

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN.

V.

THE INADMISSIBILITY OF SIN.

Every one that doeth sin, doeth also lawlessness ;

Indeed sin is lawlessness.

And you know that He was manifested, that He might take away sins ;

And sin in Him there is not.

Every one that abides in Him, sins not :

Every one that sins, has not seen Him nor come to know Him.

Little children, let no one deceive you :

He that doeth righteousness is righteous, according as He is righteous :

He that doeth sin is of the Devil,—for from the beginning the Devil sins ;

For this end the Son of God was manifested, that He might undo the works of the Devil.

Every one that is begotten of God, does no sin,

Because His seed abides in him :

Indeed he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God.

In this the children of God are manifest,—and the children of the Devil :

Every one that doeth not righteousness, is not of God ;

And he that loves not his brother.

—1 *John* iii. 4–10.

THE Church of the first age lived in expectation of the return of the Lord Jesus from heaven. At any hour He might “be manifested” (ii. 28, iii. 2), to the shame or glory of His servants. This *ἀποκαταδοκία*, as the Apostle Paul called it (Rom. viii. 19), the uplifted head and the far-off wistful look of the Bride waiting for her Lord, was the attitude maintained by the Christian communities amongst which St. John laboured in the closing decades of the first century, as it had been in the Pauline communities of its middle period. The expectancy was not so vivid and absorbing as at an earlier time—the strain had been too intense for continuance—but it remained; and the hope of the Parousia constituted a settled factor of the Christian life; it sustained the lofty motives for fidelity and spiritual aspiration to which the Apostle John appeals

in the paragraph discussed in the last of these Studies (ii. 28—iii. 3). For one who believes in Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Judge, the desire to win His acceptance and appear before Him with confidence at His coming furnishes an incentive to worthiness of life as powerful and honourable as any that the heart can cherish. This motive St John regarded as well-grounded, though he appeals to it but rarely, and as indispensable for his "little children."

1. The hope of the Christian, based on his Lord's definite promise, is to see Him in His state of heavenly glory. Now that implies, the Apostle has asserted, a likeness of character, a moral congruity and conformity between the see-er and the Seen. Vision, in the spiritual sphere, turns upon sympathy, affinity. There is a correlation and pre-adjustment between the eye and the light; the sun finds itself mirrored in the optic instrument. Those who expect to "see Christ as He is," make their account therefore with "being like Him" and aim at this: the latter is the pre-condition of the former; he who seeks Christ as his goal, takes Him for his way and studies to "walk even as He walked" (iii. 2 f., ii. 6). But the "confidence" of the Christian at the Parousia may be turned to confusion and shame (ii. 28); his "hope" awakens a *fear* lest he should be found unlike his Saviour, and so debarred from the sight of His glory—a fear which is the other side of our great hope, the hope translated into negative terms. In this association of ideas the tacit connexion lies between verses 3 and 4, between the paragraph of encouragement in prospect of Christ's coming (ii. 28—iii. 3) and that of warning against the deceitfulness of sin, which is its sequel (iii. 4–10). That connexion is aptly expressed by the language of 2 Peter iii. 14: "Wherefore, beloved, as you expect these things, give diligence to be found in peace without spot and without reproach before Him."

The last section, accordingly, supplies by implication a

motive against moral declension that is amongst the strongest present to the Christian mind, viz. that it will rob the servant of Christ of his dear reward; it cuts him off from the hope of participating in his Lord's assured victory and entering His eternal kingdom. In a word, *sin is ruinous*; it destroys the Christian man's future, and turns the salvation he looked for into perdition. This is the first of five reasons which the Apostle has to give his little children in this context why they should not sin. The other four follow in the verses before us,—which are so many “Checks to Antinomianism,”¹ so many darts aimed by St. John's powerful hand at sin in believers. The whole passage is a keen and concise demonstration of the inadmissibility of sin. In the first sentence of chap. ii., “My little children, these things I am writing to you so that you may not sin,” the Apostle acknowledged his fear on this account and indicated one chief intention governing the whole Epistle. The present section of the letter shows how deeply this purpose entered into his thoughts, and how grave the danger was lest the Church, infected with Gnostic errors of doctrine, should be tainted at the same time with Antinomian corruptions of life. He makes out that on every ground it is impossible for the followers of Jesus Christ and children of God to acquiesce in sin,—in any kind or any degree thereof.

