

Difficult Texts Explained

by Charles Ewing Brown

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Transcript

difficult-texts-explained.pdf" txtUrl: "/pdf-text/text/c/charles-ewing-brown---difficult-texts-explained.txt" thumbnailUrl: "" hasTranscript: true oneLinerSummary: "The sermon clarifies difficult biblical texts regarding sin and salvation, emphasizing the grace of God and the possibility of living a righteous life." sermonType: "teaching" topics: - name: "Christian Doctrine" slug: "christian-doctrine" - name: "Entire Sanctification" slug: "entire-sanctification" bibleRefs: outline: - heading: "I" points: - "Understanding difficult Christian doctrines" - "The necessity of earnest study" - "The confusion in contemporary beliefs" - heading: "II" points: - "The doctrine of universal sinfulness" - "The nature of inherited sin from Adam" - "The role of grace in salvation" - heading: "III" points: - "Interpreting difficult scriptures" - "The importance of context in biblical texts" - "Examples of misunderstood verses" - heading: "IV" points: - "The concept of perfection in the Bible" - "The distinction between sin and sinful tendencies" - "The role of righteousness in believers" - heading: "V" points: - "Addressing common misconceptions" - "The interpretation of Paul's writings" - "The assurance of salvation and holiness" faq: - q: "What is the main focus of the sermon?" a: "The sermon

focuses on explaining difficult texts in the Bible related to sin and salvation." - q: "How does the speaker interpret the concept of sin?" a: "The speaker emphasizes that while all have inherited a sinful nature, salvation through Christ allows for freedom from sin." - q: "What does the speaker say about perfection?" a: "The speaker argues that perfection is attainable through God's grace, contradicting the belief that Christians must live in sin." - q: "Why are some biblical texts difficult to understand?" a: "Many texts are misunderstood due to lack of context and the figurative language used in the Bible." - q: "What is the significance of Paul's writings?" a: "Paul's writings are often misinterpreted, but they actually support the possibility of living a righteous life through Christ." quotes: - "The Christian teacher of the present day is confronted by a confused situation." - "We believe that all the scriptures in the Bible dealing with the subject of sin can be interpreted honestly and truthfully in the light of these principles." - "To deny this is to contradict our Lord Jesus Christ, who said: 'Blessed are the pure in heart.'" applicationPoints: - "Engage in earnest study of the Bible to better understand its teachings." - "Recognize the importance of context when interpreting scripture." - "Embrace the belief that through Christ, one can achieve a life free from sin." keywords: - "Christian doctrine" - "universal sinfulness" - "grace of God" - "difficult scriptures" - "perfection" - "righteousness" - "salvation" - "interpretation" ---

Doubtless it is just as hard to understand the difficult points of Christian doctrine without earnest study as it is to understand the science of chemistry or of medicine. One does not have to understand these sciences in order to benefit by taking the proper remedy for a given disease, but he must study earnestly if he is ever able to learn why the chemical affects him as it does. The Christian teacher of the present day is confronted by a confused situation. Everywhere the world is filled with careless, semi-heathen people who have no consciousness of sin. Apparently millions of wicked people today do not think they are sinners at all. They judge by purely naturalistic, animal standards and have no fear of God before their eyes. On the other hand there are a vast number of believers in traditional Christianity who misunderstand the doctrine of universal sinfulness in human nature without the grace of God and suppose that this sinfulness attaches to human life as long as life lasts.

Over against these two extremes, the doctrine which we hold teaches that all men inherited a sinful nature from Adam. This tendency to sin does not involve guilt until the child has grown up to a point where he rejects Christ and accepts the sin and guilt of the race as his own. We believe this rejection inevitably happens, and yet we believe that in Christ salvation from all sin here and now is granted as a free gift. This salvation is realized in two crises: first, justification and regeneration in which sin is forgiven and washed away; and a second crisis of entire sanctification in which the sinful tendency is removed in an epochal experience of the grace of God. Since there are no less than three different conditions of human nature described in the Bible, and inasmuch as biblical language is popular and figurative rather than technical and systematic, it stands to reason that a careless reader of the Bible may easily stumble upon a text which he will not understand through lack of proper knowledge of the rest of Scripture. Peter explained this danger in connection with the writings of Paul. He said that in these writings there "are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction" (II Pet. 3:16). We believe that all the scriptures in the Bible dealing with the subject of sin can be interpreted honestly and truthfully in the light of these principles. Moreover, we insist that they cannot be rightly understood otherwise. Following are some scriptures which have been interpreted to mean that no Christian can live above a constant course of committing sin.

