

Sin as Transgression

by Charles Ewing Brown

The sermon explores the nature of sin as a transgression against God's law and emphasizes the importance of love in overcoming sin.

Scripture: Psalm 32:8, Matthew 3:1, John 7:17, Romans 2:15, Galatians 4:6, 1 John 1:7, 1 John 3:4, Revelation 3:2

Topics: "Nature Of Sin", "Original Sin"

Description

Charles Ewing Brown preaches about the nature of sin, highlighting how it is a permanent element in mankind's life, often ignored in modern conversations and literature. He emphasizes that sin is like a pestilential disease, present at all times, and that all suffering has its roots in sin. Brown discusses how religions and philosophy have emerged to address this universal evil, and how the existence of law and government testify to the universality of sin. He delves into various theories of sin, contrasting Calvinism and Arminianism, and explores the New Testament terms for sin, emphasizing the importance of understanding sin in personal relations with God.

Transcript

We live in an age that is eager for novelty. If men in the ancient East said that the "old is better," now in the modern West we reverse that saying automatically without giving much thought to the true state of the case, discarding the old wherever possible. If we cannot do away with the old, we often try to find a new name for it. Like day and night, heat and cold, sickness and health, sin is a permanent element in the life of mankind.

But modern man, since he cannot rid himself of its enormous misery, seeks to explain it away or at least to find new names for it. Therefore the term "sin" is almost entirely ignored in modern conversation and current literature. Pick up your newspaper and the pile of magazines in the rack. The chances are that amid the millions of words there printed this expression will not occur one single time unless it should happen in a newspaper review of some minister's sermon. Nevertheless, sin is with us at all times. It is like a pestilential disease carried on the wind and mixed with the water and clinging to every particle of dust floating through the air. When pestilence is abroad it does no good to seek to avoid it by ignoring it, by refusing to read about it or to talk about it, and by failing to take countermeasures against it. In these years all the progress we have ever made in overcoming pestilences and the onslaughts of disease has been gained by facing the subject boldly and earnestly studying it.

The religions of mankind are a testimony to the existence of sin; they took their rise in history for the very purpose of dealing with this universal evil. Philosophy also would never have been born had it not been for the incentive to study the meaning of life, which the existence of sin has furnished to the thinkers of mankind. Ultimately all suffering has its roots in sin.

The existence of law and government are a testimony to the universality of sin. True, even if there were no sin some kind of social co-operation between men and nations would be necessary, and such co-operation might discharge some of the functions of modern government; but in such a case government and law would be so different from what they now are that they might well bear quite another name altogether. Indeed, some students of the subject regard the whole duty of government as consisting of the repression and control of the evil, antisocial element in society, allowing the normal, creative powers of human nature freedom to develop a wholesome progress. Such a society would need no government if all sin were eliminated. In other words, all the penitentiaries, prisons, soldiers, police, and judges in the world are a testimony to the universal spread of the disease of sin.

While many modern social reformers have labored assiduously to eradicate the ancient Christian conceptions of sin (this does not apply to all -- very true Christian is to some extent a social reformer), nevertheless social reformers have uncovered an enormous junk pile of social evil in our world which they sometimes call "social lag" but which might as well be called sin. We insist that if any person wishes to do the kind of exact thinking necessary in critical studies he cannot find any explanation of the mass social evil of our times if he discards the description and the interpretation of man's paradoxical nature given in the Christian doctrine of sin.

Logically the discussion of religion and of theology begins with the doctrine of God, but psychologically that study begins with the doctrine of sin for unless men have a sense of sin they do not even begin to think about the nature of God. According to sacred history the Christian doctrine began with the study of sin. The great events of Jesus' ministry were prefaced by the preaching of John the Baptist that men should repent (Matt. 3:1-2), and the ministry of Jesus himself began with his work of preaching repentance. "From that time," says Matthew, "Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17).

Serious thinkers are beginning to sense the fact that the principal cause of the weakness of the Christianity of our times is the failure of the modern church to understand and to preach the scriptural doctrine of sin and man's miserable condition therein. The study of history will show that the great spiritual leaders of the Christian church have been men who were awakened by the Spirit of God to see the awful nature of sin.

