

# ***EXPLAINING THE GOSPEL TO KIDS***

Lenaz Lecture

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**Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:16-17 NIV)**

Jesus made it clear that the gospel of the kingdom is intended for children as well as adults. Modern-day Christians often assume that children must become adults in order to be saved. However, in Matthew 18:5-6 Jesus taught that adults must become like children in order to receive the free gift of salvation and specifically referred to "little ones who believe in me."

Jesus explicitly forbade anyone to hinder a child from coming to him for blessing and rebuked his disciples for failing to appreciate the importance of children to the Savior (Luke 18:16-17). Obviously, no one should dare to brush aside a child's spiritual interests. If Jesus desired to bless children and if we recognize salvation as the greatest of all blessings, we must never stand in the way of a child's spiritual commitment. However, hindrance of a child's spiritual commitment is not merely a matter of refusing to give him permission to make a public decision. We hinder the salvation of children anytime we (1) overlook their spiritual needs, (2) parrot religious phrases that a child cannot understand, or (3) neglect the essentials of the Gospel in our efforts to simplify it and communicate on a child's level.

First, we hinder the salvation of children by overlooking children's spiritual needs. The Bible assures us that God will show mercy to children who die before they are mentally capable of genuine Christian commitment. Numbers 14:29-31 suggests that God did not view children and teens under the age of twenty as culpable for the rebellion at Kadesh. 1 Samuel 12:23 suggests that David's seven-day-old child that died would spend eternity together with David in the "house of the Lord" (Psalm 23:6). Based on texts like these which demonstrate God's mercy to the immature, some Christians have concluded that there is a specific "age of accountability"--generally assumed to be 12 or 13, at which time a child becomes lost and accountable to God for his sins. Actually, there is no fixed age of accountability. A child becomes accountable to God for their sins whenever they reach a state of moral awareness, that is, whenever they begin to willfully, intentionally, and independently disobey God's commands despite knowledge of those commands. Moral awareness is awakened in the hearts of some only in later childhood. In others the sense of responsibility toward God may dawn upon their conscience even in the preschool years.

Second, we hinder a child's salvation by parroting religious phrases that a child cannot understand. Occasionally, adults attempt to explain the gospel to children using big words like sacrifice, atonement, justification, propitiation, etc. We turn the gospel presentation into a vocabulary test. We obscure the simple gospel through terminology that many adults do not understand. Sometimes we obscure the Gospel by mystifying it. Parents often tell their children that before they "walk down the aisle," they need to make sure that God is calling them. Even a simple word like "call" can be confusing. We should not be surprised when children expect God to speak to them in an audible voice and sit by the telephone waiting for it to ring with a person-to-person call from heaven. In the concrete thinking of a child this is often the only kind of call that is understandable.

Third, we can hinder a child's salvation by oversimplifying the Gospel and neglecting the essentials of New Testament faith. Children are often told that in order to be saved they need only to pray and "ask Jesus into their heart." This obscure little phrase is now very well-worn. However, several problems exist with this common evangelistic approach. First, the explanation is not scriptural. No lost person in any biblical text was ever instructed to "ask Jesus into your heart" in order to be saved. Second, the cliché is confusing. Most who use this invitation can not even express

exactly what the phrase means. I suppose that "Jesus in your heart" speaks of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. However, this aspect of salvation is inextricably linked to repentance and faith. Third, the invitation to merely ask Jesus into your heart neglects the irreducible essentials of saving faith. The Bible makes it very clear that if a person is to become a Christian, they must trust Jesus as God, Savior, and King. Any Gospel explanation which neglects these basic truths is insufficient.

The following Gospel presentation for children attempts to take the irreducible essentials of the Gospel and express them in terms which a child can understand. Sometimes salvation counseling for children becomes a test of how much a child already knows about salvation in order to see if they are "ready to be saved." The implication of this approach is that the child must either have some intuitive sense of gospel truth or that he is on his own to pick up gospel truth and assimilate it into a coherent system. That approach is unnecessary. In fact, it is wrong. If a child is showing an interest in spiritual matters, Christian adults have a obligation to help him better understand the Gospel.

The following gospel presentation uses three approaches to facilitate a child's comprehension of gospel truth: (1) illustration, (2) repetition, and (3) interaction. First, since younger children are only beginning to learn to think abstractly, important concepts of the gospel are related through pictures, stories, and concrete examples with which they can identify. Second, the basic concepts are repeated throughout the presentation and at the conclusion the child is asked to repeat them himself. Third, the presentation avoids asking mere yes-or-no questions. Instead, the evangelist is urged to ask open-ended questions which probe the understanding of the child and keep them involved in the discussion.

Based upon the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Readability statistics, the presentation is on the reading level of a fourth grader. However, since verbal apprehension far exceeds reading comprehension in younger children, the presentation should be understandable to most children who have reached a state of moral awareness.

## PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

- Remember to explain the gospel to one child at a time. Avoid having other children in the room. They may disrupt the conversation or distract attention away from the important topic. Christian children may even prompt a premature commitment out of other children in their desire for their friend's salvation.
- Remember to explain the gospel to the child when he or she is well-rested and in a positive frame of mind. Just like adults, children find it difficult to focus mentally when they need rest. Just as school teachers generally find the earlier hours of the day to be the most productive time for teaching and learning, spiritual teachers will discover that children best assimilate spiritual truth when they can approach it with a positive attitude and a clear mind.
- Remember that the child may know far more than he demonstrates. Any parent who has asked a bright child to sing a song or recite the ABCs only to be embarrassed at the child's refusal or intentional silliness knows that a child's capabilities are not always indicated by her performance before others.
- Remember to make the atmosphere as relaxed and comfortable for the child as possible. If the child is sitting on the floor, sit beside him. Do not rush into the gospel presentation. Take a few minutes for casual conversation which focuses upon the child and expresses your genuine love for them. Call the child's name frequently throughout the presentation.
- Remember that parental involvement and support is important. If possible, have one or both parents present when the gospel is explained to the child. Even better, train parents to explain the gospel to their own children. Parents are legitimately concerned to know what is being taught to their child and how it is being communicated. However, if you present the gospel to a child in the presence of the parents, you may have to politely ask a parent not to prompt their child's answers to the questions. This is especially true an untrained parent has made an effort to communicate the gospel to the child himself. At the conclusion of the presentation, ask the parent if they are satisfied with the child's understanding of the Gospel before you proceed with the invitation. If they are not satisfied, determine where their concern lies and review that portion of the gospel with the child. If their concern remains, offer this manual to the parent and encourage them to help clarify this portion of the Gospel with their child at home. Respect the parent's authority. Most parents know their own children far better than anyone else possibly can.