THE STARS NOT PURE?

"Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be more pure than his maker? How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth. What is man, that he should be clean? and he which is born of a woman, that he should be righteous? Behold, he putteth no trust in his saints; yea, the heavens are not clean in his sight. How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water? How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman? Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in his sight. How much less man, that is a worm? and the son of man, which is a worm?" (Job 4:17-19; 15:14-16; 25:4-6). We believe that the average scholar, free from dogmatic bias, would explain this language as an example of oriental emphasis in which a proposition is stated in an extreme form in order to lay stress upon it. Another illustration is that of the saying of Christ that a man must hate his father and mother in order to follow the Lord (Luke 14:26). Viewed in this light, the remark that the stars are not pure in his sight is simply poetry exalting the unapproachable holiness of God. However, Bible teachers who interpret the Scriptures in other than a literal manner are often accused of evading the truth. Therefore we are prepared to explain this scripture in a literal manner. The Book of Job is remarkable in that so many people are quoted. Even the devil is quoted in that book: "All that a man hath will he give for his life" (2:4). That is the Bible and it is true as a statement of the fact that Satan uttered it, but it is not true in its own essential meaning. Likewise, the texts which, as some assume, teach the necessity of the sinful life of Christians are quoted from the speeches of Job's comforters. The Almighty himself said that Job was a perfect and an upright man (Job 1:8). Then Job in turn described these "comforters" as "forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value" (13:4). And again he said: "How then comfort ye me in vain, seeing in your answers there remaineth falsehood?" (21:34). But we have even stronger evidence that these remarks of Job's comforters were false doctrine, for God himself said: "My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath" (42:7). After thus rebuking these false teachers the Almighty said: "And my servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like my servant Job."

Therefore, on the simplest literalistic basis, there is word for word proof that all this talk about God not trusting even his saints is false. On the contrary, even the Old Testament contains abundance of testimony to the existence of perfect men in that generation. "Noah was a just man and perfect in his generation" (Gen. 6:9). To Abraham God said: "Walk before me, and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1). "Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God" (Deut. 18:13). "Mark the perfect man" (Ps. 37:37). "I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way" (Ps. 101:2). "The upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it" (Prov. 2:21). "I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart" (II Kings 20:3). "To show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him" (II Chron. 16:9).

CAN A PERSON BE TOO GOOD?

"Be not righteous overmuch; neither make thyself overwise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?" (Eccles. 7:16). This text has puzzled many uneducated people. We think this text is understood by interpreting it as a warning against hypocrisy, an overstrained effort to put oneself in a better light than his fellows. Robert Burns pours his scorn upon the "unco guid," and Jesus rebuked the Pharisees who pretended to be better than they were. This is all reasonable, but to suppose that in the Bible one should find a caution against purity, holiness, and ardent devotion to the highest ideals is to slander the book instead of exalt it.

DO ALL MEN SIN?

In three places in the Old Testament we read similar statements: "There is no man that sinneth not" (I Kings 8:46; II Chron. 6:36). "There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (Eccles. 7:20). A very cogent argument can be made for the statement that the New Testament experience is higher than anything possible in the Old Testament. It is spoken of as the better testament (Heb. 7:22), the better covenant (8:6), and cherishes a better hope (7:19). It is not necessary, however, to enter into an extended argument regarding the possibility of salvation from sinning in the Old Testament age inasmuch as these texts in the Hebrew simply mean there is no man who may not sin, and upon that point we can all agree.