The excuse which is made in our day for a shallow doctrine and a weak conviction of sin is that such a deep experience is unnecessary and impossible where children are properly reared. The answer to this is that the three greatest leaders of the church since the Apostolic Age -- Augustine, Luther, and Wesley -- were all carefully trained in Christian teaching and life in their childhood. And while Augustine admits going into sin, it is very certain that his deep sense of sin was due as much to his Christian insight as to the objective enormity of his evil life before the world, for in the opinion of the present day the life of Augustine before his conversion would be regarded as quite respectable. In the cases of Luther and Wesley, however, it is strictly accurate to say that they were drilled in religion as a soldier is trained for battle, and their lives were very strict and religious from childhood. Yet all these men, good by the standards of their age, live in history as men who knew a deep and terrible conviction of sin. This fact is what made them

Christian leaders. They had a deep sense of sorrow for sin and joy for redemption. If the doctrine of sin is so important, it will be worth our time to give the matter earnest thought. Let us consider first some of the theories which have held the field in regard to the nature of sin.

THEORIES OF SIN

Sin Is Due to Human Limitations

In all history this is one of the most common theories of the nature of sin. And because it is more or less concealed in nearly all the preaching and writing about sin in our times, it is desirable to seek to understand it. In order to strip this theory of all philosophical terms it will be necessary to oversimplify to some extent. Men have throughout the whole Christian Era held the view that inasmuch as God is infinite and man is limited, therefore the demands of God are so high and sweeping that we of limited and finite minds can never hope to live up to them. The books of theology are full of this theory written by men who deny its philosophical validity yet hold to it as a practical rule of the Christian life.

This kind of reasoning is a fallacy into which the most brilliant minds have fallen. But it is like saying that a mother who is a Ph.D. in psychology will impose college work on her kindergarten child and will expect far more of that child than is humanly possible for it to do. Stated in this way, the theory falls flat. We should expect a mother who is a doctor of philosophy to allow for the weakness and immaturity of her child. Yet we find Christian theologians maintaining that because God is all wise he expects more of human beings than it is at all possible for them to perform. I grant you that a scholarly mother might set a higher standard for her child than would an ignorant mother, and I believe that God sets a higher standard for men than the average man sets for himself. But we cannot believe that the infinity of God, including as it does infinity of wisdom, can set an infinite standard for weak and finite men.

This is one of the criticisms we have of the able work of Reinhold Niebuhr, in volume one of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. While he explicitly denies this theory, he does emphasize the finite nature of man to a point which creates the distinct impression that on account of his weak, limited human nature man cannot cease from sin in this life. And in volume two Niebuhr strongly suggests [17] that even Jesus himself was not sinless on account of his being a finite, human being.

The great thinkers of the church have worked out the various phases of this doctrine of the sinfulness of finite existence. Augustine explains sin as a lack of being; Leibnitz teaches that it is unavoidable because it rises from the necessary limitation of the creature. Outside the church a similar doctrine of sin is held by Christian Scientists and like schools of thought, who maintain that sin is simply a negative thing, a thing which is not.

Sin Due to an Eternal Principle of Evil

Another widespread theory of sin is that there is an eternal principle of evil, which the Parsis of India, following the ancient doctrine of Zoroaster, hold to this day. This principle of evil is personal; it is an eternal god of sin who divides the universe with the eternal God of holiness. The Gnostics, Marcionites, and Manicheans do not go that far, but maintain that sin is in matter, as in the elements of nature and the body of mankind.

It is not necessary to dwell long on such a pagan doctrine, although it is true that there are Christians today who believe that the devil is eternal as God is eternal. They do not understand that if the devil were

as eternal as God there would be two Gods. However, it is unreasonable to think of two Gods, both eternal and both omnipotent.

Sin Due to the Appetites of the Body

There is also the theory that the sensuous nature of man's body is the cause of sin. This theory is similar to the finite limitation theory except that it is somewhat more definite in locating sin in the exercise of man's natural desires and appetites. The ancient church long held the theory that sexual desire is the original sin which cursed the race. Scholars say that this is the reason why fish may be eaten during Lent -- because in ancient times it was believed that fish were generated spontaneously from the water, whereas animals were generated through a supposedly sinful act of passion and therefore fish was permitted in Lent and animal meat rejected. In modern times all educated people know that the theoretical foundation of the custom is not true, but the traditional practice continues just the same.

