forgiveness of sins. And then the metaphor we are talking about this morning ‘*to cover*’; in other words to deal with them such that they never again surface. Another image is ‘*to cause or allow to pass by*’ and also ‘*to pass by*’. This means that you are really dealing with sins in such a way that you don’t have to walk into them; you don’t have to be confronted with them again. Or, related to that, to cause a sin ‘*to be far away*’, and of course, ‘*to not remember*.’ Those are the most popular ways of talking about forgiveness in Hebrew.

Well, how about other texts where perhaps the metaphor of covering might look like it could mean something else.

Proverbs 28:13, “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.”

What is meant here? Covering your own sins means that you forgive your own sins. And, here in the context, without really dealing with them. You think you have dealt with them yourself, without dealing with them with respect to either God or the people around you that you might have sinned against. “He who covers” deals with their own sins only within themselves and will not prosper. The opposite of that is of course confessing, forsaking them and that person will find mercy.

Proverbs 10:18, “Whoever hides hatred has lying lips, whoever spreads slander is a fool.”

Here again our translation (the NKJV) takes away literally what is said: “whoever *covers* hatred has lying lips.” What is meant by covering hatred? If you attempt to put your hatred away (or try to hide it), it is less about dealing with it that it no longer comes up and more about dealing with it in respect of yourself. It is still there lurking underneath somewhere because you’ve got lying lips. In other words you are saying ‘I’ve got no hatred’, but you have covered it up; it is still there. The opposite parallel to that is, whoever spreads slander is a fool.

Proverbs 11:13, “Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.”

Or a better translation, ‘he who is trustworthy in spirit is one who covers a matter.’ Here again *cover* is in a positive sense of dealing with issues, so that they do not surface. Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; something surfaces. He who is trustworthy in spirit is one who covers a matter; deals with it.

Proverbs 17:9, “He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends.”

Here you see dealing with a transgression. It is repented of, it is forgiven. This is the opposite of repeating something but not actually dealing with it. Obviously what we would call gossip.

Luke 17, “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”

Now the metaphor of *covering* is not used here, so why am I quoting this text? Because here you clearly see what it is to deal with a sin. To *deal* with a sin is more than just *covering* it in the sense of ‘well I forgive you’; whether or not you admit that you have sinned. Forgiveness is in Scripture directly coupled with repentance. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. There is no sense here of ‘forgive him’ if he does not repent. The whole purpose of a rebuke is to get the person to see their sin, so that they come to repentance. That is when forgiveness comes into play. Obviously, right at the very start, if you are to rebuke somebody in love, there must be a willingness to forgive. If you don’t have a willingness to forgive, there is obviously no point in reprimanding or rebuking somebody, because the whole point of the rebuke is to get them to repent so that you can forgive.

Some people have struggled with this; whether repentance truly is connected with forgiveness. But I think you really only have to think of the way the Lord our God deals with sin. You have to ask yourself the question; does God forgive my sin if I don’t repent? The answer to that is of course, no. God asks us to repent and if we genuinely repent He promises to forgive us through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. He expects us to follow Him, and you see that also here in the words of the Lord Jesus.

Proverbs 10:11-12, “The mouth of the righteous is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked. Hatred stirs up strife but love covers all sins.”

This is the origin of the statement in both Peter and James. Violence covers the mouth of the wicked, hatred stirs up strife, love covers all sins. I said that this text is quoted both by Peter in his first letter and James in his letter, but there is a difference in the way they apply it. And that is interesting to look at. Have a look at these two quotations. Peter, “above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins,” and James, “Brethren if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” What’s the difference? Just ponder that for a moment.

Peter is the person who uses the quotation in line with what is intended in Proverbs. “Have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sin.” He is looking at interpersonal relationships. Have love for the other person. Have love for the other person to the extent that you are prepared in that love, if necessary, to admonish them; to get them to repent of sin, so that you can forgive them. So that relationship that you have with them can be restored and continued. Peter is thinking about this interpersonal relationship. If love is covering a multitude of sins, it’s my love for that person and in loving this person, I’m trying to get

the relationship to such a place where I'm able to forgive the person of their sins, where they have repented, they've recognised their sin, and that relationship is restored. I'm the one doing the forgiving here, because I'm loving the other person. That is what Peter is talking about.

In Peter the presupposition is that the other person has sinned against you and that's why you need to forgive them. James is talking about something quite different; he's talking about turning back somebody who is wandering from the truth. They have not necessarily personally sinned against you. Instead they are sinning as they are wandering from the truth; not personally against you. You don't have anything to forgive them for. And yet he is saying, let that person know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way, will save a soul from death and 'cover a multitude of sins.' Who is doing the forgiving here? It's not you. The presupposition is that God will be forgiving the sinner of his sins, if he turns from his way. And you are the catalyst to work the situation such that the sinner recognises his sin and so repents of his sin and turns from his sin. Therefore God ends up forgiving them. You have been the catalyst, the agent as it were, used by God to bring about the fact that a multitude of sins are forgiven by God for that person.