DO THE RIGHTEOUS FALL INTO SIN SEVEN TIMES A DAY?

"A just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again" (Prov. 24:16). In the first place it is important to note that this does not say "seven times in a day." It might be seven times in a lifetime, although, of course, the seven is only a figurative number to express perfection. Whatever kind of falling it is, this represents the very worst extreme imaginable. If it is the fate of godly people to fall into the worst of sin, the outlook is sad indeed. However, it is not of sin that he is talking. The meaning is brought out plainly in Moffatt's translation. Evil men are planning plunder: "Villain, hands off the good man's house! ransack not his abode. A good man may fall seven times, but he rises; an evil man is crushed by a calamity" (24:15-16, Moffatt). In other words, the prowlers who seek to destroy the welfare of the righteous will be frustrated; no difference how many times the righteous man falls into calamity he will recover himself.

HAS PERFECTION COLLAPSED?

"I have seen an end of all perfection: but thy commandment is exceeding broad" (Ps. 119:96). Merely to read a modern translation of this passage is to understand it: "I see a limit to all things, but thy law has a boundless range" (Moffatt). In the original language this verse has simply the same meaning as the following passage in Isaiah: "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever" (Isa. 40:6-8).

WHO HAS MADE HIS HEART PURE?

"Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?" (Prov. 20:9). This text certainly does not mean to teach that Christ cannot cleanse the heart; it is simply another way of saying that no man can cleanse his heart and make it pure by his own unaided, natural effort. There are people, however, whose hearts have been made pure by the grace of God. To deny this is to contradict our Lord Jesus Christ, who said: "Blessed are the pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8). It is God's will to "purify unto himself a peculiar people" (Titus 2:14), "purifying their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9).

ARE NONE GOOD?

"Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God" (Matt. 19:16-17). Teachers of sinning Christianity seek to wrest this text to prove that there are no good people in the world, but in doing so they skirt close to the edge of blasphemy; for if their interpretation is correct, they insinuate that even Jesus was not good and therefore there was sin in him. The young man used the word "good" in mere formal courtesy, as "Gracious One." Jesus penetrates to the moral meaning of the word "good," seeking to discover a deeper

meaning in it than the young man had surmised. The text teaches that God is the original fountain of all goodness. No one is good by nature and no one can be good except by the supernatural gift of the grace of God, but that this grace given does make men good is proved by the infallible words of Holy Scripture: "Joseph . . . was a good man" (Luke 23:50); "Barnabas . . . was a good man" (Acts 11:22-24); selfish people are "despisers of those that are good" (II Tim. 3:2-3); "A bishop must be . . . a lover of good men" (Titus 1:7-8).

There is a group of texts in Romans which is supposed to deny any possibility of a sinless life. The gist of these texts is: "There is none righteous, no not one" (3:10). This passage is taken from Psalms 14 and 53 and Isaiah 59, and reference to these origins of the quotations will show clearly that the Apostle was writing about wicked, unsaved people, and the purpose of his discourse is to prove the universal nature of sin in the unsaved. To apply this to Christians is to pervert the Word of God. Compare this with the following scripture: "He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous" (I John 3:7). "Every one that doeth righteousness is born of him" (I John 2:29). Zacharias and Elizabeth "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6). "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16). "Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them" (Matt. 13:17). Our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). "Stand in awe, and sin not" (Ps. 4:4). "Awake to righteousness, and sin not" (I Cor. 15:34). "Go, and sin no more" (John 8: lib). "How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Rom. 6:2). "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not. He that committeth sin is of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin" (I John 3:6-9). "Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

WAS PAUL SOLD UNDER SIN?

The seventh chapter of Romans has been a battleground of interpretation for centuries. The Greek Fathers consistently interpreted the experience there described as that of a conscientious, unconverted man trying to live right in his own strength. This was the orthodox interpretation of the text until the time of Augustine, who died A.D. 430. Augustine himself followed this interpretation until his conflict with Pelagius. Since Pelagius did not believe in the inheritance of the sinful tendency in mankind, Augustine revolted to the furthest extreme in combating Pelagius' views. It was then that Augustine adopted the view that the seventh chapter of Romans describes the experience of a converted man.