## INTRODUCTION

### **FOR FOLLOW-UP COUNSELING FOR CHILDREN WHO MADE PROFESSIONS OF FAITH DURING A WORSHIP SERVICE** (Vacation Bible School, Children's church, etc.)

What decision did you make during the worship service?

Why do you want to become a Christian?

Why does a person need to become a Christian?

These questions help the counselor discern the child's motives for making his decision. Did the child show an interest in becoming a Christian because someone else did? Do they only seem concerned with being baptized? Whatever the response to these questions, the child should not be turned away. Possibly, the Holy Spirit is convicting them and this conviction is such a new experience they do not know how to express what they are feeling. Our obligation and privilege to explain the gospel carefully still remains.

### **FOR OTHER CHILDREN**

Have you ever thought about becoming a Christian?

Would you like to know how you can become a Christian and know for certain that you will go to heaven when you die?

## SIN

The Bible says that we need to become Christians because of a serious problem that all people share. That problem is sin. The Bible says, "All have sinned" (Romans 3:23). Can you tell me in your own words what sin is?

This gospel presentation begins with a clear discussion of human sinfulness. This is crucial. Children can only make a legitimate commitment to Christ for salvation after they have come to an understanding of their personal sinfulness and accountability to God for their actions.

Repentance by its very definition demands this.

However, it is important that we make sure our Gospel presentation tests a child's moral awareness rather than his vocabulary. Simply because a child cannot define the word "sin" does not mean that he does not understand the sin concept. Do not be disturbed if the definition of sin supplied by the child needs elaboration or correction. Most lost adults do not have a clear understanding of sin either. Most children will offer examples of sin rather than a definition, but this is sufficient.

Sin is anything that displeases God. Sin is doing, saying, or thinking things that the Bible says are wrong. Can you think of some bad things that we do that displease God? Have you ever done any of these things? *Use a blank white sheet of paper to record the sins of the child as they name them. Write lightly and in pencil. Later these sins will be erased.*

Do you ever disobey your parents? Have you ever done something your parents told you not to do? This is sin because the Bible says, "Children obey your parents for this is right." (Ephesians 6:1) Have you ever told a lie? This is a sin. The Bible says in Exodus 20:16, "Do not lie." *After listing the child's sins on the sheet of paper, explain that God has a book in heaven where he keeps a list of every person's sin. Explain that God's list is probably much longer. He sees everything that we do--even the bad things done secretly. No sin we commit escapes his notice. Ask the child, "How do you feel about the bad things you have done?"*

This presentation asks "how do you feel" questions as well as questions which test the child's knowledge of biblical facts. These emotional gauges probe beyond the knowledge of the child to weigh their genuine understanding of the concepts. This prevents the presentation from becoming a quiz of the child's mental ability to memorize data and allows the witness to discern more accurately the child's spiritual state. Children who express a sense of sadness, shame, guilt, or remorse in response to this question have probably arrived at the state of moral awareness.

## PUNISHMENT

What do you think we deserve from God for doing bad things?

Most children will respond correctly, "punishment."

The Bible says that we deserve God's punishment. Just as our parents must punish us when we disobey them, God must punish us when we disobey him.

How do parents punish children for the wrong things that they do?

The two most common answers to this question by far are (1) grounding or "time out" and (2) spanking. This presentation will use punishment by grounding to explain the sinner's alienation from God. If, and only if, the child has questions about hell, spanking may serve as an illustration of active divine punishment. Sometimes the children are hesitant to admit that they are spanked, since they associate punishment by grounding with being "grown-up." You may have to pull this second response from them. These two responses will become our illustrations for explaining divine punishment. If the child mentions only one form of punishment simply ask, "Are you ever punished another way?" They will usually mention the other form of punishment. If they give no response then ask, "Are you ever grounded or put in time-out?" or "Have you ever gotten a spanking?" (Incidentally, do not criticize parental discipline to the child. If you suspect that a child is being abused, report it to the pastor.)

God's punishments for sin are a lot like this. What does it mean to be grounded or to have "time-out?" It means that you can't do something you want to do or go somewhere you want to go. Maybe you can't ride your bicycle with your friends [Figure A] or you can't play ball [Figure B] or you can't play your favorite video game [Figure C]. Being grounded means that you can't do something you want to do or go somewhere you want to go. Because of our sin, God has grounded us. Where do you think God has grounded us from?

Most children with a church background will give the correct answer--"heaven." I recognize that this final question is a poor sentence grammatically. However, our purpose here is to communicate with the child and this construction is most readily understood by children.

He has grounded us from heaven.

What can you tell me about heaven? What is heaven like?

Most children will answer by describing streets made of gold, gates made of pearl. Some children from Christian backgrounds may add with misty eyes that a grandfather or grandmother lives in heaven and that they miss them very much. Some descriptions of heaven will be wild and fanciful. Affirm any accuracy in the child's description and then continue.

Heaven is the most wonderful place in all the world. It is a place where no one ever dies. It is a place where no one is sad or sick, a place where it never gets dark and scary. There are no tears in heaven, no bandaged knees, no splinters, no pain at all. Best of all, heaven is the place where Jesus lives. But because we have disobeyed God, we can't go there. We are grounded from heaven. We can't go to the most wonderful place in the world . . . ever. *Point back to the list of the child's sins. Explain that each one of those sins deserves God's punishment.* How does that make you feel? Do you want to be grounded from heaven?

