

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

with God ; the later prophets unfolded to man the divine purposes of mercy and the plan of human redemption. Nothing less than this was involved in Samuel's schools. They wrought, first, for the mental and moral culture of the people of Israel ; and, finally, for the teaching of the whole world.

R. PAYNE SMITH.

"THAT WICKED PERSON."

I COR. V. 1-5, 13; AND 2 COR. II. 5-11; VII. 8-13.

AMONG the minor characters of the New Testament there is one who often attracts our thoughts by the fascination of an undefined and mysterious doom. He stands deep in the shadows of the background, so deep that we see him but darkly ; but, so far as we can see him, there is a certain ominous and fatal look about the man, an air of guilt, and of such guilt as the moral sense of mankind has pronounced well-nigh unpardonable century after century. He is one of the "reprobates" of the New Testament story, an apostate from the Faith, an offender against the native and inbred instincts of humanity. The very name by which he is commonly known—"the incestuous Corinthian"—kindles horror and loathing in us. We condemn him without hesitation, without waiting to hear what may be alleged, if not in his defence, yet in palliation of his guilt. We too commonly assume even ~~that~~ the anathema of the Church still rests upon him, forgetting the absolution pronounced upon him by St. Paul within a few weeks after he had been cast out of the Church.

A careful examination of all the facts of the case will, I believe, much modify our conception of this guilty and most miserable man. It will also modify our conception of the method of discipline which obtained in the primitive Church and of its spirit and intention. And, finally, it will, or ought to, bring out once more, and that most impressively, the merciful and forgiving temper bred by the Gospel of Christ.

1. First of all, then, let us try to get an accurate conception of this man's *Sin*. His sin was that he had married his stepmother (1 Cor. v. 1).¹ Such a marriage as this, though forbidden by Moses, was nevertheless, under certain conditions, permitted by the Scribes who sat in Moses's chair. And hence it has been conjectured that this man was a Jew who had taken advantage of the tradition by which the Scribes made the law of Moses of none effect. From the gravity of the censure which St. Paul pronounces on him it seems more probable, however, that he was a Gentile who had availed himself of the easy law of divorce which obtained in the Roman Empire, and of the license of Corinthian manners, to contract a marriage with a woman whom not the law alone, but public opinion also, affirmed it to be a crime for him to espouse. In itself, I suppose, the sin was not so heinous as many which were committed in that wicked city every day. But there were circumstances connected with it which greatly aggravated its guilt. In the first place, the father of this young man was still alive, and keenly resented the wrong which had

¹ That it was a marriage, and not merely a concubinage, is evident from the language used to describe it, ἔχειν—ποιήσας—κατεργασάμενον. Dean Stanley, *in loco*.

been done him ; for (2 Cor. vii. 12) St. Paul speaks of him who had "suffered," as well as of him who had perpetrated, this wrong in terms which prove that they were both of them, not alive only, but active and well-known members of the Corinthian Church. And, then, although the Roman law and habits were so loose that most even of their greatest men were divorced on the slightest pretexts again and again, although at Corinth morality was even at a lower ebb than at Rome, yet throughout the Roman Empire for a man to marry his stepmother, however young and fair she might be, was admitted to be an immoral act, and was branded as a public scandal. Above all, this man was a member of the Christian Church, and was bound therefore to walk by a higher law than that of Rome and to maintain the most scrupulous purity of heart and life. In such a city as Corinth we may be sure that the Christian community was jealously scrutinized by prying and malicious eyes, eager to detect any flaw ; and exposed to scandalous tongues, eager to magnify any such flaw, however slight it might be. For a member of the Church to commit any grave sin, for him to fall into a sin from which even the easy conscience of his Heathen neighbours shrank with horror and aversion, was to create a public scandal which might be fatal to the growth and welfare of the Christian society.

These points considered we cannot wonder that St. Paul treated such a sin with the utmost promptitude and severity ; that he would be content with nothing short of the instant expulsion of the offending member : that, with curt displeasure and an

unwonted exercise of authority, he exclaimed, "*Cast out from among you that wicked person.*"

On the other hand, are we to regard this young man, this undutiful son, this unworthy Christian, as a sinner above all men? can we allege no plea in mitigation of his offence? To wash an Ethiopian white is not a hopeful task; to "whitewash" him—to make him look white while he remains black—is not a task to my taste. But neither is it a manly nor a godly fashion to condemn a man as wholly and immitigably black because he has one or two foul spots on his character. If we so far exert our imagination as to apply to this case our own experience of human life and passion, that is, if we do him bare justice, it is not hard to raise this Corinthian sinner to our own level, to find in him a man like ourselves, open to similar temptations, falling before them only as we fall. And surely it is as unwise of us, as it is unjust, to conceive of him as a monster wholly remote from and unlike ourselves, and so to put away from us the instruction and warning which his story would otherwise yield.

