

## THE EXCEEDING SINFULNESS OF SIN

We come now to verses 27-30, our Lord's second illustration of His teaching with respect to the law. *'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.'* The Pharisees and scribes had reduced the commandment which prohibits adultery to the mere physical act of adultery; and again they imagined that, as long as they were not actually guilty of the act itself, the commandment had nothing to say to them and they were perfectly innocent as far as it was concerned. It is the same thing again. Once more they had taken the letter of the law and reduced it to one particular matter, and thereby had nullified it. In particular, they had forgotten the whole spirit of the law. As we have seen, this is something that is fundamentally vital to a true understanding of the New Testament gospel: 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.'

There is a very simple way of looking at this. The real trouble with the Pharisees and scribes was that they had never even read the Ten Commandments properly. If they had truly considered and studied them, they would have seen that you cannot take each one in isolation. For example, the tenth says that we must never covet our neighbor's wife, and that, obviously, should be taken in conjunction with this command not to commit adultery. The apostle Paul, in that striking statement of his in Romans 7, confesses that he himself had been guilty of that very error. He says that it was when he realized that the law said, 'Thou shalt not covet', that he began to understand the meaning of lust. Before that he had been thinking of the law in terms of action only; but the law of God does not stop at mere action, it says 'Thou shalt not covet'. The law had always stressed the importance of the heart, and these people, with their mechanical notions of worshipping God and their purely mechanical conception of obedience, had entirely forgotten that. Our Lord, therefore, is anxious to stress that important truth and to impress it upon His followers. Those who think they can worship God and obtain salvation in terms of their own actions are always guilty of this error. That is why they never truly understand the Christian way of salvation. They have never seen that ultimately it is a question of the heart, but think that, as long as they do not do certain things and as long as they try to do certain good works, they can put themselves right in the sight of God. To that, as we have seen already, our Lord replies always, 'Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.' Our Lord is concerned here to bring out that principle once more. They said in effect, 'As long as you do not commit adultery you have kept this law.' He says: 'Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.'

Here again we have our Lord's teaching with regard to the nature of sin. The whole purpose of the law, as Paul reminds us, was to show the exceeding sinfulness of sin. But by misunderstanding it in this way, the Pharisees had nullified it. Nowhere, perhaps, do we have such a terrible exposure of sin as it really is as in the words of our Lord at this particular point.

I know, of course, that the doctrine of sin is not popular today. People dislike the whole idea, and try to explain it away psychologically, in terms of development and temperament. Man has evolved out of the animal, they say, and he is just sloughing off very slowly these relics and remnants of his animal past and his animal nature. Thus the whole doctrine of sin is entirely denied and avoided. But, obviously, if that is our view and position, the Scriptures must be quite meaningless to us, because everywhere in the New Testament, as in the Old Testament also, this is something which is central. That is why we must consider it, for there is nothing at the present time which is more urgently necessary than that we should truly grasp the biblical doctrine with respect to sin. I assert that most of our failures and troubles in the Church, as well as in the world, are due to the fact that we have not really understood this doctrine. We have all been influenced by the idealism that has been controlling thought for the past hundred years, this idea that man was evolving towards perfection, and that education and culture were going to put us right. Thus we have never taken seriously this tremendous teaching which is found from beginning to end in the Bible; and most of our troubles arise from this source.

Let me illustrate what I mean. I suggest that unless we are clear about the doctrine of sin we shall never truly understand the New Testament way of salvation. Take, for instance, the death of our Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross. Look at all the misunderstanding with regard to that. The great question one has to face is; Why did He die upon the cross? Why did He set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem and refuse to allow His followers to defend Him? Why did He say that, if He desired, He could command twelve legions of angels to protect Him, but that if He did so He could not fulfill all righteousness? What is the meaning of the death upon the cross? Now I maintain that if we do not understand the doctrine of sin, we shall never really know the answers to these questions. There is only one way to understand the death upon the cross and it is this:

There was no other good enough  
To pay the price of sin;  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of heaven, and let us in.