## Optional Discussion for Children who have Questions about Hell

What is the other way that parents punish their children? [Figure D] *Ask the child to identify the objects in the illustration and explain their use.* Sometimes parents spank children, don't they? Do you like to get spankings? I didn't think so. Why not? Spankings hurt, don't they? Because we have disobeyed God, we deserve a punishment much like that. We deserve God's punishment. But God's punishment is different from the punishment our parents give us. When a parent punishes us it hurts a little while but then the pain goes away. But God's punishment is much more serious. It is not a punishment that lasts just a little while. It is a punishment that lasts forever and ever. That is the punishment we deserve from God for the bad things we have done. *Point back to the list of the child's sins. Explain that each one of those sins deserves God's punishment.* How does this make you feel?

Notice that this Gospel presentation avoids a discussion of hell. That is intentional. Hell can be used to terrorize a child and produce premature commitments. Furthermore, if hell is emphasized in the discussion, parents may get the idea that the decision was coerced whether it was or not. For children, this cautious explanation of eternal punishment is best. If during the second half of the presentation the child or parent expresses an objection to corporal punishment, drop the approach and instead ask, "What is the longest that you have ever been grounded? An hour, a day, a week?" Then explain that when God grounds a person from heaven, that punishment lasts forever and ever. Unfortunately, the concept of eternal punishment and what it involves will probably not be as clear as when the first suggested approach is used. However, the issue here is not which methods of parental discipline are biblically appropriate. The issue is the Gospel. One should not allow objection to corporal punishment to distract concern away from the spiritual needs of the child in explaining the Gospel.



## GOD'S LOVE

God doesn't want to have to punish us this way either.

JOHN 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (NIV)

God loves all of us very, very much. He doesn't want us to be punished for our sins. He doesn't want us to be grounded from heaven. He wants us to live with Him forever in heaven. But because God is a good God, he can't allow sin to go unpunished. So God had to find a way that our sins could be punished even though we were protected from his punishment. God himself came into this world in the body of a man called Jesus Christ. He lived the good life that we can't live. He never did a single bad thing all of his life. He never said a bad word. He never did anything mean. He never lied or disobeyed his parents. He was perfect in every way. Though Jesus never did anything wrong, he died on the cross for us. [Figure E] (Ask the child if they have heard the story of Jesus dying on the cross. Let them recount their version of the story. Then vividly tell of Jesus' sufferings on the cross). Jesus didn't deserve to be punished this way. He hadn't done anything wrong. If Jesus was not being punished for his sins when he died on the cross, he must have been taking the punishment for someone else. Do you know who? When he died on the cross, he was taking the punishment that we deserved in our place so that we would not have to be punished.

*Ask the child what grade he or she is in, what school he attends, and who his teacher is. Incorporate those details into the following story:*

Let's suppose that I am walking through the halls of \_\_\_\_ school, and I hear someone sniffing. To my surprise, I see you standing out in the hall crying. I ask "\_\_\_\_, why are you so sad." You answer, "Because I disobeyed my teacher in the classroom and I am going to have to be punished." But I love you and I don't want you to be punished. So I walk in to the teacher and say, "Mr. or Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, is there anything that I can do to keep \_\_\_\_\_ from being punished?" The teacher says, "No, I am sorry. \_\_\_\_\_ has disobeyed me and now the punishment must be carried out." I think for a moment and say, "But teacher, what if I gave you an apple? [Figure F] Teachers are supposed to like apples aren't they? Would you promise that you wouldn't punish \_\_\_\_\_?" "No, I am sorry," the teacher says, "\_\_\_\_\_ has disobeyed me and the punishment must be carried out. "But teacher, what if I gave you a bag of money? [Figure G] Would you promise that you would not punish \_\_\_\_\_?" The teacher answers, "No, I am sorry. \_\_\_\_\_ has disobeyed me and the punishment must be carried out!" Then I ask, "What is the punishment?" The teacher answers, "Three spanks with the paddle." Then I ask, "Well, teacher, what if I took \_\_\_\_\_'s spanking in his place? Would that satisfy you?" The teacher replies, "Well, I guess if you took his punishment in his place, he would not have to be punished." Because I love you, I lean over and take your spanking for you so that you do not have to be spanked.

That is like what Jesus did when he died on the cross. [Figure E] He took the punishment that we deserved in our place so that we do not have to be punished. *Point back to the list of sins. Explain that when Jesus died on the cross, he took the punishment for each one of those sins. Does this make sense to you?*

## OUR FAITH

Because Jesus died on the cross for us, God offers us a wonderful gift. He says that we don't have to be grounded from heaven anymore. He says that we can go to heaven when we die. He offers to protect us from the punishment our sins deserve. There is only one thing God requires of us in order to receive this gift. That is faith.

Faith means that we believe certain things about Jesus. The Bible says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved [from the punishment your sin deserves]." (Acts 16:31)

First, we must believe that Jesus is God. He is the God who made everything--the trees, the grass, the mountains, the sky, you and me. He is more than just a man. He is God in the body of a man. Jesus proved that he was God many times by doing things that not even the strongest man can do--things that only God can do. Can you think of some things Jesus did to prove he is God?

*Prompt the child to recall some of the miracles of Jesus' ministry. Raising the dead, healing the sick, controlling the weather, walking on water. Describe a few of these miracles in story fashion. After each miracle ask, "Can you walk on water etc.? No, these are things only God can do. But Jesus did what only God can do to show that he is God." Conclude by summarizing the story of the greatest evidence of Jesus' deity--his own resurrection.*

Do you believe Jesus is God?

*If there is confusion here, explain some more miracles. Make no attempt to explain the Trinity.*

Second, we must believe that Jesus died on the cross to save us from the punishment our sins deserve. Do you believe Jesus died on the cross for your sins in your place?

Third, we must accept Jesus as our King. We must accept Jesus as our boss so that he is in charge of the way that we live. This means that we want to love Jesus, and to obey what Jesus says. To have Jesus as your King means that you want to do what Jesus wants you to do and you want to be what Jesus wants you to be. Do you want to do what Jesus wants you to do?