Our explanation is very simple: we revert to the doctrine of the ancient church. Paul is describing the condition of a man before his conversion, and yet not the condition of every man but only of those who are striving against sin. The present tense used in that passage is only an example of the historical present wherein the writer uses the present tense for the sake of emphasis. His delight in the law of God (vs. 22) was simply the preference of a decent man for justice and fair play. The law which wars against these ideals and brings him into captivity to the law of sin is the old carnal nature of sin whose victory marks him as an unconverted man. And the change which he later experienced is pointed out in the second verse of the eighth chapter: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." I could bring a long array of able modern commentators to support this interpretation. Prof. C. Anderson Scott, writing in The Abingdon Bible Commentary on this passage, says: "Paul writes in the present tense, but he is really projecting his mind back to the period before his conversion, when he had found the promise held out by the Law or on

behalf of the Law a hopeless deception." [53] However, Dr. Scott concedes that there is a struggle with the indwelling power of sin in the heart of the believer even after his conversion, and he is in doubt whether that struggle is not somewhat reflected in this chapter.

WAS PAUL'S THORN SINFUL?

"Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (II Cor. 12:7). The flesh with which Paul was here afflicted was not the sinful nature which Paul sometimes calls flesh, but his physical human nature, the flesh to which he refers in Galatians 2:20 when he says: "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God." Although Paul prayed three times to be delivered from this thorn, God comforted him with the assurance: "My grace is sufficient for thee." And out of this Paul drew the consolation: "I will rather glory in my infirmities." Then he goes on to define the infirmities: "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake." There is all the explanation of the thorn that any earnest student need seek. The thorn in his flesh was persecutions and distresses which he endured for the sake of the gospel.

ARE OUR BODIES VILE?

Pleaders for the necessity of the sinful life in Christians quote Paul as follows: "For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:20-21). All that is necessary to explain this verse is to quote the comment of Bishop J. B. Lightfoot on this passage. All scholars know that J. B. Lightfoot was one of the greatest New Testament scholars of modern times. He writes "of our humiliation, i. e., the body which we bear in our present low estate, which is exposed to all the passions, sufferings, and indignities of this life. The English translation, 'our vile body,' seems to countenance the Stoic contempt of the body, of which there is no tinge in the original." [54]

Keeping the Body Under

It is argued that Paul's body was a body of sin because he wrote in his letter to the church in Corinth: "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (I Cor. 9:27). If we are willing to concede the truth of the Scriptures which teach that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Ghost (6:19) and that it is possible to be saved from all sin (I John 1:7), then this scripture need not give us any difficulty. It is self-evident that before Adam sinned, and while he was still in a state of perfection, he was possessed of all the appetites, drives, and instincts of human nature. In this earthly life these appetites furnish an occasion of sin. However, they also furnish an opportunity for spiritual development and growth in grace as one practices godly self-control regarding them. The appetites of the body are just like the cylinders in an automobile engine: they drive the machine without regard to its moral objectives just as an automobile engine will drive the automobile off the road and into the ditch quite as readily as it will drive it along the highway. It is the responsibility of the driver to exercise wise and diligent control. We all know how earnest and watchful the driver of a high-powered automobile must be on the highway, and it is just such self-control which Paul declared he exercised over his body.

DO WE DIE DAILY?

It is said that even Paul could not have enjoyed complete and enduring victory over sin because he said, "I die daily" (I Cor. 15:31). Any thoughtful person who will read the following verse will certainly have no trouble with this text: "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus" (in other words, Paul's life was exposed to peril like that of the gladiators in the arena). In verse 30 he said: "Why stand we in jeopardy every hour?" Why he was in jeopardy and how he died daily is further explained in his own words: "In all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; ... by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report: as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed" (II Cor. 6:4-9). Reading this passage as a testimony to Paul's spiritual experience will prove that Paul professed the grace of full salvation.