It is undoubtedly true that the passions of the flesh are among the most frequent and conspicuous occasions of sin. But to locate sin in the flesh in a physical sense is missing the whole Christian teaching about the nature of sin. If this theory were true, ascetic practices which punish and weaken the flesh would have spiritual value. Moreover, older people would have a great spiritual advantage and would by the very weight of age attain to saintliness, a statement which both observation and the Scriptures disprove.

THE NEW TESTAMENT TERMS FOR SIN

Undoubtedly the New Testament doctrine of sin is best understood by studying the discourses of the sacred Writers upon this subject. Nevertheless, it will help us somewhat to a better insight of the subject to take up the various terms which the New Testament writers use to describe the fact of sin. The most common word in the Greek New Testament for sin is hamartia. In its various forms it appears some one hundred and fifty-eight times in the New Testament. It is a word which means "to miss the mark." The next most commonly used word is adikia, which means "injustice or unrighteousness." In various forms this word is found sixty-six times in the New Testament. Paraptoma, "a falling away or a false step," appears twenty-three times. After this comes anomia, "disobedience to the divine law" or "anti-law." The term occurs in all forms twenty-three times in the New Testament. Asebeia, "ungodliness or irreverence," occurs in all its forms some seventeen times in the New Testament. In various forms parabasis, "a false step, transgression," appears twelve times. These are the principal words used in the Greek New Testament to describe sin.

One notable characteristic of these terms for sin is that they all indicate a maladjustment of some kind. I am aware that we must not place too much weight upon the etymology of a word, as its true meaning is to be discovered from its use. Nevertheless, it cannot be wholly without interest to find that every one of these New Testament terms indicates a deviation from a goal of some kind, a loss of contact, a failure to make connections. The form of these words in the Greek indicates as much to the student.

The first impression to a careless reader would be that sin is excusable, that it is failing to hit the target after the archer has earnestly tried. That, however, is not the true meaning. The idea conveyed in all these terms, each of which is a rhetorical figure in itself, is that a sublime objective lies before every soul. To reach this goal is the most important thing in human life, and the man who fails does so through his own fault.

The whole New Testament doctrine of sin is focused in the one word of the Apostle: "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4).

We cannot understand the scriptural doctrine of sin until we have channeled our thinking into strictly personal relations with God. Many thinkers seek to transcend the bounds of our finite human life by thinking of God and the law in impersonal terms, but nothing is known about God and no religious thoughts of God can arise until and unless we think of him as a person. The moralism of the age has created a thousand statutes, mostly concerned with our relations to our fellow man, and yet when we think in these terms we can always find excuses for our failure. The sense of sin never awakens until we come face to face with God as a person and say as did David: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."

The clearest and most reasonable doctrine of sin arises when we think of the law of God not as ten thousand statutes, but as God's personal will concerning us. The modern conception of law is an impersonal statute, administered by officials supposedly indifferent to the persons concerned. However valuable this conception of law may be, it is important to remember that it was not common in the days when the Bible was written and that that Book was composed in the language of the people of its own time.

For primitive people the law was always the will of the sovereign. That will was supreme. People who were within reach of the king's immediate presence needed no written law: they knew what the king expected of them and that was enough. Written law represented a lower state of fellowship with the king. To be subject to the king's written commands and edicts was to be virtually an exile. This is undoubtedly what the Apostle Paul meant by his teaching that we as Christians are not under the law: we do not live on the faraway edges of the kingdom where the will of the King comes to us only by written edicts. We live in the King's presence where we know his will by constant communion with him. Such a servant will not be less obedient to the King, but more completely conformable to all the subtle and intangible signs by which the King communicates his wishes. God says: "I will guide thee with mine eye" (Ps. 32:8).

The idea that there might be a set of thousands of formal laws largely unknown and utterly impossible of fulfillment which can come between the Christian soul and God and blast that soul moment by moment, or at least daily, with wrath and guilt in spite of his love for God and of God's love for him -- this doctrine is contrary to all the New Testament. The folly of such a dogma is seen when we remember that sin is not a physical thing. Sin is a disturbance of relation between persons. If there were only one man in all the world it would be impossible for that man to commit nearly every sin one could name. He could not steal, he could not lie, he could not be guilty of murder. The only sins he could commit would be sins against God because there would still be a relation between him and God. Such thoughts as this will show us that the soul of man comes first before any human law, and the being of God comes first before any law regulating the relation of his creatures to him. The relation of man to God comes before any other law. It is the basis of all law.