It is the problem of sin that accounts for it. Indeed the incarnation would never

have been necessary were it not for sin. The problem of sin is as profound as that. To tell mankind what to do is not enough. God had done that in the law given through Moses, but no one had kept it. 'There is none righteous, **no, not one.**' (Rom. 3:10) All the exhortations to men and women to live a better life had failed before ever Christ came. The Greek philosophers had all lived and taught before His birth. Knowledge and information and all these things are not enough. Why? Because of sin in the human heart. Thus the only way to understand the New Testament doctrine of salvation is to start with the doctrine of sin. Whatever else sin may be, it is at least something that could be dealt with only by the coming of the eternal Son of God from heaven into this world and by His actually going to the death of the cross. That had to happen; there was no other way. God, I say with reverence, would never have allowed His only-begotten, beloved Son to suffer in the way He did unless it was absolutely essential: and it was essential because of sin.

But the same is true of the New Testament doctrine of regeneration. Consider all the teaching about being born again, and the new creation, which is to be found right through the Gospels and Epistles. That is meaningless unless you understand the New Testament doctrine of sin. But if you do understand it, then you can see quite clearly that unless a man is born again, and given a new nature and a new heart, he cannot possibly be saved. But regeneration is meaningless to people who have a negative view of sin and do not realize its profundity. This, then, is the point at which we must start. So if you dislike the New Testament doctrine of sin, it simply means that you are not a Christian. For you cannot be one without believing that you must be born again and without realizing that nothing but the death of Christ upon the cross saves you and reconciles you to God. All who are trusting to their own efforts are denying the gospel, and the reason for that is always that they have never seen themselves as sinners or understood the New Testament doctrine of sin. This is a crucial matter.

This doctrine, therefore, is absolutely vital in determining our conception of true evangelism. There is no true evangelism without the doctrine of sin, and without an understanding of what sin is. I do not want to be unfair, but I say that a gospel which merely says 'Come to Jesus', and offers Him as a Friend, and offers a marvelous new life, without convicting of sin, is not New Testament evangelism. The essence of evangelism is to start by preaching the law; and it is because the law has not been preached that we have had so much superficial evangelism. Go through the ministry of our Lord Himself and you cannot but get the impression that at times, far from pressing people to follow Him and to decide for Him, He put great obstacles in their way. He said in effect: 'Do you realize what you are doing? Have you counted the cost? Do you realize where it may lead you? Do you know that it means denying yourself, taking up your cross daily and following Me?' True evangelism, I say, because

of this doctrine of sin, must always start by preaching the law. This means that we must explain that mankind is confronted by the holiness of God, by His demands, and also by the consequences of sin. It is the Son of God Himself who speaks about being cast into hell. If you do not like the doctrine of hell you are just disagreeing with Jesus Christ. He, the Son of God, believed in hell; and it is in His exposure of the true nature of sin that He teaches that sin ultimately lands men in hell. So evangelism must start with the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the demands of the law, the punishment meted out by the law and the eternal consequences of evil and wrong-doing. It is only the man who is brought to see his guilt in this way who flies to Christ for deliverance and redemption. Any belief in the Lord Jesus Christ which is not based on that is not a true belief in Him. You can have a psychological belief even in the Lord Jesus Christ; but a true belief sees in Him one who delivers us from the curse of the law. True evangelism starts like that, and obviously is primarily a call to repentance, 'repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.'

In exactly the same way this doctrine of sin is also vital to a true conception of holiness; and here again I think we see its urgent relevance at the present time. Not only has our evangelism been superficial, our conception of holiness has been superficial also.' Far too often there have been people who have been smug and glibly satisfied with themselves because they are not guilty of certain things-adultery, for example-and therefore think that they are all right. But they have never examined their heart. Self-satisfaction, smugness and glibness are the very antithesis of the New Testament doctrine of holiness. Here we see holiness as a matter of the heart, and not merely a matter of conduct; it is not only a man's deeds that count but his desires; not only must we not commit, we must not even covet. It penetrates to the very depths, and thus this conception of holiness leads to constant watchfulness and self-examination. 'Watch ye', says the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. 'Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.' Search your own heart and discover whether there is any evil there. That is New Testament holiness. How much more disconcerting it is than that superficial conception of holiness which thinks only in terms of action.

Above all, this doctrine of sin leads us to see the absolute need of a power greater than ourselves to deliver us. It is a doctrine that makes a man run to Christ and rely upon Him; it makes him realize that without Him he can do nothing. So again I would say that the New Testament way of presenting holiness is not just to say, 'Would you like to live life with a capital "L" ? Would you like to be permanently happy?' No, it is to preach this doctrine of sin, it is to reveal man to himself so that, having seen himself, he will abhor himself and become poor in spirit and meek, he will mourn, he will hunger and thirst after righteousness, he will fly to Christ and abide in Him. It is not an

experience to be received so much as a life to be lived and a Christ to be followed.