2. If the first reason against a Christian's sinning, implicitly contained in verse 3, was that the act is ruinous to his eternal prospects, the second, very explicitly stated in verse 4, is that *sin is illegal*: “Every one who commits sin, commits also lawlessness; indeed, sin is lawlessness.”

This seems to us a commonplace, the predicate adding nothing to the content of the subject in the sentence

¹ The title of Fletcher of Madeley's polemic on the subject of Holiness, one of the classics of Methodism.

ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνομία, or to its dehortatory force. The word "sin" carries, to our conscience, a fuller and more pregnant sense than "illegality" or "breach of law." Not so with the original readers. ἁμαρτία, "missing the mark," did not convey in common Greek speech a uniform nor very strong moral significance; it might mean no more than a *mistake*, a fault of ignorance or unhappy fortune, to be pitied rather than severely condemned. This is one of the many Greek Christian words which contracted a new religious stamp and depth of intension from the Septuagint. As the rendering of the Hebrew נִשְׁחָטָה, ἁμαρτία became something much graver than before—more serious exactly in the sense and degree in which the faith of Israel was more serious and morally earnest than Greek Paganism and humanism. "Sin," it is said, is a creation of the Bible. Etymologically, this is perfectly true. For the Bible has interpreted, has given voice and vocabulary to the stifled conscience of mankind. Paralysed and half-articulate, its moral consciousness could not even *name* the evil that crushed it. "The knowledge of sin," which, as St. Paul says, "came through the law," was a condition precedent to its removal. Sin must be known, to be hated; defined, that it may be denounced and done away. It had to be identified, distinguished from the man himself, recognized in its abnormal character and referred to its alien origin. And this was a first necessity of revelation, a task in which the supernatural help of the Spirit of truth and of God was indispensable.

The Apostle, in saying "Sin is lawlessness," virtually affirms also that "Lawlessness is sin." His proposition is convertible; the predicate (ἡ ἀνομία) as well as the subject (ἡ ἁμαρτία) is written with the Greek article of definition: the two terms cover the same ground, since they denote the same thing and define it from different sides. The Bible knows of no dividing line between the religious and

the ethical. Since man was created in the image of God and the end of his life is determined by God, then every lapse from that end, every moral aberration (*ἀμαρτία*), is an act of rebellion and a violation of the constitutional laws of human nature (*ἀνομία*). This equation is fixed by the intrinsic spiritual affinity of our being to the Divine. The heathen regarded God, or the gods, as like earthly potentates, beings external to ourselves possessing certain rights over us, and dictating certain duties and prescriptions for us as it might please themselves. If we give them their dues, if we observe the ceremonial rules of religion and conform to the laws of the State imposed under their sanction, they are satisfied. With our private morals and the inner condition of our hearts they have nothing to do : that is our own affair. Individual thinkers, here or there, might rise above the attitude described ; but it was the general tendency of Pagan thought to externalize religion in this way and to divorce morality and piety.

Ethical philosophy was developed by the Greeks upon naturalistic premises, quite apart from theology ; and it suffers to this day from the want of a supernatural basis, from the attempts, continually repeated, to form a complete, self-contained ethical theory, without regard to the religious bearing and implications of moral phenomena, and to frame an ideal of human character and a norm of human duty in which God has no place. The same artificial separation was carried out in another sense by Jewish Pharisaism. Outward and ostensible acts of sin, formal transgressions of Divine law, indictable offences, were rigidly eschewed by men of corrupt hearts, who found means of committing all kinds of wrong and vileness in evasion of the spirit and intent of the law whose letter they worshipped and kept with punctilious exactness, and which they fenced with innumerable added regulations designed to ward off the most distant possibility of infraction. A man might sin, it

was supposed, might be morally culpable and contemptible, while he broke no law of God ; or he might exempt himself from Divine chastisement by rendering a legal satisfaction which had no ethical value whatever and in no way touched the heart. God's law was reduced to a matter of forensic definition and technical jurisprudence, with which "righteousness, mercy, and faith" had very little to do.