The beginning of all sin is, then, that man has broken relations of love to God. It is God's supreme will concerning himself that man should love God and his brother and live in fellowship with both. The result of this love relationship is that all good becomes possible. Here he would be holy, here he would be happy. In this relationship he would perfect his powers, develop his potentialities, and keep the law, which is nothing else but the will of God concerning him for his moral and spiritual education. That will is set forth in the positive laws of the New Testament.

This is the teaching of Jesus who, when he was demanded to cite the two greatest commandments, immediately set them forth as follows: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength and . . . thy neighbor as thyself." These two laws seem to be simply a principle which could be put into shorter form: "Live in love." In other words, the man who loves God properly cannot behave in an unlovely manner to any member of the human race. According to the teaching of Jesus, then, the supreme law of life is to love God; and if that is the supreme law of Christ it is evident that the act of sin is the violation of that law. "Love," says the Apostle, "is the fulfilling of the law"; and this profound thought will shed a brilliant light upon the whole question of sin and salvation. The fulfilling of the law is love. The sin which violates the law is not primarily pride, selfishness, lust, cruelty, or blasphemy. First of all, that sin is simply lack of love to God. Contemplation of this idea will show us how far the Christian conception of sin is from that of the world of our times, for men may be godless, indifferent to God, lacking in love of God, and yet stand high in the honor and esteem of men. Furthermore, this definition reveals to us the necessity of supernatural religion, for the natural man simply finds it impossible merely to love God or even to understand what it would mean to love God.

This was the sin which convicted a certain seeker at the beginning of his Christian experience as a child. He realized that he could not claim to be a Christian because he could not love God as the Bible commands men to do, and he was at a loss to know how a person can love God any more than he can love the multiplication table or the principle of gravitation. It is only when one attempts to know God by faith in the experiences of the new birth that he can understand this mystery, for it is then that God sends forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6).

The Command to Do the Impossible

Christians have pondered for ages the paradox that mankind seems to be commanded to do the impossible and yet is held guilty for not doing it. Plainly, according to the doctrine set forth in these pages it is man's duty to love God, but if that love is lacking in his heart how can he exercise it? And if he cannot obey the law, why should he be held guilty for failing to do the impossible? This difficulty that has confused generations of Christians has a simple solution: man does not have what it takes to fulfill God's law. Nevertheless, he is not free from guilt for his failure, because God offers him the thing which he needs to make that fulfillment complete. This is so plain one must wonder that it has been a cause for perplexity. A surgeon has the duty of performing a surgical operation, yet regardless of his skill and ability he cannot do the work with his bare hands alone; he must have surgical instruments. Nevertheless, if he knows how and where to get those instruments we would not hold him innocent if he let the patient die while excusing his negligence on the plea that he could not perform the operation because he did not have the necessary equipment. The skilled workman could do but few of the things which must be done in our great factories if he were compelled to work with his bare hands only. But he is not excusable if he is negligent when the management has given him a vast quantity of tools to do the work which would otherwise be impossible for him. And so it is with man in this world, born with a sinful nature. With his bare hand, so to speak, he cannot serve God, he cannot refrain from sin, he cannot work righteousness, he cannot do God's will; but God has placed at his hand the gift of His grace and love. Therefore, all that is necessary is that he shall open the hand of faith and receive instruments from God's hand which will make it possible for him to love God and his fellow man and keep free from sin.

In order to discuss the subject of sin properly it is important to bear in mind this question which has been debated in Christianity for centuries. In its modern form this debate is carried on by Calvinism and Arminianism

CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM CONTRASTED

Calvinism is the doctrine that even before they are born men are predestined to be saved or to be lost. Arminianism is the doctrine of freedom of the will -- that men are truly on probation in this world and have some opportunity to make a moral choice every moment of conscious life, from birth to death. Calvinists emphasize the nature of sin as a state of hostility toward God wherein men sin unconsciously in almost every activity of their lives. Men, they say, are not only guilty of the sins of ignorance, but also of the state of sinfulness in which they live.

