

THE HEART OF SIN.

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There is decided diversity of opinion as to what constitutes the very heart of what the Christian world calls sin. Some say it is sensuality. Others insist that it is finiteness or imperfection. Still others hold that it is inordinate desire or concupiscence. Thorough-going evolutionists stoutly maintain that it is but the heritage we have received from our brute fore-fathers. But perhaps a great majority of Christians in general, and of preachers and theological teachers in particular, would agree to call the essence of sin selfishness.

It must be admitted, however, that there are some very serious objections to this view, and it is the purpose of this article to call attention to these objections and to venture to present what seems to be a better view.

LOVE OF SELF NOT SINFUL PER SE.

The classic statement of our duty towards our fellowmen as first presented in the ancient Jewish law and later confirmed by our Lord is, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." It is exceedingly difficult to understand how this can be fairly interpreted as falling short of an explicit recognition of one's right and duty to love himself. If language can mean anything, self-love is here certainly made the standard of the love we should exercise toward others. To leave out of the statement that thought is to empty it of its meaning to a marked degree. It is to take away altogether its startling character, and reduce it to a mere common-place remark utterly out of place in its context. In stating the first commandment Jesus set forth the standard, the measure, of the love required towards God: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." It is to be a love that arises from, and holds fast in its proper place in life, every part of

our being. The fact that a standard is here presented is uniformly recognized and insisted upon. And when we pass to the second commandment, where in form of words the standard of the love required is just as plainly stated, shall we fail to recognize it as such? Is it possible to believe that Jesus did not mean, when He used those words "as thyself," to set forth what should be the measure of our love toward others? or that in seeming to set such a standard He used words that must be emptied of all content? If it is wrong for one to love one's self at all, as some say, then does this statement strike out of the old Jewish law and the Christian system all love to one's neighbor? If we may not love ourselves at all, then to love our neighbors as ourselves is not to love our neighbors at all.

The Lord never spoke such foolishness. Some of us have failed sufficiently to weigh His words. He clearly recognized one's right and duty to love one's self. God is to have the first place, then self and others are to be on an equality. Not self above others, nor yet others above self, but an equality. Did the Christ hate Himself? Had He no love for Himself? With Him the Father's will was always first, however great the cost, but who will dare to say that He had no regard, no love, for Himself? Being Himself a man, and understanding perfectly the nature and requirements of the human soul, He recognized and stated the inherent demand of man's being that he possess and exercise a right love towards himself.

SELFISHNESS NOT A BASAL TERM.

Müller, in his great monograph on "The Christian Doctrine of Sin," admits the contention above that the Scriptures justify the love of self. According to his view there are three stages in the development of self-love: (1) self-preservation, not at first moral in character; obtaining the moral quality it may sink down into (2) selfishness, or rise into (3) moral self-love. Evidently, then, selfishness to his mind was the perversion of a

thing altogether right in itself. That is, selfishness, if we may break it up into its component parts, is perverted self-love, and the essentially evil thing in it is not self-love, but the perversion of this right thing.

Dr. Strong defines selfishness as "that choice of self as the supreme end which constitutes the antithesis of supreme love to God."¹ More concretely he says: "Instead of making God the centre of his life, surrendering himself unconditionally to God and possessing himself only in subordination to God's will, the sinner makes self the centre of his life, sets himself directly against God, and constitutes his own interest the supreme motive and his own will the supreme rule."² And it is not true that, unless we are to regard self-love as something essentially wrong *per se*, this definition, this statement, involves the same truth made somewhat more evident by Müller, viz., that the term selfishness needs still further analysis, and that, when analyzed, the pernicious element in it is not self-love, but the perversion of self-love, the abuse of something altogether right in itself?

But this is not all. This definition and statement of Dr. Strong require still closer scrutiny. How can a man make such a "choice of self as the supreme end" as will constitute that choice "the antithesis of supreme love to God"? How can one constitute "his own interest the supreme motive" of life and fail at the same time to make "God the centre of his life, surrendering himself unconditionally to God and possessing himself only in subordination to God's will"? Does not the "choice of self as the supreme end," the constituting of "his own interest the supreme motive" of life, require that one should love God supremely and surrender unconditionally to His will, if the choice be intelligently made? Is, then, the fundamental thing in sin simply ignorance? Can a man do the best he knows and yet be so heinously

1. *Systematic Theology*, Fifth Edition, p. 292.

2. *Ib.*, p. 295.

wicked? Evidently if we would think accurately there is very real need of a more basal term for that which lies at the heart of sin and makes it exceeding sinful.

