

WHAT SIN IS

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Sin is the transgression of the law, 1 John 3.4. Sin is lawlessness.

The fact underlying all history and revelation is sin, a fact which must be faced by us all, and each of us, everywhere and all the time.

What then is this thing from which the race has never been able to escape, and which dogs the individual all the way? Is it merely, as we are told in some quarters, a mistake or misdirection, a fault or ignorance, or ill-luck? Is it something inevitable and necessary to man's moral discipline, a good in disguise, or is it a moral disease, a blight and a curse?

The answer to these questions comes from two quarters—from human experience, that is to say what man has found to be sin, and from the Holy Scripture what God has declared it to be—and these two voices are in essential agreement.

Everywhere in the revelation of redeeming love is the dark shadow of sin, and language is taxed to express its character and to reveal its heinousness. Sin, according to the Bible, is wrong, evil transgression, mischief, rebellion, wickedness, breach of trust, vanity, guilt, trespass, disobedience, error, failure, and iniquity and is "exceedingly sinful." But of all Biblical descriptions of it the most comprehensive and impressive, "Sin is lawlessness."

In this epistle, which is a revelation of the life that is divine, spiritual, and eternal, not a little is said about sin, for it is that which holds men in the bondage of death, and keeps those who have eternal life from the full realisation of it. In the passage before us, man is constituted under law, to be subject to which is to fulfil the divine ideal of his constitution and growth, but to disregard it which, in any measure or part, is to sin. Sin supposes a law which has authority over us, and it is the fact of there being such a law that gives character to action. Righteousness has the approval of God as being the observation of His law; sin has the condemnation of God as being the violation of His law.

What then, must we ask, is the law here referred to? It cannot be human conscience, for that is fallible and is never in the New Testament called a "law." And it cannot be the Mosaic law, for that is not comprehensive and complete; and, in any case, it was not known outside of Israel. The reference, therefore, must be to the Divine law generally and universally, that is the will of God, which is reflected in the conscience, but is fully revealed only and in and through Jesus Christ. Then what is here said is that not to do the will of God is to sin.

Sin is lawlessness and lawlessness is sin. These are convertible terms, they are interchangeable ideas and cannot be separated from each other, for they cover the same ground and denote the same thing, defining it from different sides. The law is holy, and just and good, and the unutterable malignity of sin is shown by its perversion of such a law.

But we must come closer to the subject, and ask, what is the law under which man is constituted? How is that law violated? And how may it be fulfilled? These are questions of primary and pressing importance, and lie at the very foundation of the true understanding of God and of the actualities and possibilities of life.

Let us consider then, first, the LAW UNDER WHICH MAN IS CONSTITUTED. This, we have said, is the law of God, but what is the scope and nature of this divine and universal law? Each of us sustains a threefold relation, which we may speak of as divine, and personal, and relative. We are

related to God, and to ourselves, and to our fellows ; and, in this way, are brought under the law which governs three worlds - the world above us, the world within us and the world around us. But what is the significance of these relations, and what do they imply and involve? The whole Bible is the only adequate answer to these inquiries, and from it we learn that God requires of us obedience, holiness and love. These are three aspects of one law, the law of divine will. Our relation to God should be characterised by obedience, our relation to ourselves by holiness, and our relation to our fellows by love. So we are exhorted to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present age, which defines our selfward, manward and Godward obligations.

Think then of obedience and our relation to God. The apostle John lays strong emphasis upon the commands of God and their careful obedience. Six or seven times in this epistle he speaks of keeping His commandments and in the Gospel there is a like emphasis on obedience. If ye know these things, blessed are ye if you do them (John 13.17). If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the doctrine (John 7.17). Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you. Our first duty is to God to obey Him. Obedience is the law which, in His will, controls our relation to Him.

Then there is holiness, and our relation to ourselves. Holiness is the law under which our personal life is placed. This is a truth made emphatic in both testaments. Peter writes, As He who hath called you is holy, so ye become holy in all manner of things, and he supports this by adding, Because it is written ye shall be holy for I am holy and we are called to holiness and the writer to the Hebrews says that without holiness no man shall see the Lord. Holiness then is the divine design for each of us in the appointed standard of life and experience. And so it is written, This is the will of God, even your sanctification that ye shall be holy... that is to say you shall be holy. Spiritual health should characterise every Christian and this blessing is not a privilege only, but also an obligation.

And, further, there is love and our relation to our fellows. Not less pronounced in Scripture than the call to obedience and holiness, is the command to love, not friends only, but foes; not the Christian brotherhood only but all men. The apostle makes great emphasis on love in this epistle. "This is the message that we have heard from the beginning, that we love one another." "He that loveth not abideth in death." "Let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth." "Let us love one another, for love is of God ; and everyone that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God." "He that loveth not, knoweth not God for God is love." "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom he hath not seen." " This commandment have we from Him, that he who loveth God love his brother also."

Now the love here enjoined is not that of sentiment and natural affection, but of principle : it is nothing less than the love of God shed aboard in our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom He hath given unto us ; and, like the obedience and holiness, it is a duty.

This, then, is the law under which we are constituted. This we obey, that we be holy, and that we love is the Divine will for each of us, and it embraces our relation with God, to ourselves, and to our fellow man.

Let us consider for a moment, THE UNIVERSAL VIOLATION OF THE LAW. Are we, or are we not, obeying the manifold law of God's will for us? If we are honest with ourselves we shall not be left in any doubt. Let us face up to our threefold obligation, and ask: Are we obeying God? Are we becoming holy? Are we loving our fellows?