Arians admit that men are born depraved, that is, with an inclination toward sin. They deny, however, that this sin makes anyone guilty before he has reached the age of accountability and has thus accepted this sinfulness as his own by an act of the will. Thus Calvinists have stressed the involuntary, instinctive nature of sin and Arminians have insisted that this instinctive tendency toward sin is not such as to make the individual guilty until he gives his own consent thereto. In other words, the measure of ability is the measure of obligation.

Arminians call the native depravity of man sin in an accommodative sense. The older Arminians tried to conform their phraseology to the popular orthodoxy of the day as far as possible. In this, however, they also followed scriptural precedent, for Paul called the sinful tendency "sin." Speaking of an unconscious element within him before he came to the age of accountability, he said, "Sin revived, and I died." Here, Arminians insist, was the point when he accepted responsibility for his inward depravity and thus acquired guilt by giving it his voluntary consent.

Writing of all the Protestant churches at the time of the Sixteenth-Century Reformation, Dr. Charles Hodge says: "Founding their doctrine on their moral and religious consciousness and upon the Word of God, they declared sin to be the transgression of, or want of conformity to, the divine law. In this definition all classes of theologians, Lutheran and Reformed, agree." [18]

Nevertheless, John Wesley's definition of sin is quite different. For him, sin is "the wilful violation of the known law of God." [19]

Conformable to this definition is one given by the famous Wesleyan theologian, Dr. W. B. Pope, who writes: "First with reference to God, it [sin] is the voluntary separation of the human will from the divine expressed in disobedience to his law. Second, in relation to man it is guilt as the consciousness of personal wrong and personal liability to punishment." [20]

A good Arminian definition of sin is given by Prof. John Miley: "Sin is disobedience to a law of God conditioned on free moral agency and opportunity of knowing the law." [21]

Calvinists condemn the Wesleyan doctrine of sin, holding that it is not deep enough. Dr. Hodge expands the definition of sin as follows: "It is included in these definitions: (1) that sin is a specific evil, differing from all other forms of evil. (2) That sin stands related to law. The two are correlative, so that where there is no law there can be no sin. (3) That the law to which sin is thus related is not merely the law of reason, or of conscience, or of expediency but the law of God. (4) That sin consists essentially in the want of conformity on the part of a rational creature to the nature or law of God. (5) That it includes guilt and moral pollution."

Dr. Hodge proceeds to develop the Calvinistic doctrine that God's demands are so exacting no Christian can ever live up to them. He writes: "If this principle be correct, if the law demands entire conformity to the

nature and will of God, it follows:

"That there can be no perfection in this life. Every form of perfectionism which has ever prevailed in the church is founded either on the assumption that the law does not demand entire freedom from moral evil, or upon the denial that anything is of the nature of sin, but acts of the will. But if the law is so extensive in its demands as to pronounce all defect in any duty, all coming short in the purity, ardor, or constancy of holy affections, sinful, then there is an end to the presumption that any mere man since the fall has ever attained perfection." [22]

Here Dr. Hodge opposes some positions Wesleyans do not hold. We believe that "the law does demand entire freedom from moral evil," but also that the grace of God supplies the need here. And we allow that there are unconscious, sinful acts growing out of depraved hearts already hardened by previous sin. But no such acts are possible on the part of regenerated and quickened believers. But to us the most amazing thing in Dr. Hodge's argument is his complete indifference to the supernatural power of the "blood of Jesus Christ his Son which cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Moreover, Dr. Hodge here (and many like him) plainly infers that anything short of infinity must be of the nature of sin, but on this ground all Christian theology is vain and all redemption is impossible. For if this is true, not even the highest archangel can ever be free from sin, as even the angels are finite.

