

*THE PREMIER IDEAS OF JESUS.*

III. SIN AN ACT OF SELF-WILL.

SIN is the ghost which haunts Literature, a shadow on human life, which no one admits he has seen, and which an hour afterwards asserts itself. Define sin with anything like accuracy, and it will be denied; be silent as if you had not heard of sin, and it will be confessed. Literature oscillates between extremes, and affords an instructive contradiction. As the record of human experience it must chronicle sin; as the solace of the individual, it makes a brave effort to ignore sin. You hear the moan of this calamity through all the work of Sophocles, but Aristophanes persuades you that this is the gayest of worlds, and both voices were heard in the same theatre beneath the shadow of enthroned Wisdom. Juvenal's mordant satire lays bare the ulcerous Roman life, but Catullus flings a wreath of roses over it, and they were both poets of the classical age. A French novelist, with an unholy mastery of his craft, steeps us in the horrors of a decadent society. A French critic, with the airiest grace, exclaims: "Sin, I have abolished it." Our own poet of unbelief has dared to write, revealing the thoughts of many hearts:—

"Alas, Lord! surely Thou art great and fair,  
But, lo! her wonderfully woven hair;  
And Thou didst heal us with Thy piteous kiss;  
But see now, Lord, her mouth is lovelier."

Yet he also allows the secret to ooze out—

"The brief, bitter bliss one has for a great sin."

Literature has confessed this mysterious presence twice over, in the hopeless sadness of the austere school which acknowledges it, in the nervous anxiety of the lighter school which scoffs at it.

Philosophy has been, for the most part, distinguished by

its strenuous treatment of the moral problem, but has been visibly hampered by circumstances, being in the position of a court which cannot go into the whole case. Sin may be only a defect, then philosophy can cope with the position; but it is at least possible that sin may be a collision with the will of God, then Philosophy can afford no help. Spiritual affairs are beyond its jurisdiction; they are the department of Religion. Within the range of Philosophy the Race has not gone astray; it has simply not arrived—humanity is not diseased; it is only poorly developed. This deliverance is not the fault, it is the misfortune of morals, but it must always seem shallow and unworthy to serious minds. It creates the demand for Religion. If your chest be narrow, you go to a gymnast; if it be diseased, you go to a physician. It is easy to add three inches to the chest cavity; it is less easy to kill the bacilli in the lungs. There can indeed be no real competition between Philosophy and Religion, for the former cannot go beyond hygiene, and the latter must begin at least with therapeutics.

“The cardinal question is that of sin,” says Amiel, with his fine ethical insight; and if it be an essential condition in every religion that it deal with sin, then, excluding Judaism as a provisional and prophetic faith, there are only two religions. One is Christianity, and the other is Buddhism, and the disciples of Jesus need not fear a comparison. When Jesus and the founder of Buddhism address themselves to the problem of evil, the “Light of Asia” is simply a foil to our Master. He identified evil with the material influences of the body, as if a disembodied spirit could not be proud and envious; Jesus traced evil to the will, and ignored the body. He proposes to cleanse the soul by a life of meditation, as if inaction could be the nursery of character; Jesus insists on action, the most unremitting and intense. Finally, the great Eastern held out the hope of escape from

individual existence, as if that were the last reward for the tried soul; our Master promised perfection in the kingdom of heaven. Both systems recognise the supreme need of the Race, which is a favourable omen: they differ in the means of its relief. Buddhism amounts to the destruction of the disease, and the extinction of the patient. Christianity compasses the destruction of the disease, and the salvation of the soul. Tried by the severest test of a Religion, Jesus alone out of all masters remains: He saves "His people from their sins" (St. Matt. i. 21).

Had Jesus never said one word, yet has He done more than all writers on sin, for His life was its everlasting exposure. As the undriven snow puts to shame the whitest garment, so was Jesus a new standard of holiness to His society, and as the lightning plays round the steel rod, so did the diffused wickedness of His time concentrate on His head. Pharisees in a heat of pseudo-morality became self-conscious, and slunk from His presence, who could not look at them (St. John viii. 9), and an honest man of vast self-conceit beheld in a sudden flash the moral glory of Jesus, and besought him to depart (St. Luke v. 8). Twice Jesus was carried beyond Himself by anger—once when St. Peter tempted Him to selfishness, and He identified the amazed apostle with Satan (St. Matt. xvi. 23); once when the hypocrisy of the Pharisees came to a head, and His indignation burst forth in the invective of history (St. Matt. xxiii.). He shudders visibly in the Gospels before the loathsome leprosy of sin, while His compassions lighten on the sinner, and in the same Gospels we see the hatred of the world culminate in the Cross, because Jesus did the works of God (St. John v. 19). The personality of Jesus called the principle of evil into full action, and sin was an open secret before His eyes.

