

The Fundamental Quality of Sin

by Charles Ewing Brown

Charles Ewing Brown delves into the fundamental quality of sin, exploring various theories such as sin stemming from ignorance of God, the pursuit of physical pleasures over true happiness, pride as the root of sin, and selfishness as a chief characteristic of sin. He emphasizes that sin is ultimately a rejection of God's love, leading to various forms of rebellion and self-deception. Brown discusses the beginning of sin as a break from God's love, initiated by a lack of faith and trust in God's will, resulting in guilt, corruption, and separation from God.

Description

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Transcript

the-fundamental-quality-of-sin.pdf" txtUrl: "/pdf-text/text/c/charles-ewing-brown---the-fundamental-quality-of-sin.txt" thumbnailUrl: "" hasTranscript: true oneLinerSummary: "The fundamental quality of sin is a willful rejection of God's love, which leads to guilt, corruption, and physical death." sermonType: "expository" topics: - name: "Nature Of Sin" slug: "nature-of-sin" - name: "Rebellion Against God" slug: "rebellion-against-god" bibleRefs: outline: - heading: "The Nature of Sin" - heading: "The Root of Sin" - heading: "The Essence of Sin" - heading: "The Consequences of Sin" - heading: "Guilt and corruption result from sin" - heading: "Physical death is the supreme earthly penalty of sin" faq: - q: "What is the fundamental quality of sin?" a: "The fundamental quality of sin is a willful rejection of God's love." - q: "Is pride the root of sin?" a: "No, pride is a symptom of sin, not the root." - q: "What is the essence of sin?" a: "The essence of sin is rejection of God's love." - q: "What are the consequences of sin?" a: "Guilt and corruption result from sin, and physical death is the supreme earthly penalty." quotes: - "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." - "Guilt has another meaning. It is the sure obligation to punishment." - "The sting of death is sin." applicationPoints: - "Recognize the fundamental quality of sin as a willful rejection of God's love." - "Understand that guilt and corruption result from sin, and physical death is the supreme earthly penalty." - "Seek to develop a love for God that is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost." keywords:

- "sin" - "God's love" - "rejection" - "pride" - "selfishness" - "guilt" - "corruption" - "physical death" - "spiritual death" ---

Writers on the subject of the fundamental quality of sin often make an effort to trace sin to its final meaning. Some say that the fact of sin is explained by man's ignorance of the right. If he knew the right he would do it. Undoubtedly men who really sin are ignorant of God; nevertheless, it is a willful ignorance, and the experience of mankind has shown that it takes more than light and knowledge to make men live good lives. For it sometimes happens that men sin against very great light and knowledge of the truth, thereby making themselves all the greater sinners in spite of their knowledge.

We are told that the end of life is happiness and sin is the substitution of the pleasures of physical sense, appetite, and passion for the true happiness of the good life. To this the answer is that it is certainly true that the life of obedience to God will yield the greatest happiness. Nevertheless, the Bible nowhere teaches that happiness is to be the supreme end of life. It is one of the weaknesses of our modern Christianity that we have set the creature above the creator by interpreting religion purely from the standpoint of what it will do for us, whereas the Bible always interprets religion in the light of what we owe to God. By sinning, men do indeed miss the way of happiness, but that is only incidental to an even greater loss. Furthermore, this theory can lead to asceticism by condemning the innocent enjoyment of the legitimate pleasures of this earthly life.

Some there are who say that the root idea of sin is pride. Man departs from God by exalting himself into rebellion against God's supreme law. It is certainly true that pride is sinful and is doubtless a potent cause of rebellion against God. Nevertheless, we believe that pride is a symptom, a fruit of sin, rather than the root sin itself as is indicated by the fact that no one ever becomes proud until he has already fallen into sin.

Many treatises on sin place its essential nature in its chief characteristic, namely, selfishness, but it is possible to show that some sins do not conceivably benefit self. Modern psychologists have described an experience of human nature in which a man turns his hatred inwardly against himself and thus becomes guilty of self-murder. Therefore it seems better to say that the essential sin is deviation from God's love, for whatever cause, and that commonly in human life the first and chief characteristic of this rebellion is seen as selfishness and self-love, the alienation of the love of the heart from God to self.

This self-love manifests itself in many obscure and self-deceptive ways. For example, some men pride themselves on their unselfishness because of their love of their family, friends, or other favored individuals. Psychologists are too much for these men, for they show that such people have by no means escaped from self-love: they have simply identified friends and family with self, and they love these as part of themselves. Proof of this is found in the fact that when one of these friends, or even a close member of the family, boldly violates the supposed interest of that man's self, then his love turns to hatred.

