



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

March 1986

SIN

Christianity is a revealed religion. The revelation is not just information about the nature of God, though we do learn vast amounts about God that we could never discover on our own. Revelation also tells us about ourselves. Our nature -- what it means to be human -- is by no means obvious apart from revelation. In fact, we see many people in our culture who have concluded that there is no more to life than eating, drinking and being merry, and who live accordingly. They believe that there is nothing after physical death, and sometimes even that there is no right and wrong, but only convenience.

As Christians, we are not in quite such a situation. We have what God has told us about ourselves. We know that we are made in His image and likeness, and destined to dwell with Him in heaven. We know that Christ came to earth to live as a man and show us true humanity as well as divinity. We know as well that we are sinners, that since Adam all men have sinned. The understanding of our sinfulness is vital to our lives as Christians. For Christian life is the life of the redemption of sin, the life of increasing holiness, that we may finally be holy as God is holy.

If we are to allow God to redeem our sin, we must understand it. We must know it for what it is, as He has revealed its nature to us. Only then will we know the truth about ourselves, and so have the opportunity to be honest with God as well as ourselves. Only then will we be in a position to deal with it, and allow God to redeem it.

Many people (Christian and otherwise) recognize sin in themselves and dislike it. There are several reasons for this. First of all, sin produces guilt. No one likes to feel guilty. Yet sin inevitably produces guilt. As sin accumulates, so does the guilt. The guilt is there to impel us to action about the sin. It is like pain: an indication that something is amiss,

and needs attention. Nevertheless, many people misunderstand guilt, and try to treat it without treating the sin. Various psychologies (pop and serious) offer means which claim to get rid of guilt. Some try to convince us that all guilt is irrational: that there is no reason to feel guilty, and therefore we should just talk ourselves out of it.

Unfortunately, as long as we sin, there is reason to feel guilty, because as long as we sin, we are guilty before the throne of God's righteousness. Guilt is unpleasant. We can try to ignore it. But once we recognize that it is caused by sin, then we will dislike sin, because it makes us feel guilty.

A second reason that we dislike sin is for what it does to our self-image. We like to think of ourselves as good people, perhaps with some superficial inadequacies, but basically good. Sin interferes with that self-image. When we see ourselves sinning, we cannot at that same time think that we are good: the facts are against us. Moreover, if we try not to sin and fail, we learn that our failings are not minor and superficial, but deeply rooted and well nigh impossible for us to correct, however hard we may try. We will dislike our sin because it makes us face the unpleasant truth about ourselves: we are sinners and incapable of being anything else.

Third, we see that our sin wreaks havoc on our relationships with other people. When we sin against someone we love, we see the hurt that we do to him. Even when we have made apology and such reparations as are possible, we know that there is still a scar. The damage may never be undone; it will always be there as part of the history of the relationship. Similarly, when our sins are publicly exposed, we are seen to be sinners, and may appear fools as well. This is not pleasant and is something our egos definitely wish to avoid.

So sin is a generally unpleasant matter, even conceived merely from the perspective of self-interest. We can dislike sin for what it does to us. So far, the unpleasantness of sin can be discovered by anyone who cares to look. Beyond this, we need the assistance of revelation to understand the character and remedy of sin.

Sin is fundamentally a violation of creation. God has made the world and all its creatures to live in harmony and natural order. Sin disrupts that order. It disrupts the human order -- as we see in our guilt, our pretentious self-image of perfection, and the destruction of relationships. We also experience that disruption of order when we are sinned against. When we are hurt by sin, we feel it as a violation: as something that ought not to be. We resent it, and may rail against it. We know that something has been done to us and it is evil.

Sin disrupts the natural order. As we now know the world, it is not as God created it. Its fallenness is seen in its disharmony, in illness and disaster, in predatory life at the expense of another creature's death. In a word, the lion does not lie down with the lamb.

But the worst thing about sin is not what it does to us, nor even what it does to creation, human or material. The worst thing about sin is what it does to God. God is Creator, and thus when we mess up creation we are offending Him, just as you would offend an artist by putting spray paint over his finished painting. But God is also a righteous and holy God. He cannot abide evil -- or rather, evil cannot abide God. He made the world to exist in communion with Himself, and now that communion has been destroyed. The world is no longer holy as He is holy; it has rejected His Lordship. He created out of the fulness of His love, wishing that all creatures would know Him as their Lord and love Him as their Creator. But now, man has turned against Him. In sinning, man has rejected the Lordship of God (and His love), preferring instead to live for himself.