## REVIEW

What is sin?

What do we deserve because of our sins?

How is God's punishment different from the way our parents punish us?

What did Jesus do to keep us from being punished?

Who is Jesus?

What did Jesus do to prove that he is God?

As you ask each question, give the child plenty of time to respond without prompting or assistance. You will probably be surprised by how well they understand. If some answers are a bit confused, gently correct the child as needed. After the review, if you are comfortable with the child's understanding, move on to the commitment. Ask again, "does this make sense to you?" If you are uncomfortable with the child's understanding, ask if you may pray for them. Pray that God would help them to understand the Gospel more clearly each day. Make sure that the closure to the counseling session is affirming to the child. Do not give them the impression that they have failed or that they are not "smart enough" to become a Christian. You do not want them to be hesitant to come to you with their spiritual questions. A sense of failure or a feeling that you are disappointed with them will create that hesitancy. Assure the child that you love them and want to help if they have any questions. Then allow them to return to class, to their play, etc.

## COMMITMENT

Would you like to know for certain that you will escape God's punishment and that you are going to heaven when you die? Would you like me to pray with you to Jesus right now and ask him to take you to heaven and ask him to be your God and King?

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, I know that I have done bad things. I am sorry for what I have done. I know that I deserve your punishment. But I believe you were punished for my sins in my place. Now, I do not have to be punished. Please take me to heaven when I die. Make me into the person you want me to be. I accept you as my God and my King. Amen.

Now, you just prayed and asked Jesus to rescue you from the punishment that your sins deserve. What was his answer? *Wait for the child's response then explain:* Yes, God's answer was yes-- "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13) That is God's promise to you. You and I sometimes break our promises. God never has and he never will.

Do you know what just happened when you believed in Jesus?

Show the child figure H

What is this a picture of?

And what is this rubber thing on the bottom of the pencil?

What is this word underneath the eraser?

This is a picture of what happens when we believe in Jesus. Jesus erases our sins!

*Take the record of sins, and erase each sin completely. Shake the piece of paper to remove the eraser particles. Subtly flip the piece of paper over as you show it to the child so that no trace of the sin list will be visible.* Then explain: It is true that God keeps a list of all our sins. But when you believed in Jesus, he erased all of your sins. He erased all the times we . . . (Name each sin in the list and then erase them individually). Now when God looks at you, he doesn't see you as someone who needs to be punished. Now when God looks at you he sees you just as if you had never sinned. Just as if you had never done anything wrong. Just as if you have lived the perfect life of Jesus himself.

*Give the child the eraser bookmark (Jesus erased my Sins!). [Figure I] Tell them that every time they open their Bible and see the giant eraser, they can remember what Jesus has done for them.* Write the child's name, the date of their decision and your name as their counselor on the back. These bookmarks can be copied onto card stock for durability. After they have been filled out with the pertinent information, they may be laminated by the witness and delivered to the child in their home. This will give the witness a good opportunity for a follow-up visit with unchurched parents. If you are not comfortable explaining the Gospel to adults, carry along someone who is.

## ASSURANCE

*Read Romans 6:23, "God's gift is life forever in heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord." Explain that God promises to erase our sins and take us to heaven as a gift. Ask, What should we do when someone gives us a gift? What should we say? That's right--Thank you. In just a moment we will pray together and thank Jesus for erasing your sins and promising not to punish you--promising to take you to heaven. Do you think there are other ways that we can thank Jesus? If the child hesitates, suggest things like being nice to other people, loving their brothers or sisters, obeying their parents, telling others about Jesus, being baptized. Then explain, "We don't have to do any of these things for God to love us and take us to heaven. Heaven is God's gift. How much does a gift cost? How much do you have to pay your parents for the gifts you get at Christmas? Nothing! They are free. The gift of heaven is free too! We don't have to be baptized or be good to earn the gift. God gives it to us just because he loves us. But by being baptized and being good, we can say "Thank you" to God for his gift."*

*Ask the child to pray and thank God for erasing his sins and promising to take him to heaven, in his own words. If they are frightened or embarrassed, pray for them. Fill out a decision card, noting any comments that might be helpful, and see that the card reaches the pastor.*

*If a parent was not present during the counseling session, tell them of the child's commitment. Offer them one of these manuals so that they may know how the gospel was explained to their child. Encourage them to review the presentation using this format. Introducing different explanations of the gospel may confuse the child so ask that they follow this model to avoid confusion. Point out the review questions to the parent. Encourage the parent to ask her child these questions and either video or write their answers. Years later as the child becomes an adult and learns much more about the Christian faith, they may wonder if they could have possibly understood the essentials of the gospel as a child. These transcribed or recorded answers along with a copy of this manual can serve as the child's documented testimony, permanently clarifying their understanding of the gospel for posterity.*

**CONGRATULATIONS!** You have just led a child to Christ! By your love and obedience you have helped spare them from a life of heartache and an eternity of doom. The angels of heaven are rejoicing. You should be happy too! Now let this experience encourage you to witness to many more people, children and adults as well.

## OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

### I. SIN

- A. The Fact of Sin (Rom. 3:23)
- B. The List of Sins
- C. Response to sin: "How do you feel about the bad things you have done?"

### II. PUNISHMENT

- A. "What do we deserve for the bad things we have done? Just as our parents must punish us when we disobey them, God must punish us when we disobey him."
- B. Forms of Punishment
  - 1. Grounding (Figures A, B, C). We have been grounded from heaven.
  - 2. Spanking (Figure D). God's punishment is a punishment that never ends.
- C. Reason for Punishment: "Every sin (pointing to the sin list) that we have committed deserves God's punishment."

### III. GOD'S LOVE

- A. John 3:16
- B. Jesus took the punishment for our sins in our place (Figure E).
- C. Illustration of taking a school child's punishment (Figure F, G, E)

### IV. FAITH

- A. Believe that Jesus is God in the body of a man. (Examine the evidence of Jesus' miracles).
- B. Believe that Jesus is the Savior--the one who took the punishment for our sins.
- C. Accept Jesus as King.