WAS PAUL PERFECT?

Paul wrote, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect" (Phil. 3:12). It is evident that there are different kinds of perfection mentioned in the New Testament. Even Jesus says, "And the third day I shall be perfected" (Luke 13:32). The perfection to which Paul had not yet attained was the glorified experience of resurrection from the dead. This is the obvious meaning of the passage; it is so plain that only those blinded by dogmatism can fail to see it. In verse 11 of this same chapter Paul says: "If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead." The meaning is simply that Paul denies that he has been raised from the dead in his mortal body. Why should anybody make such a denial? Is that not too plain to need proof? So it would seem, but there were false teachers who were spiritualizing the resurrection, some saying that the resurrection is past already (II Tim. 2:18). Others twisted Paul's own words (Eph. 2:6 and Col. 3:1) in order to maintain that the experience of regeneration was all the resurrection that was to be expected.

WAS PAUL THE CHIEF OF SINNERS?

Paul wrote: "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (I Tim. 1:15). It stands to reason that if Paul was the chief of sinners at the very moment when he was preaching the gospel and preparing to die a martyr's death as one of the very foremost apostles, then no human being can be anything better than a sinner. Doubtless there is a sense in which a man's past record lives in history in spite of all he might do to change it.

Paul's record as a persecutor of Christ was a source of pain to him as long as he lived. Paul's language in I Timothy 1:15 is simply an instance of the historical present tense, which an eloquent writer or speaker uses in order to bring all the past vividly before the mind of the hearer or reader. It is nothing less than a wicked burlesque on the gospel to claim that one who was not a whit behind the chiefest apostles (II Cor. 11:5; 12:11) should be at the same time chief of sinners.

No atheist has ever been bold enough to slander Christianity as gravely as that. Slander it would be if that interpretation were true. As an apostle, he was one of the stewards of the mystery revealed unto the holy apostles (Eph. 3:5). He called the Thessalonian church to witness, "and God also, how horny and justly and unblamably we behaved ourselves among you that believe" (I Thess. 2:10). He made a profession of Christian perfection: "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded" (Phil. 3:15).

On his journey to Rome he was sure "that, when I come unto you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:29). He was crucified with Christ, and Christ lived in him (Gal. 2:20). God inspired him to write a portion of the New Testament. Shortly after he wrote about being the

chief of sinners, he said: "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Tim. 4:6-8).

He advised the Corinthians to "awake to righteousness, and sin not" (I Cor. 15:34). "Shall we continue in sin," he asks, "that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Rom. 6:1-2). "Whosoever abideth in him," writes John, "sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him ... He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.

Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (I John 3:6-9). Paul lived in Christ for many years (II Cor. 12:2); he had seen Jesus Christ our Lord (I Cor. 9:1). He said: "I know whom I have believed" (II Tim. 1:12). It is impossible to reconcile these scriptures with the theory that a man can be the chief of sinners and the chief of apostles without hypocrisy at the same instant of his life.

PAUL PROFESSED ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

"How shall WE, THAT ARE DEAD TO SIN, live any longer therein?" (Rom. 6:2). His old man was crucified with Christ (vs. 6). He testified: "I AM CRUCIFIED with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and THE LIFE WHICH I NOW LIVE IN THE FLESH I LIVE BY THE FAITH OF THE SON OF GOD" (Gal. 2:20). This crucifixion was both inward and outward: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I UNTO THE WORLD" (6:14). The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me FREE FROM THE LAW OF SIN AND DEATH (Rom. 8:2). He served the Lord with all humility and told the Ephesian elders that he kept back nothing that was profitable for them (Acts 20:19-20), thus he had perfect humility and perfect freedom from the fear of man. These are marks of that perfect love which casteth out fear (I John 4:18). Paul never makes a confession of sin in his prayers, but prays for the sanctification of his hearers (I Thess. 5:23). He exhorts his hearers to imitate the purity of his life: "Those things, which you have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do" (Phil. 4:9). "I beseech you, be ye followers of me" (I Cor. 4:16). He could exhort others to follow him because "ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblamably we behaved ourselves among you that believe" (I Thess. 2:10), and because he commended himself to every man's conscience in the sight of God (II Cor. 4:2). He had perfect love even for his bitterest enemies. The Jews beat him five times with forty stripes save one (11:24), and yet he loved them with the deepest passion of love: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:1-3). This is perfect love, the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ

CAN WE SAY THAT WE HAVE NO SIN?