Finally, it is surely only a true grasp of the New Testament doctrine of sin that enables us to realize the greatness of God's love to us. Do you feel that your love to God is weak and faint and that you do not love Him as much as you should? Let me remind you again that this is the ultimate test of our profession. We are meant to *love* God, not only to believe certain things about Him. These men of the New Testament loved Him and they loved the Lord Jesus Christ. Read the biographies of the saints and you will find that they had a love for God which became greater and greater. Why do not we love God as we should? It is because we have never realized what He has done for us in Christ, and this itself is because we have not realized the nature and the problem of sin. It is only as we see what sin really is in the sight of God, and realize that, nevertheless, He did not spare His only Son, that we begin to understand and to measure His love. So if you want to love God more, grasp this doctrine of sin, and as you realize what it meant to Him, and what He has done about it, you will see that His love is indeed 'so amazing, so divine'.

There, then, are the reasons for concentrating upon this doctrine of sin. But now let us look at what our Lord actually says about it. There is no true understanding of the gospel of salvation, no true evangelism, no true holiness, no true knowledge of the love of God unless we realize what sin is. Well, what is it? Let us first attempt just a brief analysis of what our Lord says about it, and then we can go on to state what He says in these same verses about how we can be delivered from it. It is no use talking about deliverance from sin until we know what sin is. There must be a radical diagnosis before we can begin to think of treatment. Here is the diagnosis.

The first thing our Lord emphasizes is what we may call *the depth or the power of sin*. 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' He does not say 'As long as you do not do the act all is well'; rather 'I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.' Sin is not merely a matter of actions and of deeds; it is something within the heart that leads to the action. In other words the teaching here is the characteristic teaching of the Bible everywhere about this subject, namely, that what we must really concentrate upon is not so much sins as sin. Sins are nothing but the symptoms of a disease called sin and it is not the symptoms that matter but the disease, for it is the disease that kills and not the symptoms. Symptoms 'can vary tremendously. I may see one person propped up in bed, breathing painfully and in acute distress; and I say that person is desperately ill suffering from pneumonia or something like that. But I may see another person lying flat on his back in bed, no distress, no acute symptoms, no pain, no difficult breathing, lying apparently at ease and in comfort. And yet there may be some foul disease, some foul growth in that person's constitution eating away

at the vitals, a disease which will kill him as certainly and as surely as the other. It is not the mode but the fact of death that matters. It is not the symptoms that finally count, but the disease. That is the truth which our Lord here impresses upon us. The fact that you have not committed the act of adultery does not mean you are guiltless. What about your heart? Is there disease there? And His teaching is that what matters is this [horrible] power that is in human nature as the result of sin and the fall. Man was not always like that, for God made him perfect. If you believe in the evolutionary theory, you are really saying that God never made man perfect, but is bringing him to perfection. Therefore there is no true sin. But the Bible teaching is that man was made perfect and that he fell from that perfection, with the result that this power, this canker, has entered human nature and is there as an evil force within. The consequence is that man desires and covets. Quite apart from what is happening round and about him, this thing is within him. I quote again, as I have quoted so often in this connection, that our Lord said it is 'out of the heart' that 'Proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, . . .' Now sin must be understood like this, as a terrible power. It is not so much that I do a thing, it is what makes me do it, what urges me to do it, that matters. There it is in all of us and we must face it-the depth and the power of sin.

But let me say a word about *the subtlety of sin*. Sin is this terrible thing which so deludes and fools us as to make us feel quite happy and contented so long as we have not committed the act. 'Yes', I say, 'I was tempted, but thank God I did not fall.' That is all right up to a point, so long as I am not too content with that. If I am merely satisfied with the fact that I did not do the thing, I am all wrong. I ought to go on and ask: 'But why did I want to do it?' That is where the subtlety of sin comes in. It affects the whole constitution of man. It is not merely something in the animal part of our nature; it is in our mind and outlook, and it makes us think corruptly in that manner. Then think of the clever way in which it insinuates itself into the mind, and the terrible way in which we are guilty of sinning with the mind. There are highly respectable men and women who would never dream of committing an act of adultery, but look at the way in which they enjoy sinning in the mind and in the imagination. We are dealing with practical matters, we are dealing with life as it is. This is what I mean. You have never been guilty of adultery? All right. Would you then answer me this simple question. Why do you read all the details of divorce cases in the newspapers? Why do you do it? Why is it essential that you should read right through these reports? What is your interest? It is not a legal interest, is it? or a social one? What is it? There is only one answer: you are enjoying it. You would not dream of doing these things yourself, but you are doing them by proxy. You are sinning in your heart and mind and in your imagination, and you are therefore guilty of adultery. That is what Christ says. How subtle this awful, terrible thing is! How often do men sin by reading novels and biographies. You read the reviews of a book and find that it contains something about a man's misconduct or behavior, and you buy it. We pretend we have a