These sophistries, whether Jewish in their conception or, in the case of the readers, more probably Pagan, St. John traverses, cutting clean across the whole web of error when he writes : " Whosoever doeth sin, doeth also lawlessness." The teaching of the New Testament deepens the conception of *sin*, as being a fatal lapse from God and from man's true end posited in God ; it broadens the conception of *law*, as that proceeds from the character of God and regulates man's entire being, in spirit and in body, with all its ongoings and outcome, finding in written codes only an approximate expression ; and thus it brings the two conceptions into the same plane and makes them coincide. Every deviation from the right, every moral error and flaw, every wrong thing done or but conceived in the heart, is opposed to the sovereignty of God and to the revealed law of our nature as men. This is the fundamental and (as one may say) *constitutional* objection to sin. It is condemned by the law of the universe.

3. In verses 5-7 St. John goes on to say that *sin is unchristian*. Here again we must put ourselves back into the position of the readers, if we are not to make the Apostle write mere truisms. They had things to learn which we have been learning for many centuries, and to unlearn evil prejudices and presumptions that were their second nature. The current religions rested on non-ethical conceptions ; their gods and prophets were not distinguished by any great severity against sin or any strict separation from it on their own part. To the Paganism of the age it was a new and

amazing sort of message, to be told of a God who "is light, and in whom is no darkness at all." Now the same thing is said, in the emphatic and precise declaration of verses 5 and 7, respecting the Divine Messenger who brings the tidings, and who is the Word of life and Son of God (i. 1, 7), through whom God in His true self is known to us. The Channel of the new life is as pure as its Source. All Christians "know" this to be so, and are bound by their knowledge to the complete abjuring of sin. "You *know* that He was manifested (*ἐκεῖνος ἐφανερώθη*: the distinctive pronoun points, as it did in verse 3 and in ii. 6, and again in verse 7 below, to the historical Jesus) to take away sins." St. John has twice said, "If He should be manifested," in thinking of Christ's expected second revelation in that body of glory to which all the sons of God are to be conformed; but "He *has been* manifested"—a great, decisive appearance of the Son of God has taken place; and that appearance of the Divine in our flesh was God's demonstration made against sin. He was sent to abolish sin and rid the human race of it,—to take it clean away: *ἵνα τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἄρῃ*. Christ and sin are utter contraries, fatal antagonists: each means the death of the other.

For *αἶρειν τὰς ἀμαρτίας* signifies more than the (sacrificial) *bearing* of sins; it adds to this the idea of *removal*. The Sin-bearer lifts the load and take its weight upon Him, not to let the burden fall again with renewed force upon its victims, but to carry it right off and make an end of it. "He hath been manifested," as another writer puts it, "once for all at the consummation of the ages, *for the abolition of sins* through His sacrifice" (Heb. ix. 26). According to the double sense of *אָפַר* with *אֶת* or *עַן*, *αἶρω* in such connexion has this two-fold sense. Herein lie the glory and completeness of Christ's redemption. The cross destroys both the guilt and power of sin; righteousness is imputed and implanted in one act. It seems, however, that

St. John does not credit this undoing of sin to the sacrifice of Calvary by itself, but to the entire incarnate revelation; for the verb *ἐφανερώθη* is unqualified, just as it was in ch. i. 2, and the whole appearance, character and action of the Son of God made man were directed to counterwork and overthrow the world's sin. That manifestation of God in Christ against sin culminated, as chap. ii. 2 has shown us, in the *ἰλασμός* *περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν* of our Lord's sacrificial death; but all else that Jesus was and did pointed the same way and wrought toward this end, which He¹ pursued with a single mind. Here is another echo, following that heard in chap. ii. 2, of the Baptist's saying, which in the first instance led the Apostle to Jesus and supplied him afterwards with the key to his Master's mission: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (*ὁ αἶρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου*).

The qualifying "our" of the Received Text, before "sins," is due to the copyists: the Apostle is speaking broadly of that which is true not "for our sins only," but "for the world" (ii. 2). Writing *τὰς ἁμαρτίας* rather than *τὴν ἁμαρτίαν* (as in John i. 29), he conceives the abolition of sin, not as matter of principle and ideal, but as it is to be realized in concrete detail, and realized without limit: similarly it was said in chap. i. 9 that God "is faithful and righteous, that He should forgive us our *sins* and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We speak too often, vaguely, of "sin," as a general principle and power, too little of definite and actual "sins." An abstract confession of the former may cover an obstinate adherence to the latter.

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(To be continued.)