THE PREACHER'S PREDICAMENT.

A well known preacher said some time ago that since leaving the seminary the tail-gate of his theological apple-cart had fallen out and he had been spilling his theological apples all along the way. If he meant what he said, he has been exceedingly unfortunate. Our theology, while not, of course, necessarily *the truth*, is nevertheless our orderly conception of the truth, and the man who is *losing* his theology must be losing his grip on the truth. On the other hand the man who is *changing* his theology *may* be getting a firmer grip on the truth. It is the firm conviction of the writer that many preachers would get a firmer hold on the truth, and consequently be able to do more efficient work, if they were to change their theology at the point under consideration.

If we follow the masters who have taught us theology, many of us will say to our congregations to-day, as we present the awful fact of sin, that the sinner is exceedingly sinful because he has put himself first in God's stead, because he has constituted "his own interest the supreme motive and his own will the supreme rule" of life; and to-morrow we will declare with all the eloquence we can command that "godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:8), that every man for his own sake, even if all other considerations are left aside, should choose Christ. Verily, we need not be surprised if some folks are mean enough to say we are inconsistent, and many more content themselves with thinking it. To the man of ordinary mind this must look very much like appealing to men to do to-day the very thing we condemned them for doing yesterday.

The theological instructor may easily obscure the inconsistency for himself and for his classes as they pass along through his well-wrought system of divinity. Days and weeks pass between the study of sin and the presentation of the reasons which should lead men to accept Christ as drawn from the better estate into which the life in Christ brings them, if the last are ever presented in any adequate way. But the preacher may not always have the relief which this lapse of time brings. He is not engaged in teaching a system of theology, he is using a system of theology in winning men to Christ. He must bring every reasonable appeal to bear upon his auditors to flee from sin, and these appeals must follow each other in quick succession if his efforts are not to lose much in effectiveness.

Nearly every appeal to the unsaved is based either on the fearful consequences of sin here and hereafter or on the blessedness of the life which is "hid with Christ in God." These fearful consequences and this blessedness may be thought of as pertaining to the individual alone or as reaching out through the individual to others also. The preacher who regards sin as essentially selfishness experiences no embarrassment in making the appeal based on the consequences of sin. But when, as must often happen in evangelistic work, a burning presentation of the vileness of sin in its very essence must be followed immediately by an appeal which brings into view the infinite value to the individual of the saved life, then it is that he must labor at a disadvantage. He may never have determined precisely where the difficulty lay, but nearly every preacher has had the feeling at such times that something was wrong somewhere, and may have blamed himself for a failure that was due entirely to the form of his theology.

It is admitted, of course, that the ordinary preacher is not nearly so learned as the expert theologian, and unquestionably learning counts for much. But perhaps it

will not be entirely unpardonable if we timidly suggest that it is very hard to see how even a trained theologian could preach a sermon to-night presenting selfishness as the essence of sin and follow it to-morrow night with another in which he would appeal to men to flee to Christ because that is best for them personally, and yet either appear to be or actually be consistent. Has it not become a Christian axiom that, if a man chooses that which is best for himself, intelligently makes "his own interests the supreme motive" of his life, he will choose Christ? Then how can the preacher present as the very essence of sin that which he declares should lead to the choice of the Christ and eternal life, and feel at ease or exert the power he ought?

A BETTER WAY.

This difficulty is entirely removed when we rest in the plain statements of the Scriptures. John defines sin as lawlessness: "And sin is lawlessness" (1 Jno. 3:4, R.V.). With this agrees the root meaning of the various Greek and Hebrew words expressing sin. The basal meaning of the Greek word *ἁμαρτία* is "a failure to hit the mark;" "as a warrior who throws his spear and fails to strike his adversary; or as a traveler who misses his way."¹ This word is used in the New Testament at least 174 times, and other forms derived from the same root swell the number to at least 226. Similarly *παράπτωμα* (used 23 times) means "a fall beside or near something;" *παράβασις* (used 7 times) and *παραβαίνω* (4 times), a going beside or over. In the Hebrew, *חטא* signifies to miss the mark; *פשוט* a breaking with or falling away from any one; *עקב* a bending or making crooked. In short, the biblical conception is that a mark has been set, law has been established. Sin, whether in man or any other being, is a missing of the mark, a failure to observe that law. That is, sin is lawlessness.

1. Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. I., p. 18.