It is the teaching of Paul that faith identifies the believer with Christ in a way somewhat similar to that described by modern psychologists except that love for Christ really does transcend the human self and becomes truly unselfish.

Speaking of sin, Dr. W. B. Pope says: "First, with reference to God, it is the voluntary separation of the human will from the Divine, expressed in disobedience to His law. Second, in relation to man, it is guilt, as the consciousness of personal wrong and personal liability to punishment." [28]

I would amend this by placing the whole personality at the point of alienation and say not only the will but also the love of the heart separates from God.

We believe that the essence of sin is rejection of the love of God. We prove this by two facts: first, God is love; second, God's law, which all men must violate in order to become sinners, is the law commanding us to love God and mankind. This puts the whole doctrine of sin on a voluntary basis so far as its beginning is concerned. Once a man shot himself in the head and thus blinded his eyes forever. After this man became blind he was in a condition from which he could not extricate himself and his subsequent life of blindness was lived, as we may say, against his will. Nevertheless, his total life of blindness was centered in an act of his own will. He became blind for life, not involuntarily, but because he committed the act that blinded him. In the same way, every sinner is such at the beginning because of his rejection of God's way of love, light, and life.

When a man has turned aside from the love of God he becomes a prey to every form of sin, and thus he falls into the various kinds of sin we have already enumerated, such as selfish pride, lust, spiritual blindness, and the like.

THE BEGINNING OF SIN

If you ask how this stepping aside can occur at the beginning, the answer is that the evident purpose of man's earthly life is the creation of holy character, and that means character which is established in immovable devotion to God. This is not a philosophical fumble in the dark, but a clear statement of Holy Writ. Paul states the object of cleansing and sanctifying Christ's church as being that "he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27).

This purpose of God is applied to individuals by Paul when he describes the atonement as being intended to "present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight" (Col. 1:22). And to this great purpose Paul bends all the energies of his being, preaching and teaching "that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (vs. 28). The supreme goal of human life is expressed in Jude as being "to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24).

But this holy character is not formed without the strain and stress, the tempest and struggle of combat, for "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). God gave man a holy nature at the beginning, but this nature was not only innocent of sin, it was also ignorant of evil. It had had no experience of contact with evil. If man had held with perfect faith to the revelation of God's will not to eat of the tree of knowledge, then he would have been greatly strengthened. And by continuing in the path of faith and loving conformity to God's will he would have matured in the holy character of a friend of God and the end of his existence would have been achieved. It is our belief that he would in due time have passed on to heaven without dying -- but that is another story.

How Man Fell

Let us, then, examine the process by which man fell. The key is found in I John 2:16: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Thus we see that the break with God's love began by a transfer of man's love from God to some other thing. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (vs. 16). The lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh are sinful by being

contaminated by the sinful quality of man's nature; but at the very beginning, before man had ever sinned, there were certain instincts and desires which were necessary for the maintenance of his life. These desires were innocent at the beginning but became the occasion of sin. When Eve looked upon the forbidden fruit she was influenced by the desire of the eyes. When she imagined how good it would taste, she was moved by the desires of the flesh. As these desires moved her she let down the shield of faith; in other words, she began to doubt God. This breaking of the tie of faith broke the circle of perfect love in her heart and opened the door for the rebellious action which constitutes sinning. The first sin, therefore, and the beginning of any course of sin, is a sin against love, which originates in a lack of faith or personal confidence and trust in God.

WHAT IS THE LOVE OF GOD?

Love is an attraction felt for another person. This attraction manifests itself by approval and admiration of that person, by the desire to be in his company, to please him, and to have his approval and admiration.

Most human love is partial and imperfect, but complete love would affect and influence a man in every power of his being. "The spring of action," writes Aristotle, "thus resolves itself into one single thing, viz., the object of desire. For if there were two faculties acting as springs to action -- reason on the one hand, desire on the other -- they would have to move in virtue of some common character they shared. Now reason, it is found, does not act as a spring of action independently of desire: for settled wish is a form of desire, and when a man is led to act according to his reasonable conviction he is moved as so in a manner corresponding to his wish." [29]

In other words, love is desire, and desire moves every power of the soul. Love moves the mind to admire the beloved. The love of God makes us appreciate the beauty of his eternal truth and thus praise him for his holy and glorious nature. In the region of the emotions love makes one feel deeply toward the beloved. Love to God makes us feel a desire to be with him, to be like him, to see him as he is, and to enjoy the pleasure of his fellowship.