Dr. Hodge then proceeds to maintain that not only an act of deliberate self-determination but all spontaneous impulsive exercises of the feelings and affections are in a sense voluntary. Also, he holds that whatever inheres in the will, as a habit of disposition, is called voluntary as belonging to the will. "There is," he says, "a sinfulness as well as sins; there is such a thing as character as distinguished from transient acts by which it is revealed; that is, a sinful state, abiding, inherent, immanent forms of evil, which are truly and properly of the nature of sin. All sin, therefore, is not an agency, activity, or act; it may be and is also a condition or state of the mind. This distinction between habitual and actual sin has been recognized and admitted in the Church from the beginning." [23]

While we are willing to admit that there are states of sin as well as acts of sin, and that an evil disposition or wrong attitude may be fully as destructive spiritually as a definite willful act, nevertheless it seems evident that this Calvinistic doctrine has been exaggerated out of all likeness to the truth of the gospel. For example, this principle has been interpreted to mean that every act of a Christian man is tainted with sin because it is impossible to assert of any given act that it could not have been better.

Take the act of prayer. A mother is praying for the salvation of her son. The critics say that that act is tainted with sin because it is selfish. Possibly she is thinking of the enjoyment she will have in the increased devotion of her son to herself and of her pride in his respectability. and in his prestige reflected upon her after he is saved. Inasmuch as there are motives like this unknown to a person who is doing a good deed, the point is obvious that even in prayer and preaching there is not lacking the quality of sin, they say.

A certain theological professor held this view. Finally, he came to have a conference on the subject with two other Christian men, but before they sat down to consider the subject it was agreed that they should have prayer. After prayer, one of the brethren asked the professor, "Now, professor, you say there is sin in all that we do. Let me ask you which is the greater sin, to pray for light on this subject as we have prayed together today or to go out and murder a man?" The professor was embarrassed because, on the principle that all human frailty is sin, it is hard to make a common-sense distinction in such unreasonable

doctrines.

On this point, the famous Church of England theologian and friend of Wesley, John Fletcher, of Madeley, writes: "Does a well-meant mistake defile the conscience? You inadvertently encourage idleness and drunkenness by kindly relieving an idle, drunken beggar, who imposes upon your charity by plausible lies: is this loving error a sin? A blundering apothecary sends you arsenic for alum; you use it as alum, and poison your child; but are you a murderer, if you give the fatal dose in love? Suppose the tempter had secretly mixed some of the forbidden fruit with other fruits that Eve had lawfully gathered for use; would she have sinned if she had inadvertently eaten of it, and given a share to her husband? After humbly confessing and deploring her undesigned error, her secret fault, her accidental offense, her involuntary trespass, would she not have been as innocent as ever? I go further still, and ask, May not a man who holds many right opinions be a perfect lover of the world? And by a parity of reason, may not a man who holds many wrong opinions be a perfect lover of God? Have not some Calvinists died with their hearts overflowing with perfect love, and their heads full of the notion that God set his everlasting, absolute hatred upon myriads of men before the foundation of the world? Nay, is it not even possible that a man, whose heart is renewed in love, should, through mistaken humility, or through weakness of understanding, oppose the name of Christian perfection, when he desires, and perhaps enjoys the thing?" [24]

Then he continues on the question of God's demands above our ability. "Does not St. Paul's rule hold in spirituals as well as in temporals? 'It is accepted according to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not.' Does our Lord actually require more of believers than they can actually do through his grace? And when they do it to the best of their power, does he not see some perfection in their works, insignificant as those works may be? 'Remove this immense heap of stones,' says an indulgent father to his children, 'and be diligent according to your strength.' While the eldest, a strong man, removes rocks, the youngest, a little child, is as cheerfully busy as any of the rest in carrying sands and pebbles. Now, may not his childlike obedience be as excellent in its degree and, of consequence, as acceptable to his parent, as the manly obedience of his eldest brother? Nay, though he does next to nothing, may not his endeavors, if they are more cordial, excite a smile of superior approbation on the face of his loving father, who looks at the disposition of the heart more than at the appearance of the work? Had the believers of Sardis cordially laid out all their talents, would our Lord have complained that he did not 'find their works perfect before God?' (Rev. 3:2). And was it not according to this rule of perfection that Christ testified the poor widow, who had given but two mites, had nevertheless cast more into the treasury than all the rich, 'though they had cast in much'; because, our Lord himself being Judge, she had 'given all that she had'? Now could she give, or did God require more than her all? And when she thus heartily gave her all, did she not do (evangelically speaking) a perfect work, according to her dispensation and circumstances?" [25]

Browning has stated it thus:

Not on the vulgar mass

Called "work," must sentence pass,

Things done, that took the eye and had the price;

But all the world's coarse thumb

And finger failed to plumb,

So passed in making up the main account;
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:
Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke thro' language and escaped:
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped. [26]

The idea that God makes infinite demands upon limited and finite persons is so unreasonable that it is difficult to discuss it with moderation. To say that a Christian is a sinner because he does not perform at every minute of his life the utmost that we can imagine him capable of doing is to set a false and strange standard of Christian living. Even God does not do all that he could do in any given instance. There is a tree standing outside my window; God could make that tree reach up to the moon, and that no one can deny. And yet he does not do so for his own reasons.