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8). The Apostle was writing in the sunset of the Apostolic Age. Around him was the gathering darkness of a deep heresy called Gnosticism, which persisted for generations to torment and perplex the church and its leaders. Dr. Daniel Steele writes: "Just what John means will be seen when we find what great errors he is writing against. He lived long enough to see the germs of so-called Gnosticism springing up to corrupt the church.

Their basal error was dualism, two eternal, uncreated principles in conflict, good and evil, the latter making its abode in matter, and identifying itself therewith in such a way as to be inexpungeable by God himself. One branch of the Gnostics taught that spirit is perfectly free from sin, and cannot be tainted or soiled by it, since sin is limited to the sphere of matter, and there is no bridge nor pontoon from one to the other. Hence the human spirit is sinless, though its material development may be foul with lust, debauchery, gluttony, and drunkenness. The favorite simile of the Gnostics was, the sinless soul in a polluted body is like a golden jewel in a pigsty, encompassed by filth, yet without mixture with it. He who embraced this philosophy had no need of the blood of Christ as the ground of the forgiveness of sin, because his spirit, his real personality, had no sin to be forgiven, no pollution to be cleansed. This is exactly what John means when he says, I John 1:8, 'If we' -- i.e., any Gnostic -- 'say we have no sin,' needing the atonement, 'we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' But if anyone abandons his false philosophy, confesses his sin, and makes a clean breast by his full acknowledgment and genuine repentance, 'he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' This exegesis is in perfect harmony with the announced purpose of the Epistle, 2:1, 'That ye sin not.' It avoids making John flatly contradict himself when he says (3:9), 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.' Above all, it avoids the absurdity of recommending a medicine as a perfect cure, and in the same breath branding every testimony to such a cure through its use as a piece of self-deception, or an unmitigated lie." [55]

MUST WE ALWAYS PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS?

"Forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4).

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

Undoubtedly these are the strongest texts in all the Bible with which to support the doctrine that all Christians sin continually and need constantly to pray for forgiveness of sin. Most holiness people start with the "debts" text and explain that as meaning our human weaknesses and unintentional mistakes. After the "debts" the "sins" are explained as meaning the same thing. But the answer to that is that if these things are not sins why need Christians to pray for forgiveness regarding them?

Although the New Testament contains many prayers, or references to prayer, not once is there any record of any Christian who prayed for forgiveness of sin, nor of a New Testament writer exhorting true Christians so to pray. Paul condemned certain persons for specific sins, but he never sanctioned a general confession of sins on the part of Christians.

What, then, is the meaning of the prayer for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer? It is this: the Lord's Prayer is a social prayer. It is not a prayer for an individual Christian. It is the priestly prayer of all Christians wherein they, as New Testament priests, present 'supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks ... for all men' (I Tim. 2:1), as commanded by Paul.

Many people cannot understand the delicate courtesy of the saints of the New Testament as they include themselves in the things they condemn in order to make their warnings more palatable, even though many fanatics would condemn them for so doing. Take as a single instance the following: "Therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God" (Jas. 3:9).

Does any earnest Christian think for a moment that the Apostle James meant to confess here that he was in the habit of cursing men? The "we" is simply meant to identify himself with all men in the moral government of God.

53 C. Anderson Scott, The Abingdon Bible Commentary, p. 1152

54 J. B. Lightfoot, The Epistle to the Philippians, p. 156

55 Daniel Steele, Half Hours with St. Paul, pp. 147-148

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-ewing-brown-/difficult-texts-explained/>

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