The conventional history of sin has three chapters—origin, nature, treatment. It is characteristic of Jesus that

He has only two: He omits genesis, and proceeds to diagnosis. It is for an instant a disappointment, and in the next a relief: it remains for ever a lesson. Among all the problems upon which the human intellect has tried its teeth, the origin of evil is the most useless and hopeless, the most fascinating and maddening. Eastern religions have played the fool with it, Christian theology has laboured it without conspicuous success. Science has recently been dallying with it. It is a kind of whirlpool which sucks in the most subtle intellects, and reduces them to confusion. Jesus did not once approach the subject: He alone had the courage to leave it in shadow. As a consequence He has offered another pledge of His reasonableness, and removed a stumbling-block from the doctrine of sin. Jesus' silence did not arise from indifference to the law of heredity, for he traced the blind hostility of the Pharisees to the bigotry of their fathers, and saw in the sin of His crucifixion the legitimate outcome of ages of fanaticism (St. Matt. xxiii. 29-32). But He foresaw how the moral sense might be perverted by wild applications of the law, as when His disciples asked, "Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (St. John ix. 2). Jesus would, no doubt, know the Rabbinical theory of Adam, although He escaped St. Paul's doubtful advantage, and had not been educated in the schools; but one feels by an instinct that Jesus' missing discourse on the "Federal Relationship" would not fit in well between the Sermon on the Mount, and the Farewell of the Last Supper. Jesus must have been taught the story of the Fall, and in after years He endorsed its teaching. He clothed that lovely idyll with a modern dress, and sent it out as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is always a startling transition from the theologians to Jesus, and it gives one pause that the supreme Teacher of religion did not deliver Himself on original sin. But it is a fact, and Jesus had His reasons,

For one thing, any insistence on heredity would have depreciated responsibility, and Jesus held every man to his own sin. Science and theology have joined hands in magnifying heredity and lowering individuality, till a man comes to be little more than the resultant of certain forces, a projectile shot forth from the past, and describing a calculated course. Jesus made a brave stand for each man as the possessor of will-power, and master of his life. He sadly admitted that a human will might be weakened by evil habits of thought (St. John v. 44); He declared gladly that the Divine Grace reinforced the halting will (St. John vi. 44) but, with every qualification, decision still rested in the last issue with the man. "If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean," as if his cure hinged on the Divine Will (St. Matt. viii. 2). Of course, I am willing, said Jesus, and referred the man back to his inalienable human rights. Jesus never diverged into metaphysics, even to reconcile the freedom of the human will with the sovereignty of the Divine. His function was not academic debate, it was the solution of an actual situation. Logically men might be puppets; consciously, they were self-determinating, and Jesus said with emphasis, "Wilt thou?" (St. John v. 6).

Jesus had another interest in isolating the individual, and declining to comprehend him in the race—He compelled his attention. Nothing could have afforded the Pharisees more satisfaction than a discussion on sin. Nothing was more uncomfortable than an examination into their particular sins. A million needle points pressed together make a smooth substance, but one is intolerable. Jesus touched the conscience as with a needle prick, for which He received homage from honest men, and the cross from the dishonest. Before and since Jesus' day people have been invited to hold an inquest on the sin of Adam, and have discharged this function with keen intellectual interest. It was Jesus who made sin of even date, and invited every hearer to see the tragedy of Eden in his own experience.

If one be still disappointed with the marked silence of Jesus on the genesis of sin, let him find his compensation in Jesus' final analysis of sin. Our Master was not accustomed to lay down a definition, and make it a catchword, or to propose a subject and expound it to exhaustion. He does not equip us with a theory to be associated with His name. His method was worthy of Himself, who alone could say, "Verily, verily," and was becoming to spiritual truth which is above theories. It was not the brilliant play of artificial light on a selected object; it was the rising of the sun on the whole sum of things, a gradual, silent, irresistible illumination before which one saw the wreaths of mist lift, and the recesses of the valleys laid open. As Jesus teaches, by allusions to sin in His discourses, by revelations of the state of holiness, by the clinical treatment of sinners, by incidental glimpses of His own experience in temptation, a complete and full-rounded idea of sin rises before the mind. His disciples hold it, for the most part, in unconsciousness; as soon as they identify it, Jesus' idea is verified.