If, then, we look at him—as we are bound to look at all men—with considerate and compassionate eyes, if we remember *how* men fall into such sins as his to this very day, it will not be long before we find something to say even on his behalf. From St. Paul's brief incidental references to him he appears to have been a young man of sensitive passionate temperament, impetuous in doing well no less than in doing ill. He had been cast out of the Church, and so had his sin brought home to him, but a few weeks before he was in danger of being "swallowed

up by a swelling and excessive sorrow" for his sin (2 Cor. ii. 7). The danger was so real and imminent that the Apostle trembled lest the penitent should be caught in the toils of Satan and sink into the lethargy of despair (*ibid.* 11). To prevent that tragic close to the story, the holy Apostle is profuse in the assurance, "I forgive him; he hath not wronged me" (*ibid.* 10 and 5); and urgent with the Corinthians that they lose no time in forgiving and in comforting him, in certifying and ratifying their love toward him (*ibid.* 7, 8).

Let us remember, then, how easily and in how many ways a man of his temperament and condition might be led, almost unwittingly, into the gravest sin. He is young, sensitive, passionate, impetuous; his mother is dead; the comfort of her counsel and sympathy is withdrawn from him. His father brings home a new wife—a heathen, apparently, from the tone of St. Paul's allusions to her and the absence of any indication that she, like the father and son, was connected with the Christian Church. Possibly, probably, she too is young, and fair, and has been given to the elder man by her parents very mainly because he is a man of some wealth or of established position in the city. By-and-by we discover that she is divorced from the elder man and married to his son. These are the bare facts of the story so far as we can recover them. Does it require a poet, or a novelist, to suspect that behind these facts there probably lay a romance, or a tragedy, such as in similar cases we almost invariably find? The young man *may* have loved this girl before his father saw and desired her; while she favoured the younger, her

parents may have favoured the elder, suitor, and have given her to him against her will. Once married, she may have taken out a divorce, as for almost any or no reason she was able to do under the Roman law, and have given herself to the man she loved. Or, she may have willingly married the elder man, her heart being yet unawaked, and then, brought in her new home into familiar intercourse with the younger, her heart may have gone over to him before she knew that she had lost it, and the two, with the easy morality of the time, may have resolved to break all the dutiful bonds of wife and son that they might gratify their passion for each other. Or,—and this I hold to be the most probable hypothesis,—she may have been one of those fascinating *fatal* women of whom one reads, with a strange power for taking men captive body and soul, and a wicked delight in using it.

If we adopt any one of these hypotheses, or any similar hypothesis, this man at once becomes human to us and alive. And we may be sure that some such hypothesis is required by the facts of the case. A man with so much that was good in him, a man capable of a *dangerous* repentance, a repentance likely to be fatal to both his physical and his spiritual health, could not have fallen into a public and heinous sin without being drawn towards it by some strong constraint, some passionate emotion, without being blinded, in part and for a time, by the sophistries which vehement passion is prompt to weave. I have no wish to palliate his sin. It was a heinous offence against God and man, a terrible violation of filial duty and of his duty to Christ and the law of

Christ. Had it not been checked promptly and sternly, it might have brought the Church in Corinth into a disrepute which it would very hardly have survived. All I wish is to shew that this great sin must have had a strong motive ; that the sinner was a man, and a man of like passions with us : and that he does not therefore stand outside the pale of our sympathy and compassion.

2. Let us try to get an accurate conception of *the Sentence* passed on his sin. He had a terrible awaking from his brief passionate dream. One evening he leaves the fair heathen who has bewitched him, and goes down to Church. When he arrives the tables are spread and his brethren are sitting down to their common evening meal. An unusual animation prevails among them. It is known that a letter has arrived from the Apostle Paul, to whom many of them owe their very souls, and that in the course of the evening the letter is to be read to them. Titus, the bearer of the Epistle, sits at the board with a somewhat clouded and anxious face, for he has caught the tremours of the Apostle, and fears how the Church will receive St. Paul's warnings and rebukes. At last, the meal being over, the moment comes, and Titus, or some other, takes the precious Letter in his hand, unrolls it, and begins to read. We know how the Letter opens, with what warm salutations, what affectionate thanksgivings for the abundance of gifts conferred on them, what noble and catholic sentiments, what pathetic recollections of the time when the Apostle was yet among them and of the generous reception they accorded him ; what gentle and persuasive rebukes of the factious

spirit which had recently grown up among them, what kindly and humorous satire on *their* being wise while *he* is a fool, their being strong while he is weak, their being honourable while he is despised (1 Cor. i.-iv.) And then, after all this kindly weather, the storm breaks: "Am I to come to you *with a rod*, or in love?"

