

## STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN.

## V.

THE INADMISSIBILITY OF SIN (*continued*).

THE Remover of sin is, of course, Himself without it. "And in Him there is no sin" sums up what has been said of Jesus in chap. ii. 2, in verse 3 above, in verse 7 below, and in chap. v. 20 at the end of the Letter. He is *δίκαιος, ἄγνός, ἀληθινός*. He is "the Son of God," "the Only-begotten"; "the eternal life" is His and was manifested to us in His earthly course. These predicates utterly exclude the notion of sin from our conception of Christ. This goes so much without saying and the negation of sin in Jesus Christ is so obvious, that it would be superfluous to state it here, but for the sake of the inference immediately to be drawn in verse 6: since "*in Him* there is no sin," no one "who abides *in Him*" can practise sin. The union of sin and Christ in the same heart is impossible. The man abiding in Christ lives in a sinless region; he sees a light unsullied, he breathes an air untainted. Sin has no foothold or lodgement in the realm where the redeemed walk with the risen Christ; it forms no part or parcel of the life that is hid with Christ in God.

Verses 6 and 7 deduce, with a fine combination of mysticism and blunt downright simplicity, the consequences for Christians of what St. John has testified about Jesus Christ Himself. If He is sinless and came for the express purpose of abolishing sin, if Christ and sin are essentially oppugnant and incompatible, then to harbour sin, to be on any terms with it, is to dissociate oneself from Him. Herein is the saying true: "He that is not with Me is against Me." Not only is the practiser of sin *ipso facto* out of Christ; his life argues that he always has been so,

and that his Christian profession was never genuine. "Every one that sins, has not seen Him nor known Him."<sup>1</sup> The same thing John had said of the "many antichrists," extruded from the Church and seducing its membership: "they went out from us, but they were not of us" (ii. 19). The outer severance, the visible acts of rebellion against the law of Christ, disclose an inner radical alienation of spirit from Him. Men of religious pretensions who live a life of deceit or impurity or lovelessness, who reconcile themselves to immoral practice and yet deem themselves Christians notwithstanding, had from the beginning—the Apostle supposes—no proper knowledge of the Lord they profess to serve. They have never really seen what Jesus Christ is like nor come to any true acquaintance with Him, or they would surely realize the absurdity of their position. For his own part, the writer felt that once to have known the Lord as he had done, made any other ideal of life impossible; once and for all the love of sin was killed in the disciple by the companionship of Jesus. He would no more think of returning to it now than the civilized man to the tastes and habits of the savage or the philosopher to the babblings of the child, or than the young prophet Isaiah to unclean talk after his vision of the Holy One of Israel. "The time past may suffice" to have wrought folly, to have lived in envy and malice. The sun is up! who that sees it can walk any longer as in darkness?

The contradiction, that lies on the surface, between verse 6, with its total exclusion of sin from the life of a Christian man, and chap. ii. 1 f., which provides for the case of a Christian brother falling into sin, was noticed in the first of this series of Papers (November 1903). There the acrist subjunctive suggested the possibility of such an occurrence

<sup>1</sup> The *perfects* οὐχ ἑώρακεν, οὐδὲ ἔγνωκεν, connote facts that have taken effect, the settled results of action, the state into which one has passed thereby.

(ἐάν τις ἁμαρτῆ: here the present participle (ὁ ἁμαρτάνων, ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν) presumes a habit and character, a mode of life. "Every one that sinneth, that doeth sin," is as much as to say "Every sinner, every one whose life yields sin for its product,"—or in the words of chap. i. 6, "who walks in the darkness." The Apostle is not dealing in casuistry. He has not before his mind the doubtful cases—doubtful to human judgement—that are on the border line of Christian assurance, where a man with a sincere faith and love has acted at some point inconsistently or has been "overtaken in some trespass." There are two broadly contrasted classes of men before his view, claiming the Christian name. He is dealing with pretenders to Christianity, who deliberately excuse sin and make room for it in their plan of life, who justify sin as allowable, as normal in the Christian man while still living in the body and under material conditions, and who see no necessity that the disciple should be as his Lord. So he reaffirms in verse 7, against the current delusions of Gnostical ethics, against all patrons and apologists of laxity in the Church, the axiom of moral common sense and of every honest Christian conscience: "Little children, let no one deceive you: he who *does righteousness* is righteous, even as He (the sinless Christ) is righteous." His doctrine equally disposes of the Antinomianism that goes about under an evangelical cloak, and would make the blood-stained robe of Christ's righteousness the cover for a loose morality,—as though the Lord had said to the absolved adulteress, "Go in peace, and sin again!"