Thus sin is a rejection of God's love. This is its deepest evil. It wounds the love that God has for His creatures. Christ braved the Cross to redeem us from sin: the nails and the spear are the wounds that our sin inflicts upon the body of the incarnate God. If we have loved deeply, we know the hurt that sin can cause our love, a wound more acutely felt than any physical pain. This gives us the merest notion of the pain we cause God by our sin. It is His love for us, and His holiness, that cause Him the pain from our sin.

We learn then two great truths about sin. The first is that it is violation. It violates the order of Creation. Since God is the Creator, sin is also an affront to Him. When we smash a potter's vessel or spray paint on an artist's finished canvas the artists have a right to be offended by our actions. We are saying (at the very least) that we do not value their work. Thus we also pour contempt upon the makers of the works. When we sin, and so smash away at God's handiwork in Creation, we do exactly the same thing. We say we do not value Creation the way it is, and would rather have it our way. Thus our sin cannot avoid offending the Creator.

We learn that sin is an affront to God's holiness: it is evil. Nothing that is not holy as God is holy can abide His presence. Thus Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden when they had sinned: as sinners they could not remain in God's presence. The world has been estranged from God ever since. If we are called to a final dwelling in heaven, then we are called to holiness. For we must be holy if we are to be in heaven. Thus sin must have no place in our lives if we are in training for heaven.

Second, we learn -- both from experience and from revelation -- that we cannot redeem sin by ourselves. There is nothing we can do to make good our sin, so that it is as if it never occurred. At best, we can provide some compensation: we can give back what we stole (and a little more), we can do something nice for the person we hurt in anger, we can apologize to the one whose character we maligned behind his back. But even then, we are not entirely satisfied: there is still that bad taste of guilt. For compensation does not undo the sin, it merely corrects some of its effects. The sin remains: we may regret it, but nothing we can do will undo the past.

For a religious person, the effect is multiplied. We are forced to acknowledge not only that we have sinned once or twice, but that it is a deep and consistent habit: that we are sinners. We may try to pretend that we are not. But then, we are shown to be liars by every new sin. Or we can run around trying everything we know in the way of pious exercises to atone for our sin. And yet, this doesn't work either. No amount of penance, no quantity of prayer, no amount of service to other people can erase the fact that I am a sinner.

And that frustration leads us to the central Christian claim about sin: God Himself redeems it. Without merit on our part, without our even having asked Him to do it, He bears its burden to the Cross and so offers us freedom. It is His gift to us, the gift of something we could have in no other way. If we are to receive this gift we must confess our sins. If we are denying that we are sinners, or that our sins are evil and offensive to God, then we will simply refuse God's offer of forgiveness. If we try through our pious exercises to atone ourselves for our sins, we will refuse the gift God offers us. The Cross covers all sins. Confession is the means by which we open ourselves to receive forgiveness. For thereby we acknowledge the two truths about sin: that it is evil and that we cannot ourselves redeem it. In laying our sins at the foot of the Cross we open our hands to receive forgiveness the only way we can have it: as God's gift.

Thus the Christian is delivered from the frustration of sin and guilt. Guilt is itself redeemed. Now it is of use to us: it pricks our conscience when we sin and so drives us back to the Cross. Guilt shows us that we need once again to confess our sins and accept God's mercy.

Christianity is not for the faint of heart. Our redemption follows our full acknowledgement of our sins. It takes courage and the grace God gives us to face our sins for what they are. But if it is hard to accept the reality that we are sinners, so are the blessings great if we do. In the free gift of forgiveness, we are given the possibility of life freed from the burden of our sinful pasts. The Christian, alone among men, can admit and accept his sinfulness because he knows not only that he is a sinner, but also that he is redeemed. In the full assurance that Christ has accomplished his redemption from sin upon the Cross, he can on the one hand face his sin squarely for what it is, and on the other, rejoice in God's gift of redemption. This is the essence of faith: first that we recognize our sin and that it is beyond our redemption, and second that we accept God's promise of redemption as the sure and certain foundation of our lives. This is the freedom from sin which gives us the joy we have as Christians.