Now note how remarkably John's definition of sin and the fundamental meaning of these words used to express sin fit into the thought of the present day. The world has already become widely acquainted with two leading conceptions of law, and a third is coming more and more into view. One of the first two has come down from the earliest times; the second is of comparatively recent origin. No one of the three is in any sense really contradictory to the others, but the second marks a step far in advance of the first, and the third evidently reaches that which is ultimate. First, we have law as legislative enactment. Some superior (it may have been a man, it may have been a god, it may have been God) declared that such a thing should be or should not be done. The declaration of his will came to be designated as "law," a legislative enactment which was to be obeyed. Such was the conception of law throughout most of the world's history. The second conception of the term is largely a development of the nineteenth century, and is the rich gift of science to the world. The multitudinous things of the material realm were reduced to certain elements. These elements were found to exercise choice in their combinations, and to be steadfast in their likes and dislikes. All forces were found to be constant and orderly in their activities. It gradually broke upon the mind of man that the way a thing acted was determined by the nature of the thing. Consequently man's age-long conception of law had to be enlarged, and to-day we no longer think of it as legislative enactment simply, but also as "an order of facts determined by their nature." In other words, the fundamental thing in the mind, when we think of law, is no longer the will of a superior, but the nature of things.

But there is a third conception of law that is rising into view. It can hardly be said to be fully before the world, but it is coming, and it is ultimate in its nature. As the first and transitory enlargement of the conception

of law arose from the scientific study of material things, so the second and ultimate enlargement is arising from the scientific study of spiritual things. If the law of material things was forever established by the nature given those things at creation, must not law for man be regarded as forever established in the same way? Are not all of God's legislative enactments with respect to men summed up in this: "Live in harmony with the nature given to you at creation"? And if the nature of a material thing determines what that thing shall or shall not do, and the nature of man determines what man should or should not do, can we stop short of the conviction that the nature of God determines all that God has done, does, or shall do? Are we not, indeed, beginning to say that law is "an order of facts determined by" the nature of God? Evidently we must take this final step, and when it is taken we will have reached that which is all-inclusive and final.

Nor is the second conception of law mentioned above, which may be characterized as the modern scientific conception, as far apart from the old Hebrew conception as at the first glance it may seem. The Hebrews thought of law, it is true, as legislative enactment, but the source of the legislation was not man, but God. Their laws were God's decrees. And what does an "order of facts determined by their nature" mean, except that every object acts in harmony with the nature which it received at its creation, when God in the very act of its creation decreed what it should be? Bring out in the Hebrew conception of law the thought which it certainly involves, viz., that the legislative enactments of God for man are in harmony with the nature given man in the act of his creation, and the ancient Hebrew conception at once becomes identical with the modern scientific conception. Or bring to the surface the thought which is really involved in it—though science dare not lay emphasis upon it—viz., that God gave to each object of scientific investigation its na-

ture when He created it, and the modern scientific conception of law becomes identical with the ancient Hebrew.

We hold fast to the biblical thought, therefore, and maintain that sin is lawlessness, the doing of things that violate the fundamental laws of the nature given us at man's creation. That is, sin is *abnormality*. It is a crime not only against God and one's fellowmen, but also against one's own self. In the highest, deepest, widest, most awful sense sin moves towards suicide and homicide and deicide. It is destructive only, and destructive only of that which is good.

Such a conception of the essence of sin is basal. It cannot be further analyzed. It is also founded upon that which is ultimate. It finds the law of which sin is a violation in the nature which the Creator gave man, and that is final so far as man is concerned. And as God cannot be thought of as acting contrary to His own nature in any thing that He does, His nature was the ultimate factor in determining man's nature. Consequently, whatever is an abuse of man's God-given nature is at the same time a violation of God's nature. Moreover, when we conceive the essence of sin as abnormality, we have done more than simply reach a basal conception which seems to be both in harmony with the Scriptures and founded upon that which is ultimate. We have also relieved the preacher of his predicament. This conception of the essence of sin can be preached at all times without embarrassment. Sin can be painted in the darkest colors possible to the human mind and speech, and the most earnest possible appeal to men to save themselves because of the blessedness of the saved life made immediately after, and neither the preacher nor his auditors be conscious of any inconsistency. And, further, the presentation of sin as abnormality can certainly be made with power. Sin can be shown to be indeed exceedingly sinful and unworthy, the crime that embraces in its vast depths of blackness all other crimes. The saved life can be shown in harmony

with present-day thinking to be illuminated by a light that shines more and more unto the perfect day. And the brightness of this growing day will appeal mightily to men falling ever deeper into the deadening gloom and chill of that darkness. Surely it may be urged that whatever thus promises to liberate and empower the heralds of the cross is worthy of wide and most careful consideration.