

Strength Against Sin

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Men live in sin, and yet they have the secret thought that it ought not to be so, that they ought to get rid of it. Even those that have not the law, in this respect “are a law unto themselves,” for “the work of the law [that is, each thing the law enjoins us to do] is written in their hearts; their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts struggling with each other, either accusing or excusing” (Rom 2:15. See Greek).

The groan of humanity, as well as the groan of creation, by reason of sin, has been deep and long. Not always loud; often an undertone, more often drowned in laughter, but still terribly real.

Sin as disease, infectious and hereditary, sin as guilt, inferring divine condemnation and doom, has been acknowledged; and along with the acknowledgement, the sad consciousness has existed that the race was not made for sin, and that man himself, not God, had wrought the wrong. Men in all ages, and of all religions, have in some poor way, put in their protest against sin, “knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death” (Rom 1:32). The fallen sons of Adam, though haters of God and of His law (Rom 1:30), have thus unconsciously become witnesses against themselves, and unwittingly taken the side of God and of His law.

All through the ages has this struggle gone on between the love and the dread of sin, the delight in lust, and the sense of degradation because of it; men clasping the poisoned robe, yet wishing to tear it off; their life steeped in the evil, yet their words so often lavished upon the good.

With much warmth did the ancient pagan wisdom of Greece and Rome utter itself against vice, with deep pathos at times describing the conflict with self, and the victory over the unruly will and the irregular appetite. But it suggested no remedy, and promised no power in aid. It could only say, “Fight on.” Philosophy was helpless in its encounters with human evil, and in its sympathies with earthly sorrow. It looked on, and spoke many a true word, but it wrought no cure, it healed no wounds, it rooted out no sin. It was the exhibition of weakness, not of power, the mere cry of human helplessness.

Romish devotees, with fastings and flagellations, in addition to earnest words, have tried to extirpate the wrong and nourish the right. Groping after righteousness, yet not knowing what righteousness is, nor how it comes to us, they have built themselves up in self-righteousness. Professing to seek holiness, without understanding its nature, they have snared themselves in delusions which bring no purity. Bent, as they say, upon “mortifying the flesh,” falsely identifying “the flesh” with the mere body, and working upon the theology which teaches that it is the body which ruins the soul, they lay great stress on weakening and macerating the corporeal frame, not knowing that they are thus feeding sin, fostering pride, making the body less fit to be the helpmeet of the soul, and thereby producing unholiness of the darkest type in the eye of God. By rules of no gentle kind: by terror, by pain, by visions of death and the grave, by pictures of a fiercely flaming hell, by the denial of all certainty in pardon, they have sought to terrify or force themselves into goodness. By long prayers, by bitter practices of self-denial, by slow chants at midnight or early morn in dim cathedrals, by frequent sacraments, by deep study of old fathers, by the cold of wintry solitude, by multiplied deeds of merit and will-worship, they have thought to expel the demon, and to eradicate “the ineradicable taint of sin.”

But success has not come in this way. The enterprise was a high but fearful one and the men knew not how terrible it was. They had quite underrated the might of the enemy, while overestimating their own. The resources of the two sides were indeed unequal. Not Leonidas against the myriads of Persia, nor the old Roman three who held the bridge against the Etruscan host could be compared to this. It might seem but the feeble aberrations of one poor human heart that they were dealing with, but they knew not what these indicated—what the power of a human will is for evil; what is man’s hostility to God; what is the vitality of sin; what is the exasperating tendency of naked law, and the elasticity of evil under legal compression; what is the tenacity of man’s resistance to goodness and to the law of goodness; what all these together must be when fostered from beneath, and backed by the resources of hell.

In all this there is not one thought of *grace* or divine free love, no recognition of forgiveness as the root of holiness. Man’s philosophy and man’s religion have never suggested this. It would seem as if man could not trust himself with this, and could not believe that God would trust him with it. He has no idea of barriers against sin, save in the shape of walls, chains, and bars of iron, of torture, threats and wrath. On these alone he relies. He is