### V. REVIEW

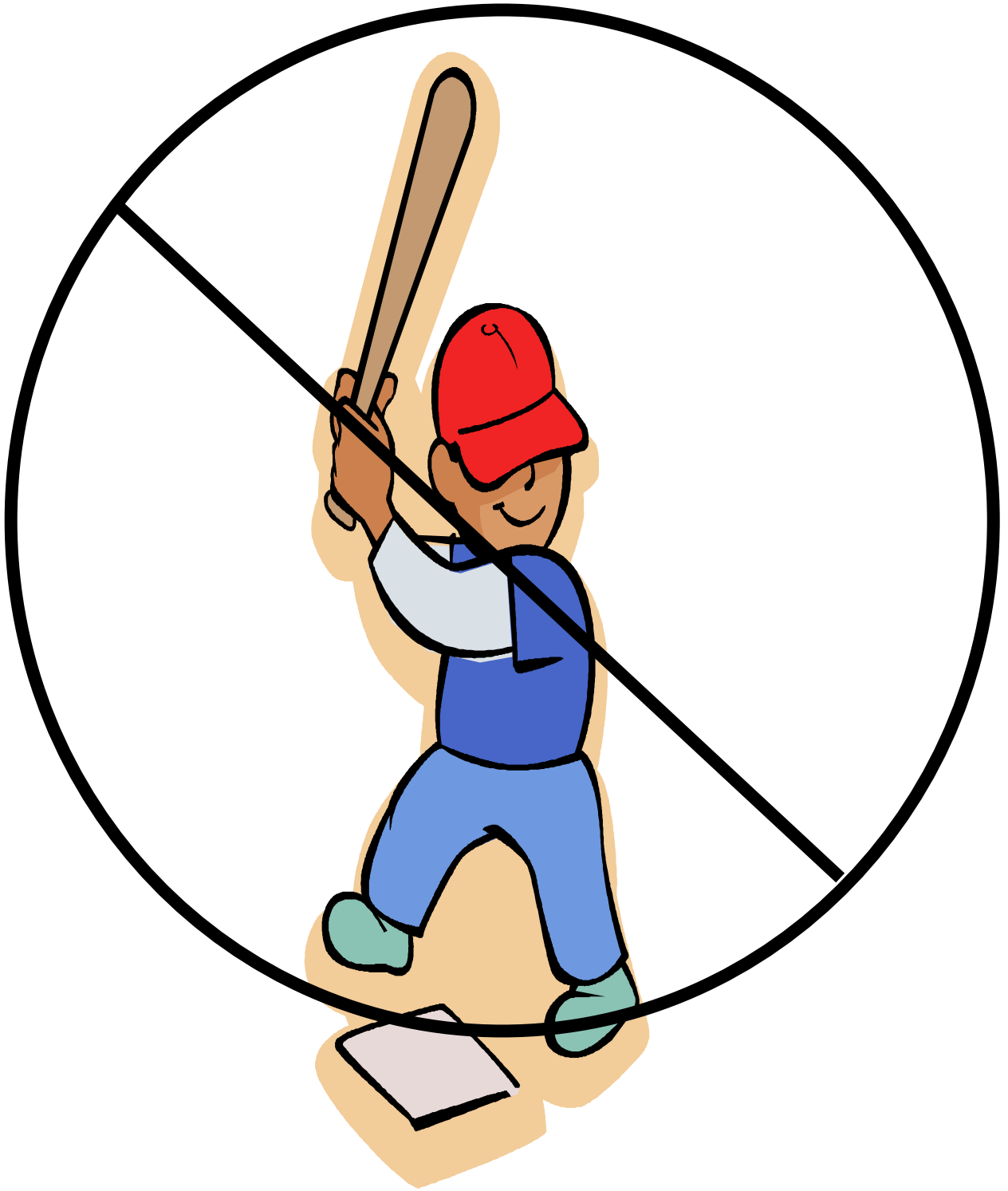
- A. What is sin?
- B. What do we deserve for our sins?
- C. How is God's punishment different from the way our parents punish us?
- D. What did Jesus do to keep us from being punished?
- E. Who is Jesus?
- F. What did Jesus do to prove that he is God?

### VI. COMMITMENT

- A. Prayer
- B. What was Jesus' answer? Rom. 10:13
- C. Jesus erased my sins (Figure H, sin list, and bookmark)