Two teachers had attempted the diagnosis of sin before Jesus, and Jesus included their conclusions. Moses had wrought into the warp and woof of Jewish conscience the conviction that sin was a crime against the Eternal, and the Psalmists had invested this view with singular pathos. It mattered not what wrong a man did; it was in the last issue the heart of God he touched. And God only could loose him from the intolerable burden of guilt. Sin was not only the transgression of a law written on the conscience, it was a personal offence against the Divine love. Jewish penitence therefore was very tender and humble. "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned." Jesus, in his Monograph on sin, incorporates this discovery (Ps. li. 4) when He makes the prodigal say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in Thy sight" (St. Luke xv. 21), and

when He teaches to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." Jesus took for granted that sin was a crime.

Plato made the next contribution to the science of sin. He approached the subject from the intellectual side, and laid it down, with great force, that if we knew more we should sin less; and if we knew all we should not sin at all. This view has been discredited by the reduction of knowledge to culture when it is at once contradicted by history, for the Renaissance, say in Italy, was a period of monstrous iniquity. Read vision for knowledge, and this view verifies itself, for if our human soul saw with clear eye the loathsome shape of moral sin and the fair proportions of moral beauty it would not be possible to sin. Jesus lends His sanction to Plato when the prodigal comes to himself, and, his delirium over, compares the far country, in its shame and poverty, with his father's home where the servants have enough and to spare. When Jesus insists "Repent," He makes the same plea, for repentance is awaking to fact. It is a change of mind (*μετάνοια*). Jesus also believed that sin was a mistake.

Where Jesus went beyond every other teacher was not in the diagnosis of sin: it was in its analysis. He was not the first to discover its symptoms or forms, but He alone has gone to the bottom of things and detected the principle of sin. Wherein does sin consist? is the question to which one must come in the end. Jesus has answered it by tracing down the varied fibrous growth of sins to its one root, and so, while there are many authorities on sins, there is only one on Sin. As when one sings, according to a recent beautiful experiment, on a mass of confused colours, and they arrange themselves into mystical forms of flower or shell, so Jesus breathes on life, and the phantasmagoria of sin changes into one plant, with root, and branches, and leaves, and fruit, all organized and consistent. Tried by

final tests, and reduced to its essential elements, Sin is the preference of self to God, and the assertion of the human will against the will of God. With Jesus, from first to last, Sin is selfishness.

It is the achievement of modern science to discover the unity of the physical world. It is one of the contributions of Jesus to reveal the unity of the spiritual world. Before His eyes it was not a scene of chance or confusion, but an orderly system standing on the "will of God." This was Jesus' formula for the law of the soul, which is the principle of thought—for the law of life, which is the principle of conduct. If any one did the "will of God," he was in harmony with the spiritual universe; if he did his "own will" he was out of joint. Consciously and unconsciously each intelligent being made a choice at every turn, either fulfilling or outraging the higher law of his nature, either entering into or refusing fellowship with God. Sin is not merely a mistake or a misfit; it is a deliberate mischoice. It is moral chaos.

Jesus' absolute consistency in His idea of sin appears both in the standard of holiness to which He ever appealed and in His fierce resistance of certain temptations. "Which of you convinceth Me of sin?" (St. John viii. 46) demanded Jesus in one of His sharpest passages with the Pharisees, and it was a bolder challenge than we are apt to imagine. Had Jesus not been able to refer to some law above the opinions and customs of any age, a law beyond the tampering of men,—and yet repeated within every man's soul,—He had been cast in that bold appeal. He had violated a local and national order at every turn, and incurred misunderstanding and censure. Had he responded to a higher order which is over all, and which a Pharisee, as much as Himself, was bound to obey? If it could be shown that He was guided by private ends, and that His life was an organized selfishness, then He must



be condemned, and the amen of every honest man would seal the sentence. But if His life was singular because it was not selfish and did not conform to this world, then He must be acquitted. Jesus was jealous on this point, and evidently watched Himself closely, from His repeated assertions of obedience to the Divine will. "Neither came I of Myself, but He sent Me." "I seek not Mine own glory." "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me." "I can of Myself do nothing; as I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me."