slow to learn that all legal deterrents are in their very nature *irritants*, with no power to produce or enforce anything but a constrained externalism. The interposition of forgiving love, in absolute completeness and freeness, is resisted as an encouragement to evil-doing; and, at the most, only in a very conditional and restricted form is grace allowed to come into play. The dynamics of grace have never been reduced to a formula; they are supposed incapable of being so set down. That God should act in any other character than as the rewarder of the deserving and the punisher of the undeserving; that He should go down into the depths of a human heart, and there touch springs which were reckoned inaccessible or perilous to deal with; that His gospel should throw itself upon something nobler than man's fear of wrath, and *begin* by proclaiming pardon as the first step to holiness—this is so incredible to man, that, even with the Bible and the cross before his eyes, he turns away from it as foolishness. Nevertheless this is “the more excellent way,” nay, the true and only way of getting rid of sin. Forgiveness of sins, in believing God's testimony to the finished propitiation of the cross, is not simply indispensable to a holy life, in the way of removing terror and liberating the soul from the pressure of guilt, but of imparting an impulse, and a motive, and a power which nothing else could do. Forgiveness at the end or in the middle, a partial forgiveness, or an uncertain forgiveness, or a grudging forgiveness, would be of no avail; it would only tantalize and mock. But a complete forgiveness, presented in such a way as to carry its own certainty along with it to every one who will take it at the hands of God—this is a power in the earth, a power against self, a power against sin, a power over the flesh, a power for holiness, such as no amount of suspense or terror could create.

It is to this that our Lord refers, once and again, when dealing with the Pharisees, those representatives of a human standard of goodness as contrasted with a divine. How deep is the significance of such statements as these: “When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both” (Luke 7:42); “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven” (Luke 7:47); “The lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt” (Matt 18:27); “Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more” (John 8:11); “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32); “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10); “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16); “I came not to judge the world, but to save the world” (John 12:47). It is to this also that the apostles so often refer in their discourses and Epistles: “Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness” (1 Pet 2:24); “Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 13:38); “God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8); “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us” (1 John 4:10); “We love Him, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). To this, also, all the prophets had given witness; thus, “I will pardon all their iniquities” (Jer 33:8); “There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared” (Psa 130:4); “As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us” (Psa 103:12); “I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins” (Isa 43:25).

Yet it is not merely a question of motives and stimulants that is indicated in all this. It is one of release from bondage; it is the dissolution of the law's curse. Under law and its curse, a man works for self and Satan; under grace he works for God. It is forgiveness that sets a man working for God. He does not work in order to be forgiven, but because he has been forgiven, and the consciousness of his sin being pardoned makes him long more for its entire removal than ever he did before.

An unforgiven man cannot work. He has not the will, nor the power, nor the liberty. He is in chains. Israel in Egypt could not serve Jehovah. “Let My people go, that they may serve Me,” was God's message to Pharaoh (Exo 8:1): first liberty, then service.

A forgiven man is the true worker, the true lawkeeper. He *can*, he *will*, he *must* work for God. He has come into contact with that part of God's character which warms his cold heart. Forgiving love constrains him. He cannot but work for Him who has removed his sins from him as far as the east is from the west. Forgiveness has made him a free man, and given him a new and most loving Master. Forgiveness, received freely from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, acts as a spring, an impulse, a stimulus of divine potency. It is more irresistible than law, or terror, or threat. A half forgiveness, an uncertain justification, a changeable peace, may lead to careless living and more careless working, may slacken the energy and freeze up the springs of action, (for it shuts out that aspect of God's character which gladdens and quickens); but a *complete and assured pardon* can have no such effect. This is “the truth which is after godliness” (Titus 1:1). Its tendencies toward holiness and

consistency of life are marvellous in their power and certainty. Irrepressible we may truly call the momentum which owes its intensity to the entireness and sureness of the pardon, a momentum on which some, in their ignorance of Scripture, as well as of the true deep springs of human action, would fasten their drag of doubt and uncertainty, lest what they call the interests of morality should be compromised. As if men could be made unholy by knowing certainly with what a holy love they have been freely loved, or made holy by being kept in suspense as to their own personal reconciliation with God! As if pardon, doled out in crumbs or drops (and even these so cautiously held out, or rather held back, that a man can hardly ever be sure of having them) were more likely to be fruitful in good works than a pardon given at once, and given in such a way as to be sure even to the chief of sinners—a pardon worthy, both in its greatness and its freeness, of the boundless generosity of God!

It would be well for many if they would study Mr. Robert Haldane's *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, especially the second volume. It is a noble protest against the meager teaching of many so-called Protestants on the subject of justification by faith. Its faithful condemnation of the false, and bold vindication of the true may be reckoned too "decided," perhaps "extreme," by "advanced" theologians, but the church of God, in these days of diluted doctrine, will be thankful for such an assertion of Reformation theology. His strong point is his elucidation of the apostle's statements as to the believer's being "dead to sin," which he shows to have "no reference to the character of believers, but exclusively to their state before God, as the ground on which their sanctification is secured" (vol 2, p 22). To be "dead to sin" is a judicial or legal, not a moral figure. It refers to our release from condemnation, our righteous disjunction from the claim and curse of law. This, instead of giving license to sin, is the beginning and root of holiness.