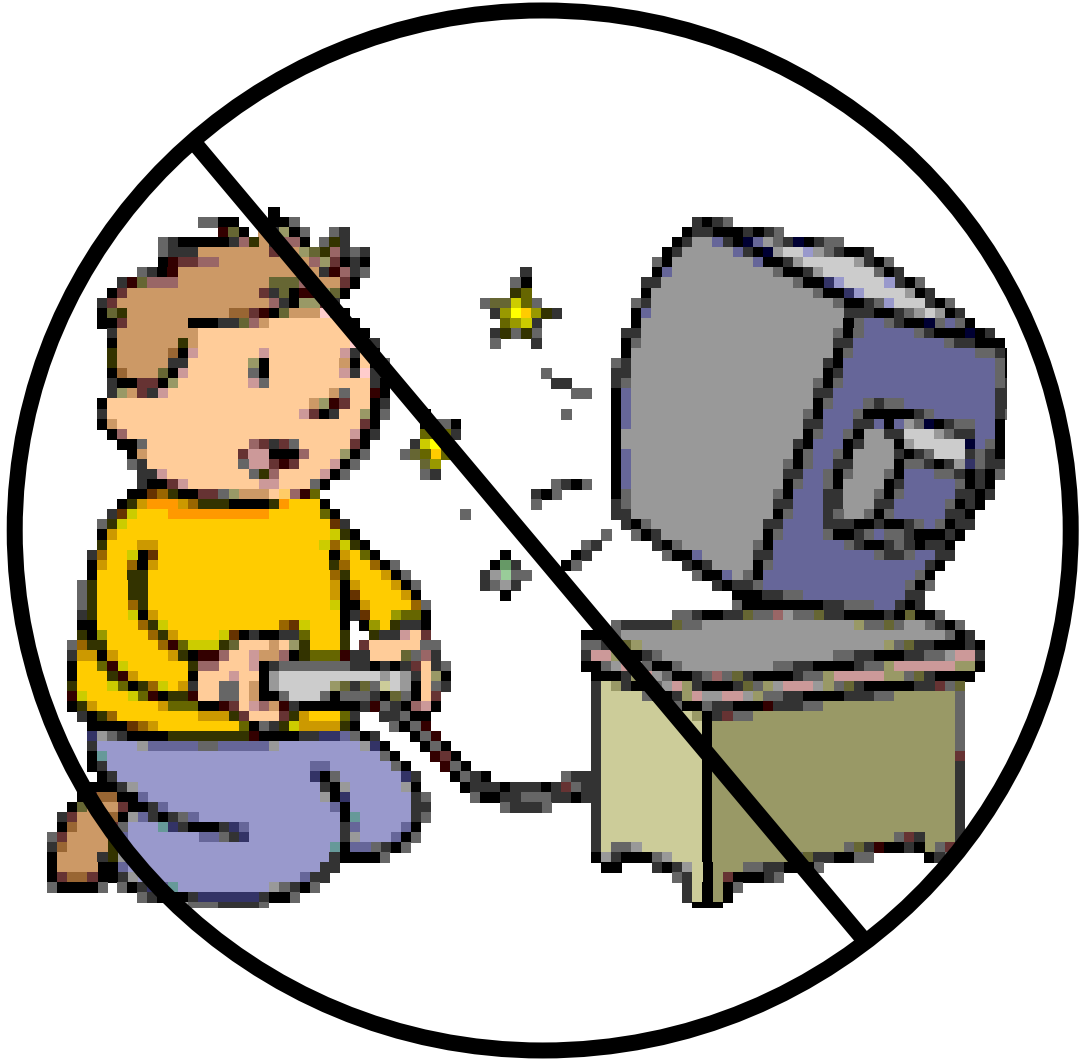


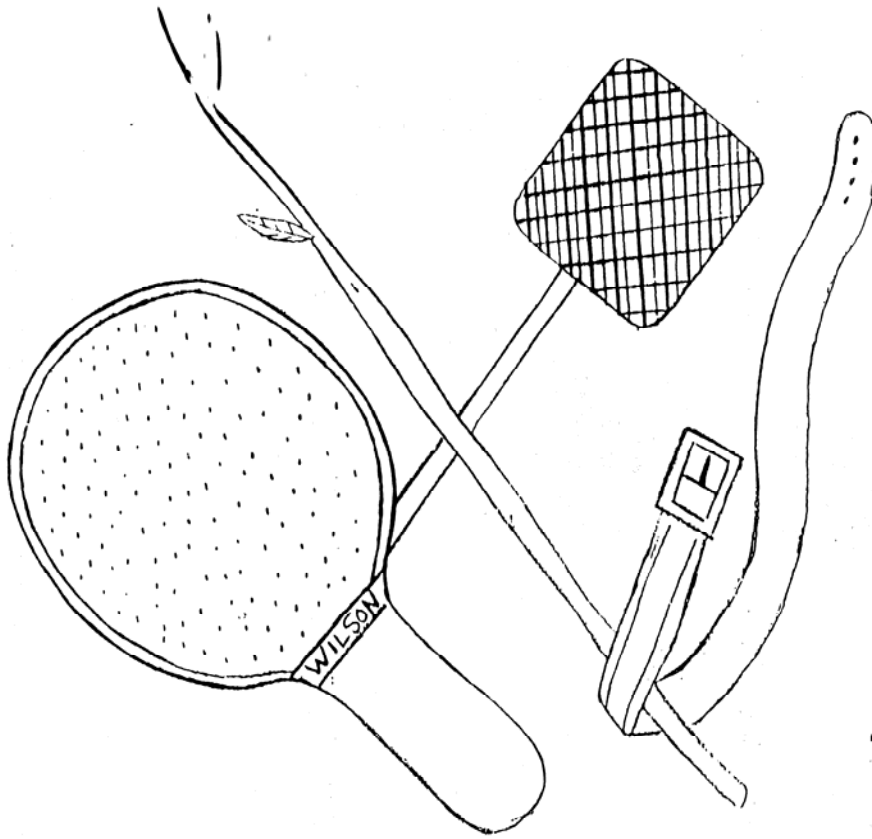
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