4. Being negatively an un-Christian, anti-Christian thing, verse 8 affirms that sin is positively *diabolical*. The righteous Son of God stands forth as the leader of the sons of God, cleansed by His blood and abiding in His righteousness. For the doers of sin there is another leader; they choose another patron and pattern: "He that commits sin

is *of the Devil*." The reason St John gives for ascribing this shameful complicity to sinners is that "from the beginning the Devil sins." There sin, so far as revelation indicates and according to the Apostle's theory of evil, took its rise,—from that most wretched and wicked being whom Scripture names "the Devil"—"the slanderer," and "Satan"—"the enemy" of man. Satan was the first to lapse from God; and he has continued in sin all along—he "sinneth from the beginning." From this personal source the law of sin and death first proceeded, and "the darkness" spread over the world, even as Christ's law of love and all the light of the Gospel were "from the beginning" in God the Father (i. 1, ii. 7, 13). Sin is Satan's domain, his sphere, his work; and every sinner is his ally and instrument. The committer of sin makes himself of the Devil's party, of the Devil's spirit, and finally—according to the fearful words of Jesus (Matt. xxv. 41)—of the Devil's doom. He is engaged in building up those "works of the Devil," which "the Son of God came that He might destroy"—*ἵνα λύσῃ*, "that He might pull down." Every such man is helping the enemy of God and man, the captain of rebellion, to maintain that fortress of evil, that huge rampart erected in the universe against the holy and almighty will of God, which we call "sin."

To follow such a leader is as futile a course as it is evil. It is to resist the whole design of the mission of Jesus Christ, and thereby to set oneself against the central stream of the purposes of God toward mankind, to take sides, as Jesus put it, with "the strong one armed" and in possession (cf. v. 19 below) against "the stronger than he," who is shortly "to spoil his house and take from him all his armour wherein he trusted." To espouse the cause of Satan against Christ is to embark on a doomed vessel, to enlist under the flag of despair. With triumphant certainty St. John writes, "For this end the Son of God was mani-

festèd,—to undo the works of the Devil"! Unless the Son of God has come in vain, unless He has stepped into the arena to be vanquished, the mischief wrought by Satan in this world is to be undone; the entire confederacy, the compacted forces of evil will be dissolved. The empire of "the god of this world" shall be broken in pieces—  
*ἵνα λύσει τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου.*

Included in "the works of the Devil," the life-work of every man who has served upon his side and stood for sin and the world against the Lord's Christ, is marked for destruction. *εἰς τοῦτο ἐφανερώθη . . . ἵνα λύσῃ κ.τ.λ.* is parallel to *ἐκεῖνος ἐφανερώθη ἵνα τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἄρῃ* in verse 5: men's "sins" are "the Devil's works"—there is a super-human potency and direction behind them—and in "taking away sins" Christ breaks up the fabric of evil in the world and brings Satan's kingdom to an utter end.

"Children of the Devil" (*τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου*) at last St. John calls the Antinomian religionists outright, who neither do righteousness nor love their brethren (verse 10). He had the warrant for this epithet in the words with which the Lord Jesus stigmatized the Jewish party who sought His life, hating the light that shone in Him because their deeds were evil: "You are of your father the Devil, and the lusts of your father it is your will to do. He was a man-slayer from the beginning, and in the truth he standeth not. . . . He is a liar, and the father thereof" (John viii. 44). Those who claimed Abraham and, in the highest sense, God for their father, are referred to this dreadful paternity, since they abet Satan's desires and are tools to work his will against the true Son of God. Their moral affinity proved their spiritual descent. Their features betrayed their family. On the same principle Elymas the sorcerer was addressed by the Apostle Paul: "O full of all guile and all villany, *son of the Devil*, enemy of all righteousness . . . perverting the right ways of the Lord" (Acts xiii. 9 f.). It