ALL NEW ACTS OF SIN ARE WILLFUL

The definition of sin given by Wesley was formulated by a man of religious genius and a great scholar, and it may be defended as the definition of any new act of sin. Our observation teaches us that an act of sin is likely to have a paralyzing effect upon the conscience, so that those who live in sin for many years become so hardened in their consciences that they commit gross sins, apparently quite unconsciously. Each of these sins, however, is a link in the chain in the group of sins to which it belongs. Undoubtedly, the beginning of the source of sin which it represents was made consciously by a troubled and tempted soul. Many people regard a lie so lightly that they lie unconsciously and apparently without compunction, but when they began the habit of lying the sin of lying was, as Wesley says, a willful violation of the known law of God. And so with other sins of like nature. This principle rules in the case of the Christian in comparison with the sinner. While some sinners commit gross sins unconsciously without deliberation and without compunction, the sensitive heart of the Christian will not be in danger of such unconscious, unintentional sinning as that. For such a person an act of sin is a dreadful thing, and -

Between the acting of a dreadful thing And the first notion, all the interim is Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream: The genius and the mortal instruments Are then in council; and the state of man, Like to a little kingdom, suffers then The nature of an insurrection. [27]

And such an act is not done unconsciously. In other words, to nurture and cherish an evil disposition, sinful habits, and gross wickedness without even being conscious of the fact is the penalty of one or more of the kinds of sins which Wesley defines as willful transgression of the known will of God.

The will of God, or the law of God, for each individual is not merely a code of many statutes; neither is it a demand for infinite power, wisdom, beauty, and grace such as not even angels could produce. It is infinite in another respect. It is the focusing upon each individual soul, weak, finite, human, and limited, of the infinite wisdom, knowledge, and love of God. And that infinite knowledge and wisdom judges exactly what the individual is capable of at a given time.

He will be weaker than some and stronger than others, and the law by which he is judged is the law of God's infinite intelligence measuring his capacities and leading him upward along a path of infinite development. As he moves along that path he walks in the light, and as he walks in the light he experiences the miracle-working power of the blood of Christ which cleanses us from all sin (I John 1:7). Love progresses toward the goal of infinite perfection which he will never reach because he will never be God.

The very moment a man begins to assent to God's will, at that moment he begins to know what God's will for him is. Jesus said, "If any man will do his [Jesus'] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." Therefore, while it is possible for a sinner to sin unconsciously, even a seeker begins to know what God's will is for him at that moment; and that is the law which governs his life. Thus we take the Calvinistic definition of sin and interpret it in an Arminian manner.

In the case of a soul that is sensitive to God, sin must be willful because the law of God is not merely some distant, learned, legal book but a principle written in his heart -- "The law written in their hearts," says Paul.

Transgression of the law of God, then, is violating or sinning against the light which we have of God's will concerning us, and lack of conformity to the divine law is failure to live up to what we know God expects and demands of us as individuals.

Thus we reconcile the Arminian and Calvinistic definitions of sin by understanding the law of God as the "light which lightens every man who cometh into the world," of which man himself is conscious, or becomes conscious, when he assumes the penitent attitude toward God.

17 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, *Human Destiny*, p. 73

18 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. H, p. 180

19 Daniel Steele, *A Defense of Christian Perfection*, p. 42

20 W. B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, Vol. II, p. 29

21 John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol.. I, p. 528

22 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 185

23 Ibid., Vol. II, pp. 186-187

24 John Fletcher, *Checks to Antinomianism*, Vol. II, p. 500

25 Loc. cit.

26 Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra"

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-ewing-brown-/sin-as-transgression/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net