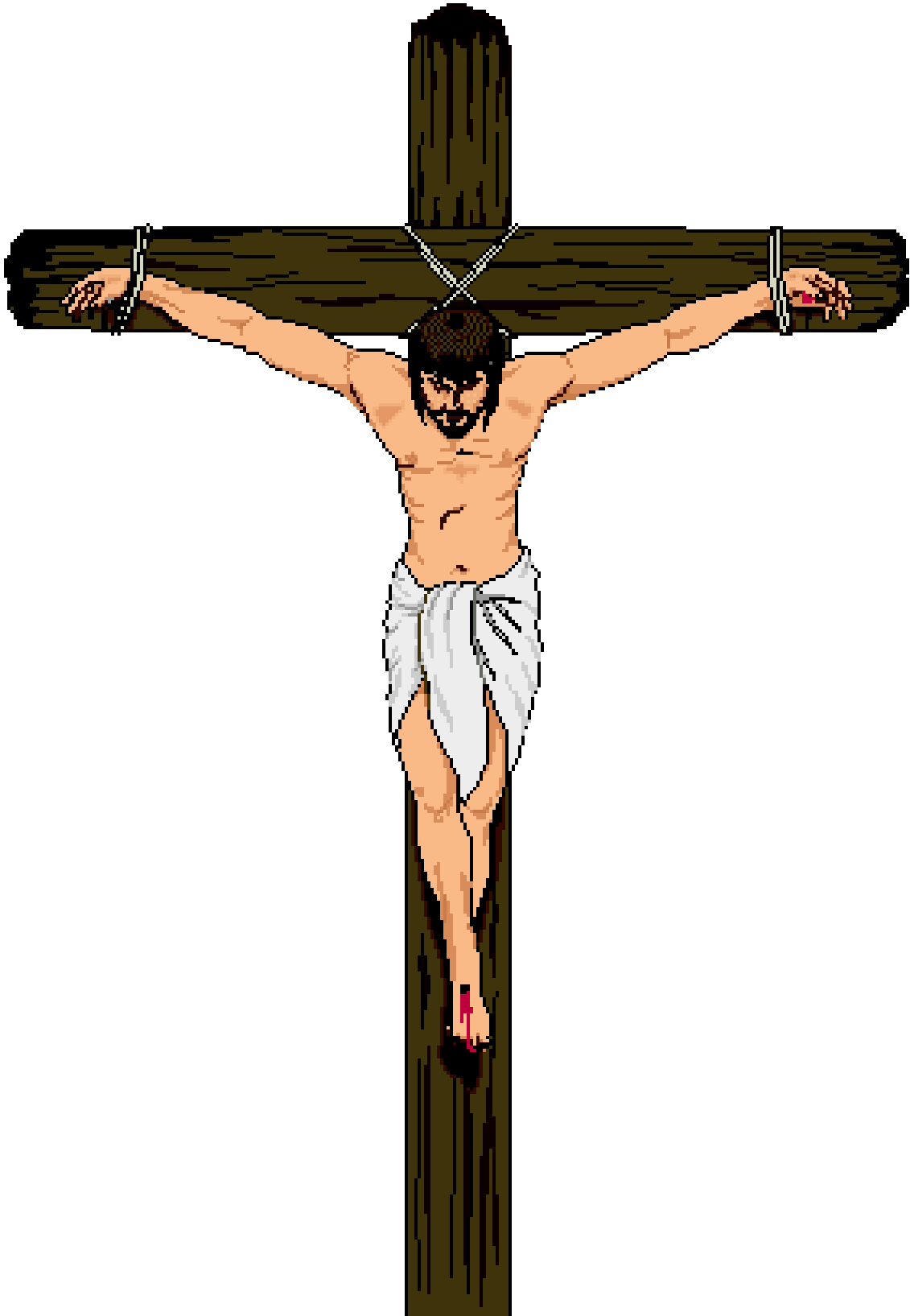
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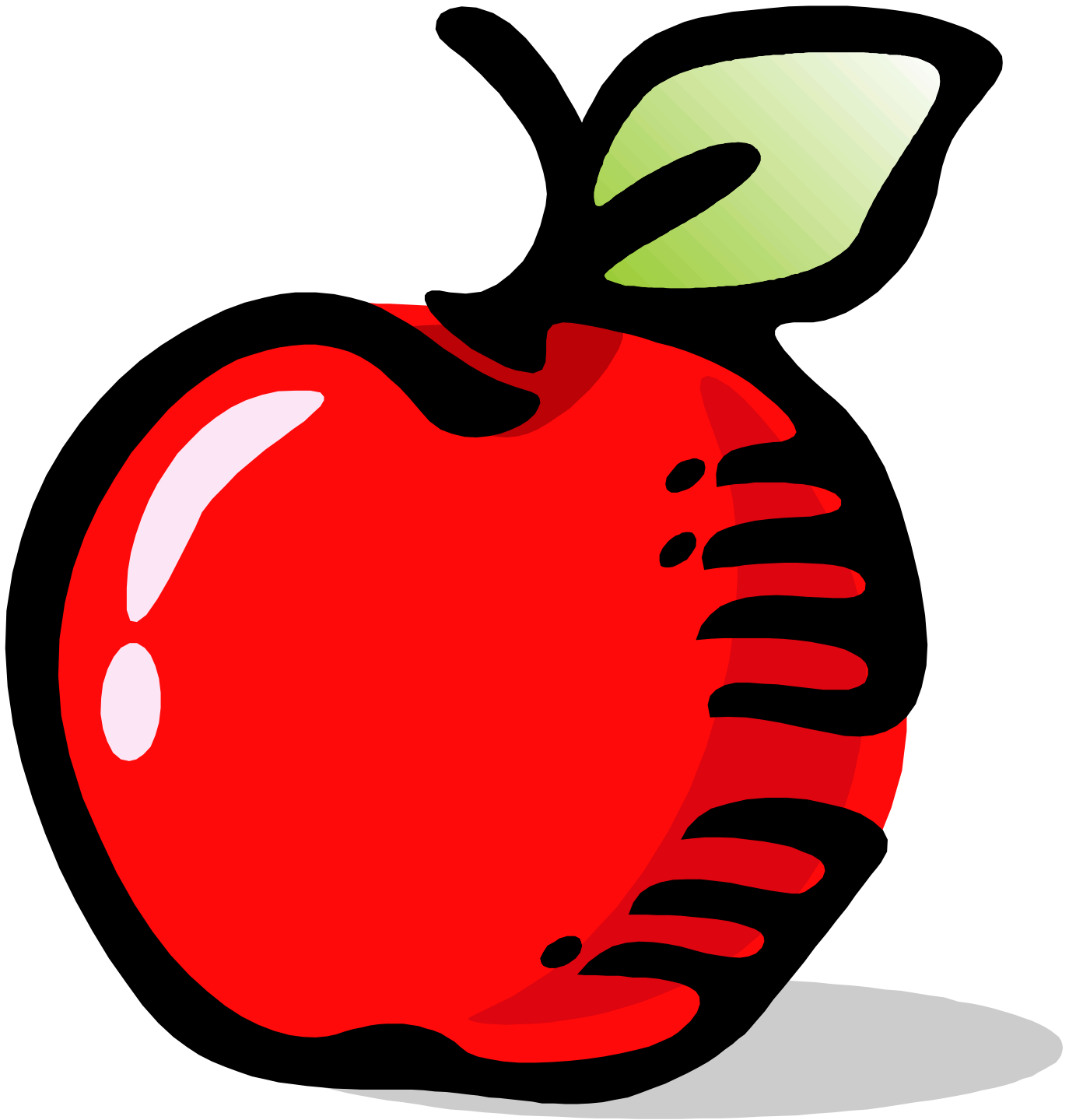