This love is the "expulsive power of a new affection" which repels sin by making us love God and his ways. In the region of the will love manifests itself by doing things which please the lover. Jesus said "If a man love me, he will keep my words" (John 14:23). Thus complete love toward God is seen to affect every phase of human consciousness, and that is what Jesus said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27).

While it is possible, to some extent, to love people whom we do not completely trust, it is nevertheless true that trust, or faith, is a component part of complete, normal love. Any lack of trust or confidence in a person implies fear that that person may do one some injury, more or less, and "he that feareth is not made perfect in love" (I John 4:18). Thus we see that "perfect love casteth out fear" and is only possible in the exercise of a perfect faith. This faith need not be intellectually developed into definite mental conceptions. It may be the simple faith which an infant has in its mother. The child has no idea what the mother is going to do with him or for him, but he has faith that, in his mother's arms, he is perfectly safe and therefore free from all fear, worry, and anxiety about the future. This is the characteristic of proper love to God.

THE BASIS OF LOVE TO GOD

Doubtless our first impulse is to ask, Who is equal to these things? How can man ever exercise such love as that? To this there is but one answer and it is from the Word of God: "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:5). It is something into which our hearts are directed by the Lord: "And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God" (II Thess. 3:5).

This, of course, is a supernatural experience. There is no way by which a man can generate this love in his heart by his own unaided effort. America's greatest psychologist, William James, understood this better than many professed Christians seem to understand it. "I believe," he writes, "that a candid consideration of piecemeal supernaturalism and a complete discussion of all its metaphysical bearings will show it to be the hypothesis by which the largest number of legitimate requirements are met ... What I now say sufficiently indicates to the philosophic reader the place where I belong." 30_

We, too, are not ashamed to stand in this place so boldly held by all the writers of the New Testament.

Having discussed sin as transgression, let us consider its results as guilt and corruption. "Guilt," writes Prof. Wm. Newton Clarke, "results from the commission of sin. From every point of view sin is a dreadful thing and it is dreadful to have willed it and committed it. Guilt is the personal blameworthiness that follows the commission of sin. It consists in the fact that the person in question is the one who has done the deed, and upon whom the blame of it rests and must rest. Such is the guilt, for example, of murder. It is not mere liability to the punishment of murder: that is a misleading idea, and a very inferior one. A trial in a criminal court is designed to ascertain whether the accused is guilty, i.e., whether he is the man who has done the evil deed in question. If he is, liability to punishment follows, but it is not identical with guilt. The guilt consists rather in the fact that the man, wherever he is and whatever he is doing, sleeping or waking, working or playing, following his favorite pursuits or kissing his innocent children, is the man who has murdered another, and upon whom the responsibility and wickedness of the act abide. He is guilty of it: that is to say, he has done it, and is to blame for it" [31]

While guilt is not mere liability to punishment but something even more dreadful, it must be borne in mind that guilt does involve the liability of punishment. "Guilt has another meaning. It is the sure obligation to punishment." [32] This punishment involves spiritual death, which is the separation of the soul from the Holy Spirit, which only giveth life, and the substitution of self for God in the throne room of the soul. This is a punishment because of the measureless evils which it brings on the soul. Moreover, man loses his dominion over his physical and emotional life. He becomes carnally minded and "corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" (Eph. 4:22).

Another penalty of sin is that the universe without and the soul within, being emptied of God, becomes the temple of false gods and man becomes an idolater. "Therefore he . . . changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (Rom. 1:23).

Idolatry is fully as common in so-called Christian lands as in heathenism, for Paul says that covetousness is idolatry. If money is the idol of some people, it stands to reason that there are many other gods which must take the place of the true God in the temple once deserted by him. Sin, having taken its root in the soul, grows in power with each added transgression. The increase in depravity becomes part of the penalty of sin.

Physical death is the supreme earthly penalty of sin but it has its meaning principally because it is the analogue of the spiritual death which brings endless separation from God. This briefly describes the

nature of guilt and penalty. We must remember, however, that in the case of infants who have no proper knowledge of sin, these evils of sin become unfortunate consequences of an act of sin concerning which they have no guilt and in which they suffer no penalty, inasmuch as penalty can only be a consequence of guilt. Even physical death in children is nothing like the terrible thing that it is to sinful adults because, as Paul says "the sting of death is sin."

28 W. B. Pope, A Compendium of Christian Theology, Vol. II, p. 29

29 Aristotle, The Nature of the Soul, III, 10

30 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 523

31 Wm. Newton Clarke, Outline of Christian Theology, p. 246

32 W. B. Pope, A Compendium of Christian Theology, Vol. II, p. 36

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