gives an added odiousness and horror to transgression to consider that our moral offences are no detached and casual misdoings, beginning and ending with ourselves. They are instigated from beneath; and they implicate us—each sinful deed so far as it goes, and those forms of sin that appear so light, so natural and pleasant—in that vast and malignant conspiracy against the government of God which is represented in the teaching of Christ and Scripture under the name of “the kingdom of darkness” and “of Satan.”

5. In his impeachment of sin in believers, St John comes round in the end to what, under other words, he had said at the beginning: Sin is *unnatural in the child of God*; it is contradictory to the very being of the regenerate life, and constitutes the denial of its reality. Sin is as foreign to the character, as opposed to the true nature, of the man himself as it is alien to the Christ in whom he dwells, and as it is congenial and connatural to the Wicked One who tempts him.

The two sentences of verse 9 amount to this: as a matter of fact the child of God “does not do sin” (*ἀμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ*)—the produce of his life is not of that kind; further than this, as a matter of principle “he cannot sin.” In the former of these statements St. John is appealing to the facts: they are “manifest” (v. 10); the evidence is plain to any one who has eyes and cares to look. “We know,” he writes in the 14th verse, “that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren”; so in chap. ii. 13 f., “You young men are strong, and have overcome the Wicked One”; in chap. v. 4, “This is the victory that has overcome the world,—it is our faith”; finally, in chap. v. 18, “We know that every one that is begotten of God does not sin.” This was the witness of the Apostolic Christian consciousness to the moral efficacy of the Christian spirit. St. John’s faithful readers know how widely different their life is from what it had been before conver-

sion, from the daily life of the heathen around them—and, as he seems to imply, from the life of the Antichrists and false prophets, who thrust on them their presumptuous claims to a higher and more intimate knowledge of God than that reached through faith. There are the grapes and figs on the one side—"the fruit of the Spirit," in love and joy and peace; and the thorns and thistles giving their inevitable yield in "the works of the flesh," upon the other. The contrast was patent and palpable, in the actual state of society; and Christ's true disciples could not but "know that" they were "abiding in Him, from the Spirit He had given" them—in crying contrast as that was with the spirit of the world. Each believer had in himself the witness, open to be known and read by all men, of his new birth from God, in his freedom from sin, in the changed tenour of his life, in the purity and righteousness and affectionateness of his disposition and his daily walk. To one, and another, and another of his beloved flock the Apostle could point, and say: "There is a man begotten of God; for, look! he lives a life unstained by sin."

While behind all sin a Satanic inspiration and paternity are operative, so the righteousness of the Christian is due to "a seed of God abiding in him." There is a deep-hidden master force governing the man's behaviour, a mystic influence about him, a principle of Divine life and sonship acting itself out in his daily walk and counteracting "the spirit of the world" that breathes all around him (iv. 4; 1 Cor. ii. 12; 2 Cor. iv. 4), a "seed" which bears good fruit of righteousness where the evil fruit of sin once grew rankly. That "seed of God" dwelling in the believer in Christ is, doubtless, to St John's thought, *the Holy Spirit*, concerning whom he says later, in verse 24: "In this we know that He abideth in us, from the Spirit that He gave us." The *σπέρμα* of this passage is the *χρίσμα* of chap. ii. 27, which

invests the Christian with knowledge and power, which inspires him with purity and goodness. St. John's teaching about the Holy Spirit and His relations to individual Christian men is in full accordance with St. Paul's, who recognizes in this gift of the Father at once the seal of the adoption of the Sons of God and the seed of all Christian growth and fruitage in them. There are two principles, two lines of spiritual heredity and propagation, diametrically opposed: the filiation from God and from the Devil respectively, "the Spirit" with his "fruit" and "the flesh" with its "works," each "lusting against" the other (to use St. Paul's language on the subject in Galatians v. 16-24). Each desires what its opposite abhors. To be "led by the Spirit" is to "mortify the deeds of the body" (Rom. viii. 5, 13); it is to work the works of God and to counterwork, in and around oneself, "the works of the Devil."