Up to this point all the members of the Church, even "that wicked person," may have listened with tolerable composure to the Letter. Nothing very grave had been alleged against them. No one person had been singled out for blame. But here, when the question was read, "Am I to come to you with a rod?" surely more than one back must have shivered with a prophetic twinge. Probably, however, the Young Man in whom we are specially interested had no presentiment of what was coming; St. Paul's tone had been so general, so entirely that of one who was addressing a large community in a large spirit, that it was very unlikely that private sins should be singled out in the Letter and exposed. If he was unprepared, so much the worse for him; for now the rod falls in earnest. It is impossible to describe, every one must be left to picture for himself, the agony of shame with which a sensitive impulsive young man would listen to the sentences that follow: "I am absolutely told that there is fornication among you, such as is not even among the heathen,—*that a man should have his father's wife*. And are ye puffed up? and did not rather mourn that he who did this deed had to be removed from your midst? For I, at least, absent in the body but present in the spirit, *have already*

judged him that so shamefully perpetrated this deed: In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ,—ye and my spirit being gathered together with the power of the Lord Jesus, to deliver such an one to the Adversary, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Cast out from among you that wicked person.”

It was a terrible awaking; and as we listen to the curt authoritative sentence of the Apostle, we have need to remember how much more terrible it would have been for this Young Man to have been left lapped in his sinful dream than it was even to be waked out of it with the thunders of an apostolic anathema rolling in his ears.

There can be no doubt, I think, either that St. Paul intended to supply the Church at Corinth with a formula of excommunication, or that they used it in the case before us. After due consultation, and when the vote of the Church had been taken,—not an unanimous vote, as it proved; for St. Paul speaks (2 Cor. ii. 6) of the censure or punishment as inflicted “*by the majority*,”—we must suppose, therefore, that the Young Man was summoned before the elders of the Church, and that they pronounced over him the solemn words: “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we deliver thee, So-and-so, to Satan, for the destruction of thy flesh, that thy spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” And we may well believe that the sentence fell on the offender like the doom of death. In that sense, at least, we know that it has been used and apprehended in subsequent ages, without any vote of the Church to sanction it, on the sole authority of those who have assumed

to be successors of the Apostles. Many a devout and godly man, for no worse crime than that he thought more truly and deeply than his fellows, or that he rebuked the sins of his spiritual guides, has been cast out from the bosom of the Church and put to the ban. And it is to be feared that many of us have suffered this horrible abuse of the formula to qualify and pervert our conception of its original meaning and intention. No one who honestly *studies* the solemn language of the Apostle can for a moment suppose—though, for want of study, many have supposed—that he meant either to put this man under a ban, to shut him out from the common requisities and courtesies of human life, or to pronounce a mystic spiritual doom on him, to cut him off from all hope of eternal life, to call or make him a son of perdition. What he meant is plain enough from his own words, if only we interpret them by his habitual convictions and by the principles laid down or assumed in Holy Writ. Thus interpreted, he meant (1) to have this open offender against the law of Christ cut off, cast out, from the communion of the Church, at least for a time, and so brought to a knowledge of his sin and a sincere repentance for it. St. Paul habitually conceived of the great Heathen world as the domain of Satan, as under the power of the prince of this world: and, therefore, to cut a man off from the Church, and cast him back into the world from which he had been drawn and raised was, in his view, to “deliver such an one to Satan.” (2) St. Paul habitually conceived of pain and disease, nay, even of the losses, obstructions, rebuffs to which men are exposed as the work of that evil spirit who is for ever seeking to thwart

the gracious purposes of God and to undermine the welfare of man,—as indeed do all the Scripture writers from the time of Moses and Job downward. Is any good or kind purpose crossed? he instantly sets it down to the machinations of the devil; as when he wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Epistle ii. 18), “I, Paul, would have come to you once and again, *but Satan hindered.*” Is he tormented with a disabling and incurable malady? In “the stake in his flesh” he sees “*an angel of Satan sent to buffet him*” (2 Cor. xii. 7). He had the highest authority for his conclusion, since our Lord Himself saw in the woman who was bowed together so that she could in nowise lift up herself, “a daughter of Abraham *whom Satan had bound, lo, these eighteen years*” (St. Luke xiii. 16). Probably, therefore, just as Job was given over into the hand of Satan for a time, to be tried by loss of fortune, loss of children, loss of wealth, loss of friends; or just as a mist and darkness fell on Elymas the Sorcerer at the rebuke of Paul, so that he went blind, not seeing the sun for a season; so also, when the sentence of excommunication was pronounced on the sinful Corinthian, there came on him a succession of cruel losses—perhaps even the loss of the fair heathen woman herself, or some malignant form of disease which purged out the fever of his blood and brought him to himself. So much seems implied, indeed, in his being delivered to Satan “*for the destruction of his flesh.*” But how far all this differs both from the public ban to which the Church has again and again exposed the heretic, and from the mystic spiritual doom which some have discovered in this