Jesus' passionate devotion to the Divine will and His crucifixion of self-will in its most refined forms can be clearly read in the fire of His temptations. From the wilderness to the garden Jesus seems to have been assailed by one trial expressly suited to His noble ends and unstained soul. He was not tempted to do His own work or to refuse the work of God, such temptations could never have once touched the Servant of God. But it was suggested to Jesus that He might fulfil His calling as the Messiah with far surer and quicker success if He did not die on the cross. Be an imperial Messiah, was in substance the temptation which arose before Jesus at the beginning of His public life, and which He described in such vivid imagery to His disciples (St. Luke iv. 5-7). He resisted it, because this kind of Messiah was not the will of God, and as the Cross began to rise before His eyes He accepted it as the "will of God." There are signs that Jesus had a Messianic idea, and that it did not embrace the Cross. We detect the inward strain ere Jesus' victory over self-will was complete. He set his face "stedfastly" (St. Luke ix. 51) to go to Jerusalem. He resented the suggestion of St. Peter with a sudden fierceness (St. Mark viii. 33). He was troubled in prospect of the cross (St. John xii. 27). He was oppressed for a time in the upper room (St. John xiii. 21). Beneath

the olive trees of the garden He had His last encounter with evil, and only when He said, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done" (St. Luke xxii. 42) was the sinlessness of Jesus established.

Jesus cast His whole doctrine of sin into the Drama of the Prodigal Son, and commands our adherence by its absolute fidelity to life. The parable moves between the two poles of ideal and real human life—home, where the sons of God live in moral harmony with their Father, which is liberty,—and exile, where they live in riotous disobedience, which is licence. He fixes on His representative sinner, and traces his career with great care and various subtle touches. His father does not compel him to stay at home:—he has free will. The son claims his portion:—he has individuality. He flings himself out of his father's house:—he makes a mischoice. He plays the fool in the far country:—this is the fulfilling of his bent. He is sent out to feed swine:—this is the punishment of sin. He awakes to a bitter contrast:—this is repentance. He returns to obedience:—this is salvation. Salvation is the restoration of spiritual order—the close of a bitter experience. It is the return of the race from its "Wander Year."

Jesus rooted all sin in selfishness, but He distinguished two classes of sinners and their punishment. There was the Pharisee, who resisted God because he was wilfully blind and filled with pride. There was the Publican, who forsook God because he was led astray by wandering desires and evil habits. Sin, in each case, wrought its own punishment. For the Pharisee it was paralysis, so that he could not enter the kingdom (St. John iii. 3); for the Publican it was suffering, so that he must cut off the right arm and pluck out the right eye to obtain the kingdom (St. Matt. v. 29). Heaven, according to Jesus, was to be with God in our Father's house; hell was to be away from

God, in the far country. Each man carried his heaven in his heart—"the kingdom is within you" (St. Luke xvii. 21); or his hell in a gnawing remorse and heat of lust, "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (St. Mark ix. 44).

It is reasonable to expect that Jesus' idea of salvation will correspond with His idea of sin, as lock and key, or disease and medicine, and one is not disappointed. According to Jesus, the selfish man was lost; the unselfish was saved, and so He was ever impressing on His disciples that they must not strive, but serve. He Himself had come to serve, and He declared that His sacrifice of Himself would be the redemption of the world. This is Jesus' explanation of the virtue of His death. It was an act of utter devotion to the will of God, and a power of emancipation in the hearts of His disciples. As they entered into His Spirit they would be loosened from bondage and escape into liberty. They would be no longer the slaves of sin, for the Son had made them free (St. John viii. 32). Jesus proposed to ransom the race, not by paying a price to the devil or to God, but by loosening the grip of sin on the heart and reinforcing the will. The service of His life and the sacrifice of His death would infuse a new spirit into humanity, and be its regeneration. "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." (St. Matt. xx. 28.) Within this one pregnant sentence Jesus states His doctrine of sin and salvation, and it offers three pledges of reality. It reduces the different forms of sin to a unity by tracing them all to self-will. It shows the ethical connection between the sin of man and the death of Jesus. And it can be verified in the experience of the saint, which is the story of a long struggle before his will becomes "the Will of God."

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