Thus sin is excluded not by mere avoidance and repression, but by preoccupation. God's seed "abides in" the Christian heart. The man is possessed by another generative, fruitful principle. As in land full of good seed, actively germinating, weeds want the room to grow; so in a soul filled with the Holy Spirit, where He dwells at the sources of feeling and impulse, touching all the springs of action and breathing on all the issues of life, where this God-planted "seed" sends its roots into the depths and its branches into the heights and breadths of the man's nature—what place can there be for sin in him any longer? "He cannot sin," cries the Apostle: "he has been begotten of God"! The children of God can no more live in sin than the children of the Devil can live out of it. So that to the Christian man, in the integrity of his regenerate nature and the consciousness of his fellowship with Jesus Christ and of his filial relationship to God, sin is, in the strictest sense, a moral impossibility. Could St. John, for instance,



lie or steal? Could he hate his fellow-man, or deny the Lord that bought him? Such delinquency was inconceivable, in such a man. If an act of transgression is proposed to the child of God, however strong the inducements or fascinating the allurements it presents, he simply *cannot* do it. It is against his very nature; to commit the offence he must deny his truest self, and violate not merely his conscience and personal honour but all the instincts of the being received in his new and better birth from God.

There is, to be sure, a measure of the ideal in the Apostle's sweeping assertions on these points. His dictum in verse 9 applies in its full truth to the "perfect man" in Christ Jesus. Principle must be wrought into habit, before it has full play and sway. Ignorance and surprise will betray the unpractised Christian believer, turning aside his true purpose; through the mechanical force of old practice, or the pressure of hostile circumstance acting upon him unawares, the man who is yet weak in faith may stumble or yield ground. He is bewildered, for the moment, against his steady judgement, by some glamour of sin or sophistry of error. St. John would not count a babe in Christ, so suffering, as reprobate, nor be hasty to take that for a deadly sin which was not deliberately chosen by the man's will and did not proceed out of his heart. "There is," he writes in chap. v. 16 f., "a sin unto death"; and "there is a sin not unto death." Acts of "wrong-doing" (*ἀδικία*, v. 17) take place on the part of Christian men, which call for prayer on their behalf—prayer that will be answered by God's "giving life" to those that have so sinned. In all such instances—and charity will extend the limit of them widely—the intercession of the sinner's Advocate is hopefully invoked (ii. 1 f.). Yet the sin itself in every case, so far as its scope extends and so long as it continues, makes for death; it eclipses the soul's light of life, it involves a forfeiture of sonship, a severance of some

one or other of the bonds that unite the soul to God, a grieving of the Holy Spirit and a chilling of His fire within the breast. A new access of life must come, a deeper planting of the seed of the Spirit must be effected, if the effect of this lapse from grace is to be undone, if the man who has tripped is not to stumble on into an utter fall, but to be made through his stumbling stronger and warier for the future to run the race set before him.

Such qualifications of the great axiom of these verses the Apostle does virtually make elsewhere. They do not militate against its essential truth, nor detract from the reasonableness and consistency of St. John's doctrine of sanctification. Sin is that which has no right to be, which therefore must not be; and the Son of God has declared that it shall not be. In the true man, the offspring of God, the new man in Christ Jesus, sin has no place whatever; it is banned and barred out at every point, being the abominable thing which God hates, as it is vile in itself and ruins His creatures. Sin is against law and against nature; it is un-Christian and devilish; it blights every hope and aspiration of our being. It is disorder, and disease, and disfigurement; it is a shameful bondage, and a most miserable death. Sin is dehumanizing to ourselves, because it is the dethronement of God within us—unmanly, since it is ungodly; the perdition of the individual, and the dissolution of society. Such, in effect, is St John's indictment of sin; and he warns and arms his readers on all sides against this one deadly mischief, which besets men from first to last in the present evil world. From sin no salvation is found save in the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord; but in His love there is a free salvation, and a salvation without limit either in duration or degree.

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