general philosophical interest in life, and that we are sociologists reading out of pure interest. No, no; it is because we love the thing; we like it. It is sin in the heart; sin in the mind! A further illustration of this state of sin is found in the way in which we always try to explain away our failures in this respect in terms of eye and hand. We say: 'I was born like that. Look at that other man, he is not like that.' You do not know the other man; and in any case it is the subtlety of sin that would have you explain yourself away in terms of your particular nature—the hand, the foot, the eye or something like that. No, the trouble is in your heart. All else is but the expression. It is that which leads to the sin that matters.

Then there is the *perverting nature and effect of sin*. Sin is something that perverts. Wherefore, says our Lord, 'if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee.' How true that is of what sin does. It is such a devastating, perverting thing that it turns the very instruments that God has given me, and which were meant to minister to my good, into my enemies. There is nothing wrong with the instincts of human nature. They are all God-given; they are excellent. But these very instincts, because of sin, have become our enemies. The things which God put into man to make him man, and to enable him to function have become the cause of his downfall. Why? Because sin twists everything, so that precious gifts such as the hand or the eye may become a nuisance to me, and I have, metaphorically, to cut them off and pluck them out. I have to get rid of them. Sin has perverted man, turning good itself into evil. Read again the way in which Paul expounded that. This, he says, is what sin has done to man; it has made the law of God, which is holy and just and good, into something that actually leads a man to sin (Rom. vii). The very fact that the law tells me not to do a thing makes me think of that thing. That then brings it to my imagination, and I end by doing it. But if the law had not forbidden me to do it, I would not have done so. 'Unto the pure all things are pure.' Yes, but if you are not pure, some things which are good in themselves may be harmful. That is why I never believe in giving sex-morality teaching to children in schools. You are introducing them to sin. You are telling them about things they never knew before, and they are not 'pure'. Therefore you cannot act on the assumption that such teaching will lead to good. That is the whole tragedy of modern education; it is based entirely on a psychological theory that does not recognize sin, instead of on New Testament teaching. There is that within us that drives us to sin. The law is right and good and pure. The trouble is in us and in our perverted natures.

Finally, sin is something which is *destructive*. 'If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee.' Why? 'It is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.' Sin destroys man; it introduced death into the life of man and death into the world. It always leads to death, and ultimately to hell, suffering and punishment. It is hateful to God, it is abhorrent to Him. And I say with

reverence that because God is God sin must lead to hell. 'The wages of sin is death.' God and sin are utterly incompatible, and therefore sin, of necessity, leads to hell. He is of such pure countenance that He cannot look upon sin — it is so utterly hateful to Him.

That is the biblical, the New Testament doctrine of sin. 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' Of course not! But is it in our hearts? Is it in our imagination? Do we like it? God forbid that any of us should be able to look at this holy law of God and feel satisfied. If we do not feel unclean at this moment, God have mercy upon us. If we can conceivably be satisfied with our lives because we have never committed an act of adultery or of murder or any one of these things, I say that we do not know ourselves nor the blackness and the foulness of our own hearts. We must listen to the teaching of the blessed Son of God and examine ourselves, examine our thoughts, our desires, **and our** imagination. And unless we feel that we are vile and foul, and need to be washed and cleansed, unless we feel utterly helpless with a terrible poverty of spirit, and unless we are hungering and thirsting after righteousness, I say, God have mercy upon us.

I thank God that I have a gospel which tells me that Another who is spotless and pure and utterly holy has taken my sin and my guilt upon Himself, I am washed in His precious blood, and He has given me His own nature. When I realized that I needed a new heart, I found, thank God, that He had come to give it me, and He has given it.

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;  
Come quickly from above;  
Write Thy new name upon my heart,  
Thy new, best name of Love.

Let that be our prayer.

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