

Definition of Sin

by Daniel Steele

The sermon discusses the confusion of the term 'sin' and the need for a clear definition, highlighting the difference between the law of faith and the law of works.

Scripture: Leviticus 4:2, Romans 5:19-20, Romans 6:14, Romans 7:15, Romans 8:1, Romans 8:37, Ephesians 2:8, Ephesians 3:16, Ephesians 3:20

Topics: "Sin Nature", "Gods Law"

Description

Daniel Steele addresses the need for reform in the understanding and use of the term 'sin,' pointing out the various interpretations and historical roots of the term's confusion. He critiques Paul's use of 'sin' and emphasizes the importance of defining sin as a deviation from duty and a willful violation of God's known law. Steele discusses the challenges of keeping the law of faith and love, highlighting the impossibility of living without sin and the need for grace in overcoming moral weaknesses. He warns against a legalistic view of God's law and encourages a deeper understanding of sin and grace.

Transcript

OUR author endeavors to reform an acknowledged abuse in the use of the term "sin," which "nearly all writers use in a variety of senses." It is a pretty big job to bring about a reform in all writers in theology, many in ethics, and some, like Browning, in poetry and polite literature. In order to exterminate this acknowledged confusion we must rewrite most of the books in our libraries, and correct the loose habits of all present and future writers. In fact, we must correct our Bibles. Moses, in Leviticus iv and v, tells the Hebrews how to treat the "sins of ignorance;" and so careful a writer as Paul, with his diploma from the University of Tarsus in his trunk, falls into this inexact use of this important term, " sin:" " For he made him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin." Some men educated in high Calvinism have courage to insist that Christ, while hanging on the cross, was guilty of all the sins of the elect, making him "the greatest sinner in the universe;" but the rest of mankind interpret "sin" in the first clause to be sin offering. In the Hebrew language, with which Paul was familiar, the word chatath, " sin," has both meanings. This shows that the evil of a variety of meanings of "sin" has its roots in a distant antiquity. In this particular Paul is so reckless in his style of writing, that he declares unborn millions "sinners" and "made sinners by one man's disobedience." This apostle will be found quite obstructive of the proposed reform and of "dismissing original sin to the museum of theological curiosities."

His definition of sin strictly so-called as "deviation from duty; choosing our own will, instead of the divine will; disobeying that law which is binding upon us as a rule of present action," is not so concise, nor, it seems to me, so suitable to his purpose as Wesley's: "The willful violation of the known law of God." Wesley magnifies the voluntary element which is not expressed in the other definition. Our author, in defining sin, extendedly discusses the nature of the law whether fallen beings are obliged to keep perfectly the original and perfect moral law, or a lower law adapted to their diminished moral capacity.

He gives a fair consensus of Methodist opinion on both sides of this interesting question. His own views do not contribute any additional material to this old controversy between the Antinomians and the Neonomians. He seems, however, to side quite strongly with those who contend against any letting down of the law. But the law under which we now are, he says, is "the law of faith as distinguished from the law of works." But this so-called law of Christ or law of love is different from the law given to angels, to Adam, and to other perfect beings.

But, according to the author, it is about as impossible to keep this law as it would be to keep the law of paradisaical innocence. He says: "It is sin to live, even for a moment, below our privileges and the highest possibilities of grace in our particular case. It is a sin to have been, at any point, less useful than we might. It is a sin to have our tendencies toward sin at any point, or in any way, stronger than they need to be." This implies that some proneness to sin needs to be!

"It is a sin to lose any opportunity for doing a kindly act." Thus through several pages he shows that everything that is not on the highest possible key now, because of some momentary weakness in the past, is a sin. The moral of all this is the folly of the profession that anyone has lived any length of time without sinning. This would be true if each of these defects were the result of conscious volition. To this the reply is, that "what are called involuntary transgressions generally involve minute volitions escaping from us because of moral weakness."

One begins to ask what Paul means when he says, "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound;" "we are more than conquerors," etc. The pages that we are criticising may have been written to exalt the way of holiness, but their natural effect will be to make it so steep as to discourage people from trying to walk therein. We are impressed with the idea that, while our author professedly describes the law of faith and love, he is really applying to moral cripples the law of Adamic innocence and angelic purity.

There seems to be in it no sympathetic high priest who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. It looks like the hard law of works, in which grace has no place. It is possible for Christians to have as erroneous a concept of the law of love as they had in past generations of the God of love -- a Shylock enthroned in the sky demanding his pound of flesh according to the letter of the bond, and "hurling the thunderbolts of his wrath down upon the devoted head of his Son on the cross."

This concept of God, the offspring of stern Calvinism, is disappearing under the ameliorating influence of Arminianism. So also may that concept of the law of Christ, which is so inflexible and absolute as to inspire his friends with terror and repel them from perfect obedience because of its rigor, no more torture of the souls of righteous people, as it seems to have haunted the author of this book, inspiring the portrayal of the appalling difficulties and mountain obstacles in the way of holy living in the dispensation of the Holy Comforter.

From beginning to end of the argumentative part of this book we look in vain for words of good cheer to souls seeking complete victory in this life. This book minimizes grace. There is no magnificat in the

volume, unless it is in the experience which he realized while believing the Wesleyan theory. The pæan of victory is deferred till the morning of the resurrection. It cannot be that our brother has often used and deeply pondered the ascription with which Paul finishes his prayer for the Ephesian Church: "Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us." This does not look like sanctification up to knowledge, but illimitably beyond. The Century Dictionary appends this note to its definition of sin:

The true definition of sin is a much contested question, theologians being broadly divided into two schools of thought; the one holding that all sin consists in voluntary and conscious acts of the individual ; the other that it also includes the moral character of the race. One holds that all moral responsibility is individual, the other that it is also of the race as a race. Original sin is the innate depravity and corruption of the nature common to all mankind. But whether this native depravity is properly called sin, or whether it is only a tendency, and becomes sin only when yielded to by a conscious and voluntary act of the individual, is a question upon which theologians differ.

It is therefore an assumption of authority in our author, or any other one man, to declare that the term "sin" in good English usage means only a willful act of wrongdoing. We have often wished that it had this meaning only. But the wish does not alter the fact.

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