

Sin And Forgiveness: The Ultimate Liberation

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me (Romans 7:15-17).

I.

The seventh chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is a doctrinal treatise which has engaged the mind of theologians and stimulated the imagination of preachers throughout the course of Christian history. Not only does it describe the almost hopeless human bondage to sin, but with equal vividness, it sets forth God's amazing act of liberation through Jesus Christ.

This is a tantalizing study of human nature. It is, also, an exciting proclamation of the mystery and power of divine grace. Deep in our personal and collective awareness, we struggle with the encounter between the law in the "inward self" and the law in "our members." All too much of private and public unrighteousness is excused or explained-away by invoking the infirmity of the flesh in combat with the demands of the Spirit. Over and over again, the law of God in our mind prompts, urges, demands that we not give up, that we not abandon the contest between good and evil, between righteousness and unrighteousness within ourselves and within our society.

However, Paul's words to the Romans, and to us, give neither comfort nor reassurance of triumph in our self-initiated effort at liberation from the enslaving power of sin. Let us hear those words again:

For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells within my members. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. Sin working death in me (Romans 7:21-25).

What a relief to conscience and a boostful quest for self-respect! Most of us are familiar with this need to maintain the integrity of our own

ego, even at the cost of rejecting what we know to be true about the inward self.

In the following verses one may detect a tinge of scapegoating: "not really I," but something else, some other force, some other presence is the problem. Is it the old law, corruption of the ancient tradition, heredity or some alien element over which Paul has no control?

But we are not at peace with this condition. Bondage to sin stirs uneasiness, sparks resistance, quickens the zest for life or it ends in death. Sin is the most pervasive and familiar phenomenon in the human experience. It is all around us and within us. Wherever we reach, we can touch it. Wherever we look, we can see it. If we listen, we can hear it. So in this moment of heightened awareness, let us ask ourselves three questions about sin: What is it? Where is it? What is our hope?

II.

(1) What is it? Question fourteen in the "Presbyterian Shorter Catechism" asks: "What is Sin?" The answer given is: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." Very early in our religious upbringing we heard about sins of omission and sins of commission. We wondered over the difference between moral and venal sins. In Sunday School we learned to quote the stark warning that "the wages of sin are death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The most quieting assurance was in the oft repeated declaration that, "God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten son, that anyone who believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

No effort to define sin is wholly satisfactory. To know what it is places severe strains upon one's understanding. Psychologists and analysts of various kinds have attempted to deal with diverse manifestations of human behavior. They have spoken of split personalities, character syndromes, aberrations and paranoias. Sin is not in the vocabulary of the therapist. Bewilderment confounds the preacher's efforts to provide conclusive definitions. As a potent influence in human behavior, sin is considered to be an unwelcome visitation, an irreversible spiritual condition or an irremediable corruption of the ethical-moral sense.

Christians have agonized over such doctrines as "The Fall" and "Original Sin." Paul's certainty was that death came through the disobedience of the first man, Adam; so life is found through faith in the risen Christ. The condition of sin and the effects of sin are experienced as alienation from God and abandonment of God. It is a rejection of God's truth for worldly wisdom; substituting finite affections for infinite love. God continues to remind the people: "your ways are not my ways, nor your thoughts my thoughts,"

(2) Where is sin? It is in the church. The religious community is God's greatest concern. John the Baptist crying out to Pharisees and Sadducees said: "you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come." Jesus reprimanded the scribes, pharisees, hypocrites and commanded them to turn from iniquity and pretense. Sin is evident when ministers, elders and deacons in our churches fall far short of the mark as messengers and witnesses to the righteousness of God. Sin is also present when leaders of the people of God prove to be wolves in sheep's clothing, and hirelings rather than shepherds.

The corruption of the human spirit was manifested tragically around the table at the Lord's Supper, not only in the intention of betrayal, but also in the dispute about who would be greatest in the Kingdom. As with the early disciples, so with us today, Jesus calls. These words come to us as they came to Simon Peter that day by the Seaside: "Simon, Simon, behold satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned again, strengthen your bretheren."

As a minister of the gospel, left to myself, I do not know when I can sing in truth, "It is well, it is well with my soul." But like Paul, I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but pommel my body to keep it under subjection, lest while preaching to others, I myself become disqualified.

Sin is in the market place and in high places of public affairs. How often do we hear from recognized criminals the assertion, "I have done wrong." As affecting the well-being of the community, the crime is known, but the guilt must be established. Even when life is destroyed brutally, human justice admonishes against any verdict that would involve "cruel and unusual punishment."

Those who legislate for us in the interest of national security insist that our national budget be balanced, but without impairing our capability to kill the enemy quicker, faster and completely.

Sin is in my heart. Everyone of us knows the weight of sin that clings so close. Sin nestles close to the affections. It disarms the better judgement and beguiles the unsuspecting victim. This is the force of progressive alienation. The ultimate sin is to believe that we can serve God and mammon.

The roll call of the faithful gives reinforcement in our encounter with sin. Not only Gideon, Barak, David, Samuel and the prophets but also that glorious company of persons who were destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, bid us lay aside this weight and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

(3) What is our hope. Let us change the first word in these lines from Pope's Essay on Man, using the word "Sin" rather than "Vice":

Sin is a monster of such fiendish mein,
 As to be hated needs but to be seen;
 Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
 We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

Or let us reckon with ambivalence and uncertainty reflected in these lines from another source:

Within my earthly temple there's a crowd,
 There's one of me who's humble, one who's proud;
 There's one who's broken hearted for his sins,
 There's one who unrepentant, sits and grins;
 There's one who loves his neighbor as himself,
 There's one who cares for naught but fame and self;
 From these confusing selves I would be free,
 If once I could determine which is me.

Take notice of these things that have been said about sin and sinners: (1) Human beings do not merely have sins, they are sinners; (2) Sin is not a moral error, but a compulsion, a servitude of the will; (3) This distorted being and this compulsion are universal; and (4) Sin can be overcome by God.

In the depth of one's heart, there is certainty that sin cannot be exorcised by quoting pious phrases, nor by intoning a litany of religious language. Neither is psychiatry nor the alleged virtues of the oppressed equal to the task. Our reliance must be in the mighty liberating act of God in Jesus Christ. That act creates a new humanity in which true communion is restored. Here love and obedience bind the creature and the Creator.

Listen to this from II Corinthians 5:17-21:

For if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors of Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sakes he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The ultimate liberation happens when God's love and his grace are extended through Jesus Christ and when the repenting human being is restored by receiving this priceless gift in faith. This is a restoration to the source and center of one's being. The shackles of sin are broken and one can live in the freedom of the Eternal. Then we become, in truth, part of the cloud of witnesses who rejoice in triumph, echoing Romans 8:35-39:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress, or persecution or famine or nakedness, or peril or the sword? As it is written, for thy sake we are being killed all the day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in

all this we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Hallelujah, Amen.