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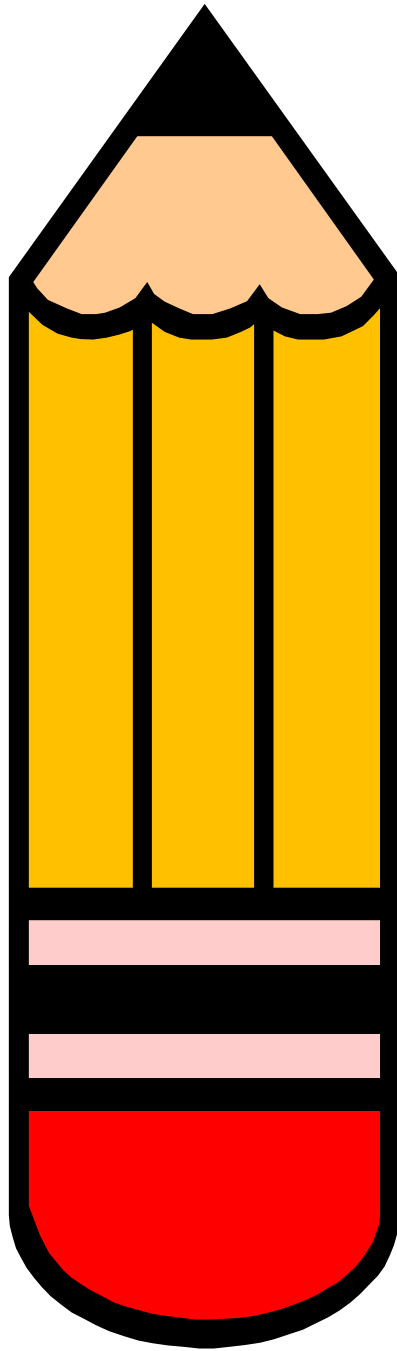
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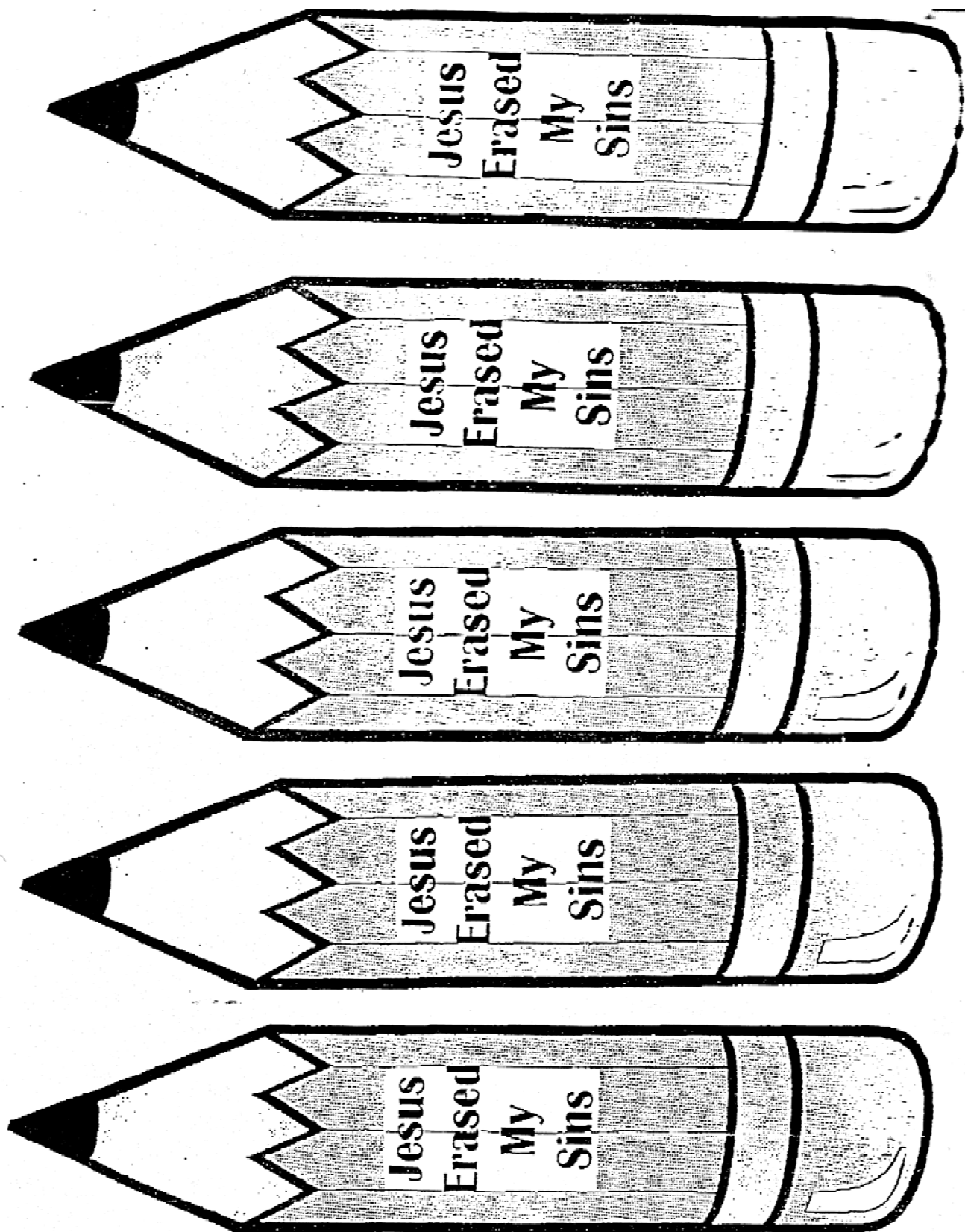


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**SINS**

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