From the Garden of Eden man has been disobeying God. By one man's disobedience we are all made sinners, and, by our own disobedience we all have become guilty. All the world is disobeying God all the time. His will is not its standard and authority in politics, or commerce, or morals, but desire, convenience, opportunism. prudence or sheer necessity are its guides. Are our churches organised around the will of God, or are they governed by some other standard?

And what about ourselves individually? Do we in all the tests of life say, as did the Apostles, We ought to obey God rather than men, or is our course determined by expediency, or fear, or cowardice, or love of ease? This, at any rate, is perfectly clear, that if we fail to obey God, we sin. The course we choose may be good in itself, but if it be something other than the will of God for us, then we sin by pursuing it.

Then, as to character, are we subject to the law of holiness, or to some lower standard. Unless in mind, and heart, and will, and conscience, we are becoming more Christlike, we are violating the law of our being, and so are sinning. The Lord does not judge us by the knowledge of the Bible, nor by our diligence in Christian service, not by our natural amiability, nor by our good intentions, but by whether we are spiritually well, by whether we are living, in all of life's situations and circumstances, the eternal life. If we are not, we are sinning, for holiness is the law of personal life, and to violate it is sin.

But in addition to our relation to God and to ourselves, there is our relation to our fellow man, whom we are under obligation to love. But do we love them? Never in the history of the Church has the world been evangelised. Never have we loved men well enough to give the Gospel to them in any one generation, regardless of cost or consequence. Now had the Church really loved the souls of men the world who have been evangelised long ago, and the failure so to do is sin, for it is the violation of the law which determines our relation to all mankind. This, however, is only one aspect of the matter, for the love-law is our judge in all our relations to our fellows; in the home, in business, in one's profession, in society, everywhere and always. None of us would wish to justify the countless defects and failures in our daily life, or even hold them as indifferent; but we do recognise them to be in breaches of the law, positive transgressions, manifold sin; or do we think of them as merely imperfections and infirmities? The Word of God declares that the manifold discords of our life and its deviations from the line of the Christian ideal are positive sins which separate us from God, and which can be expiated and abolished only by deep repentance and a distinct act of forgiveness. The Bible will not allow us to take a light view of our sins; they are the expression of sin. Our wrong actions are the articulations of a principle of evil; our sins are the product of our sin.

Individual sins, it has been said, are like islets, which appear as separate and casual specks on the surface of the ocean, but are, in reality, the mountain peaks of a submerged continent. Sin is illegal because it is the denial of the authority of God; it is the assertion of one's own will as the rule of action against the absolute good will of God; it is a challenge to the entire moral order of the universe.

How can this law be fulfilled? Confronting us all the time is God's requirement. His law is sovereign and eternal. For Him to require less than obedience to Himself, and holiness in ourselves, and love for all others, would be contrary to His nature, and is, therefore, unthinkable; and as He can require nothing less of us than this, He can take nothing less.

This fact brings us face to face with man's impotence. It is true, not only for ourselves that we do not fulfil the law of God under which we are constituted, but that we cannot do so. Of ourselves we have neither the will nor the power to obey God, become holy, and love our fellow man. In the presence of the Divine demand are utterly impotent and are subject to the penalty of a violated law.

What, then, is to be done? The passage before us supplies the answer, "Ye know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him is there no sin." The person and work of Christ meet our impotence and despair with power and promise. The sinless Christ was manifested to take away our sins; not only to bear them but to remove them, and to become in us the power to fulfil the law of God. Only by Him and in Him can we obey God, become holy and love our fellow man; but in Him we can.

This lies at the very foundation of all that we are aiming at. No teaching on sanctification can be of any avail if we are not convicted of sin. There is no light healing of the hurt of God's people, but Christ is the Divine provision for our need, because He is the fulfilment of the law and the power in us to fulfil it. Christ perfectly obeyed God, delighting to do His will. Christ was perfectly holy, for He was without sin. Christ perfectly loved and loves all men with a matchless love. The Lord Jesus paid for us by His death, the penalty of a broken law, and he imparts to us by His risen life the power to fulfil the law, to obey God, and to become ourselves holy, and to love all men ; but we must claim and appropriate our inheritance in Him.

In conclusion, to give definiteness and concreteness to this matter, let us each ask himself in God's holy presence, first, has it been my delight to do God's will, or have I found His commandments to be grievous? Has God's law been the standard of my life and have I yielded to it with instant and glad obedience? Or has my life been under the control of my own will, and have I followed my own way? Have I found God's will for me to be good, acceptable and perfect or has it been irksome and inconvenient?

Second, since I accepted Christ as my Saviour, has it been my single aim to become more like Him, or have I been content to follow the prevailing religious fashion? Have I been steadily pressing towards the mark of God' high calling, or have I loitered along the road and lost interest in the goal? I ask myself, and I ask you, this question very solemnly : Does my character and conduct justify the death of Christ for me, or are my actions such that I am a grief to Him?

Third, what has been my attitude towards my fellows? Have I loved them with God's love and served them sacrificially, or have I been just indifferent and selfish? What have I ever done to bring a soul to Christ? What effort have I ever made to win the members of my own family? What witness have I borne to those with whom I am associated in business? Do I know anything about the constraining love or is it just an expression, just a pious idea? Have I ever laboured in prayer for the salvation of souls and given of my knowledge, time and money that the Gospel might be preached throughout the world, or have I been content with the ordinary church routine, satisfied with convention and ineffective activity?

I feel that we all here have to plead guilty and confess that we have sinned against God by disobeying His law, by not approximating His character, and by not loving our fellows. Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee O Lord, hear my voice, let Thine ear be attentive to the voice of my supplication. If Thou, O Lord shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared.

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