So there's two different situations. The first one: someone sins against you personally and it's about you forgiving them to restore that relationship. The second one: somebody is sinning against God and you know about it, therefore you are asked to be the agent whereby forgiveness by God is brought about by that person repenting.

I hope at this point we have a fairly good idea of what's meant when scripture talks about *covering sin*. What we're talking about is dealing with the sin; bringing a person to recognise his or her sin and bringing them to repent. There is no such thing in all of scripture, as far as I can see, that would justify interpretation 'a' with which we began; namely the idea that you can hide sin, cover it with sand as it were and pretend it doesn't exist. Often that does happen in this life, particularly when sins have engendered all manner of frustration that have sometimes seemed too worrisome and too frustrating, too big to deal with and as time passes you just think, 'Oh let's just forget it!'

The last thing you want to be doing is justifying that attitude by twisting this metaphor of scripture. "Love covers a multitude of sins", is talking about real love and real love works at relationships. Real love dares to confront our relationship with the other person in connection with our mutual relationship to God.

That is also what the Lord Jesus is talking about in Matthew chapter 18; that mutual relationship we have with each other before God. Jesus introduces to His disciples this way of dealing with that sin. If someone sins against you then go and speak to him in private and if that doesn't work then you take a brother or two with you and if that doesn't work, 'tell it to the church.' But He prefaces that by talking about he who causes one of His little children to sin, and also after that by talking about daring to go out and look for the lost sheep. That is what a true shepherd does, says Jesus. He leaves the 99 who are already safe and in the pasture and goes out looking for that lost sheep. Who is that lost sheep?

All too often we divorce that parable from what follows. We think of the lost sheep as perhaps a brother or sister that has strayed from the church; perhaps has been excommunicated or withdrawn themselves. In fact Jesus is talking about a brother or a sister within the circle of the disciples who is in sin, living in sin; in other words not dealing with it. That's the lost sheep here.

And what Jesus means by the shepherd going out and looking for that lost sheep is what he explains in verses 15 and following, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." Literally under four eyes. "If he hears you, you have gained your brother." You've got that lost sheep back. Jesus's point is this: A person living in sin, who is still within the circle of the church and is not dealing with the sin in his life, is lost. That sheep isn't really together with the flock.

It is important to realise something of the context here too. All too often we act as if Jesus is telling us in Matthew 18 exactly what we should be doing here in the church. We forget that the church of Jesus Christ didn't exactly exist at that time, did it? When Jesus said, tell it to the church, he didn't mean write a little note and put it in all the pigeon holes. There wasn't even a church back then. Pentecost hadn't happened yet. Jesus had not even been crucified yet. Where was the church in those days? Well, every Sabbath day you went to your local synagogue that was your church; that was where you worshipped God, that's where Jesus

went, where the disciples went. They had elders too; elders that were responsible for dealing with sin. Then you have got to remember too, that Jesus is telling this to His disciples at a particular moment in His ministry. He didn't say this before; this is the first time He has said something like this and it is because he is already more than halfway through the second year of His ministry. And there has come about during this second year an enormous opposition to Him, from the scribes, from the Pharisees and from the churches (the Synagogues). The Pharisees, for example, that came up from Jerusalem to challenge Him, dared to accuse Him of working miracles by the power of the devil himself. And that was the breaking point for Jesus' preaching, because from that moment on He decided it was too dangerous to preach publicly anymore. And He couched his preaching in parables, not to make it easier to understand as we sometimes think. He deliberately couched His preaching in parables, as the gospels tell us, in order to veil the message, so that you could no longer catch Him at this message. His public preaching up until then had been sufficient. And the parables are only explained to the circle of disciples, that's more than the twelve; those people that genuinely wanted to follow him, in the evenings away from the public crowds.

John also tells us at this time the synagogues had decided that if somebody openly confessed Jesus as the Christ, they should be excommunicated. And you all remember, the blind fellow who was excommunicated for acknowledging Jesus as the Christ. What Jesus is doing in Matthew 18 is actually bringing about a form of secession. He is in fact telling His disciples: 'you ought no longer to bring sins within the community of my disciples to the elders at the synagogue. It's no longer to be the case, it's no longer warranted because they are opposed to me and they have abused discipline.' And He is saying: 'from now on discipline is to be dealt within the circle of the disciples, yet it still needs to be dealt with.' It's this circle of disciples, the people that are following Jesus day by day through His ministry (despite the opposition of the scribes and the Pharisees) that form as it were the assembly around Jesus. The word church literally just means *assembly*. Jesus says: 'this is the procedure that I want you to adopt: You see someone living in sin among the circle of disciples, you go to that person alone, under four eyes.' The presupposition is of course that the sin is not generally known to everybody.