formula of excommunication, need scarcely be pointed out, since any one who reads the words of St. Paul with thought and intelligence can only be amazed at finding that such obvious misconstructions have been put upon them. For (3) the Apostle himself expressly tells us that the "destruction," the evil and deadly power at work in this wicked person's "flesh," was intended, not for his damnation, but, contrariwise, for his salvation,—“that *the spirit may be saved* in the day of the Lord Jesus.” In precisely the same way he speaks (1 Tim. i. 20) of Hymenæus and Alexander when they had made shipwreck of their faith: “whom I have delivered unto Satan,” not that they may be “sold captive to the devil to do his will,” or be “blotted out of the book of life,” but “*that they may learn not to blaspheme.*” So, again, in writing to these very Corinthians, he reminds them that for their abuse of a Christian ordinance many among them were sick, many dead, warns them that all will be judged who in like manner offend, and yet assures them that, if they are thus judged, they will “simply be chastened of the Lord, *that they may not be condemned with the world*” (1 Cor. xi. 32).

On the whole, then, we may reasonably refuse to be terrified into any abject submission by the mystic thunders with which ecclesiastics have clothed this formula of excommunication. We may say with confidence and gratitude that the sentence pronounced on the guilty Corinthian was a most merciful sentence, since it was designed to quicken in him a profound sense of his sin and a hearty repentance for it, and so to save his soul alive from

the pit into which his unruly passions were fast plunging it.

3. Let us try to form a true conception of *the Absolution* pronounced on him. If "the end crowns the work," who that has "seen the end of the Lord" with this Young Man can deny that even the work of his excommunication was a work of mercy? Obviously, he was not chastized in vain. His conscience was roused and energized by the pungent stimulus applied to it. He saw, and confessed, and renounced his sin; his sorrow for it swelled and grew till it threatened to prove more fatal to him than either his sin or the disease which rebuked it. And when Titus brings Paul tidings of his repentance and his danger, the heart of the Apostle is strangely and profoundly moved. In his eagerness to express his pity and love, he grows almost unintelligible, inarticulate (2 Cor. v. 5-7). He can hardly bring himself to speak of the grief with which he first heard of the Young Man's sin,—“lest I be too severe on him,” or to admit that his great grief sprang from that cause “save in part.” He is profuse and fervent in his injunctions to the elders and members of the Church that they restore him in the spirit of meekness and charity—profuse and fervent in the assurances of his own forgiveness and renewed affection. “Forgive him,” he cries, “and comfort him, lest he be swallowed up by a swelling sorrow,” lest “Satan should defraud us of him.” “Whom ye forgive, I also forgive . . . in the person of Christ,” *i.e.*, with the full weight of my apostolical authority to bind and to loose. “I am filled with comfort, I overflow with joy, in all this trouble of

ours." So grateful is he for the happy issue of all this trouble that he well-nigh persuades himself that he wrote so sharply as he did, not because of his grief and horror at the sin which had been committed among them, but "that I might put you to the proof, and know whether in all things ye were obedient," that even "your cares for us might be made manifest unto *you*"—rather than to *us*—"in the sight of God." It is impossible to read these sentences—and such sentences abound in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians—without becoming aware that the large loving heart of the Apostle was in a tumult of happy excitement, full of ruth and pity for the sinner who had suffered so much, full of joy and thankfulness for his repentance, and yearning with the keenest desire to comfort and reassure him.

And in this passion of pity and forgiving love, this eager and boundless charity for those who repent and seek forgiveness, St. Paul was a faithful exponent of the very spirit of the Gospel. The very message and power of the Gospel are involved in the truths illustrated by this Young Man's experience, viz., that the miseries which afflict men spring from their sins, and are designed to correct the sins from which they spring and to win men to repentance, in order that they may be saved in the spirit, on the day, and by the grace, of the Lord Jesus: that there is hope even for the worst and vilest of sinners. If there was mercy and hope even for "that wicked person," it is very certain that no man need suffer himself to be "swallowed up by the swelling sorrow" of spiritual despair.

S. COX.