It is of paramount importance that if you are to deal with this sin, or using the metaphor, if you are going to *cover* it, it does not become known to more people than is necessary. If you can get that person to repent, to acknowledge his or her sin, then it does not have to be known to other people around you. Therefore you make that effort and the verb that Jesus uses, implies that they have to make it time and time again if necessary. In other words, you need to let wisdom be the judge of whether someone is listening to you and needs more time and discussion, or whether after two times you already know that you in and of yourself are not going to be able reach them. 'Well if that's the case', says Jesus, 'you take two or three witnesses.' In other words, don't yet let that sin be known to more people than is necessary. You as an individual have not been successful, therefore take a couple of witnesses along, but no more than that. Deal with it in that context and **only** if that's not successful, tell it to the group, to the whole circle of disciples. And when you have told it to the whole circle of disciples and they have an opportunity to remonstrate with this person and that doesn't work, then that person is to be put out; in our modern terminology, to be excommunicated.

Of course, there were no elders in the circle of disciples at that point in time. Jesus only has elders appointed in His Churches after Pentecost, when He gets His apostles to go out into the world and to establish groups of believers, to institute them as churches by appointing elders over them. At a later date when Jesus insists that His churches have elders. We use the principles of Matthew 18 and also take into account what Jesus has instituted after that date; after Pentecost. Established churches with under-shepherds; elders who are to rule those churches in Jesus's name.

Nevertheless, *covering* sins -*dealing* with sins, discipline still begins at heart with the individual church member that sees somebody else and not with the elders. It's up to us in love, to cover sins. To have them dealt with in love, to admonish a person, to get someone to recognise it, to repent before God and have that wonderful experience of reconnecting with somebody. Or as James insists, even when that sin is not personally directed against us, that we endeavour to turn that person back from the error of their way. That is real love, as hard as it sometimes can be. For then you are really dealing with that sin.

You know years ago, in Holland when I was in Valkenburg and I was pastor there; I got a telephone call one day. Somebody called me up (who should have known better as he used to be an elder), he said, "Dominee, I need to talk to you about something. I happen to know that my brother (who was also a member of the

church) every Friday evening goes to that and that place where he gambles away his wages.” He was referring to a cafe with a One armed bandit: “Please, I need you to talk to him.” Well, of course, I had to refuse. I’m not supposed to know about that sin. It’s not my responsibility to deal with it. But if *you’ve* seen it, as I explained to this person, it is *your* responsibility to talk to him. And OK, as your pastor I’m willing to give you some advice, some wise way of tackling him, of getting him to talk, but it is not my responsibility to deal with it, it is yours. And if it doesn’t work between you and him, you take one or two others with you. You don’t tell your elder, you don’t tell your minister, unless you’ve tried that path that Jesus has set before us. That is so important. Of course, if you think about it and you look at 1 Peter, you will also realise something else that’s incredibly important to the success of covering sins.

Above all, writes Peter, “Love each other deeply.” Well, that’s more than just going and admonishing somebody. And think about it. If you have a good loving and caring relationship with somebody else in the church and they’ve been in need at some point and you’ve been there for them, or they’ve experienced great joy and you’ve been there to share it too – it’s the same with sadness. If you’ve got that kind of a loving relationship, that you love somebody fervently, or deeply, and you need to in love admonish the person, because you happen to realise that they are living in sin; whether it’s against you (Peter), or against God or somebody else (James). Humanly speaking, and this is God’s wisdom, you are going to have a much better chance of communicating or connecting with someone, when you have that loving caring relationship. They will see you as a person that is caring and that is concerned for them, rather than if you have never had anything to do with them in the past at all and all of a sudden you rock up at their door saying: “listen I saw you missing church the other day or I saw you doing this or that, that was quite wrong.” Then their immediate reaction surely will be, “who are you, an interfering busybody?”

Now I’m not saying of course that you’re never going to be in that situation. Sometimes you will be and you will feel that you do need to speak to someone about living in sin, but it happens to be someone you have never really had any relationship with before in the past and I would suggest in that case, probably the first thing you need to do, is apologise. If you are a sister to that person but haven’t really been a sister (in other words you haven’t connected before), we need to demonstrate to that person, even if it is just by words at the occasion, that we do have a love for them, and that maybe perhaps in the past we haven’t always expressed it as we ought to have.

Because if you don’t connect like that; if you don’t connect on the level of love, you’re wasting your breath. Really, well and truly. It’s hard enough to be told that you need to change your ways and that you have sinned. It’s hard enough to be told that and to recognise it, than to be told that by somebody whom you hardly know and has never done anything for you. If you think about it – particularly those with a little bit of life experience – you realise when somebody who has in the past bent over backwards for you, asks you to do something (whether it is a favour or whether it is, for example, getting you to repent or acknowledge your particular sin), if that kind of a person asks you to do something, you are more than willing to do something back for them, because you recognise their concern; you almost feel a kind of a debt to them. It makes it much easier when there has been a true love relationship, to really connect and heed somebody else.

Well, it’s that aspect of covering sin that I wanted to bring to your attention this morning. I have formulated a number of questions for group discussion, which I hope will provoke some thought and you might have some questions of your own. Feel free to also develop those in the discussion.