

Participation in Other Men's Sins.

by Edward Payson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being mindful of our actions and their impact on others, as we can become partakers in their sins through our negligence, influence, or example.

Scripture: Proverbs 1:10, Proverbs 13:20, Romans 1:32, 1 Corinthians 5:6, 1 Corinthians 15:33, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Galatians 6:1, 1 Timothy 5:22

Topics: "Personal Accountability", "Sin And Guilt"

Description

Edward Payson preaches on the importance of not being partakers of other men's sins, emphasizing the need to guard against sharing in the guilt of others by tempting, assisting, or neglecting to prevent sin. He highlights how ministers, parents, masters, churches, rulers, and citizens can become accomplices in the sins of those under their care or influence. Payson urges individuals to take responsibility for their own sins and avoid participating in the transgressions of others to escape shared punishment and maintain personal accountability.

Transcript

"Neither be partaker of other men's sins."

1 Timothy 5:22.

this chapter the apostle gives Timothy particular directions respecting the duties of his pastoral office; and solemnly charges him before God and the elect angels, to observe these directions; not preferring one man above another, and doing nothing by partiality. One of the most important of his official duties consisted in ordaining other men to the work of the ministry by prayer and the imposition of hands. As it was of the greatest importance that none should be introduced into the ministry who were not suitably qualified, the apostle particularly enjoined it upon him to use great care and circumspection in examining and setting apart persons for this sacred office; and enforced a compliance with this injunction by intimating to him, that, should he neglect it, he would participate in the guilt of every unworthy character, on whom he should carelessly lay hands.

Lay hands, says he, suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins, but keep thyself pure. My hearers, though this caution was originally addressed to an individual with reference to the duties of a particular office, it is of universal application. In many other parts of Scripture we are all indirectly, if not directly, cautioned to beware of partaking in the guilt of others; and introducing improper characters into

the ministry, is by no means the only way in which a disregard of this caution may be shown.

In every state of society, and especially in such a state as exists in a civilized country, under a form of government like ours, we are connected with our fellow creatures so intimately, and by such numerous ties, that there are very many ways in which we may become accomplices, or at least partakers, in their sins; and indeed, without great care and watchfulness, it is impossible to avoid being so. In consequence of these connections, the sins of an individual become the sins of many, and there is no doubt that, in the sight of God, a large proportion of every man's guilt is contracted by sharing in the guilt of others.

This being the case, the subject which we have chosen is, I conceive, peculiarly suitable for a day of public humiliation, fasting and prayer. On such a day, we are called upon to humble ourselves before God, not only for our personal sins, but for all the sins of others in which we have made ourselves partakers. In discoursing on this subject, I shall endeavor to show, when we make ourselves partakers in other men's sins; and to state some of the reasons which should induce us to guard against partaking in them.

I. When do we make ourselves partakers in other men's sins? I answer, generally speaking we partake in the guilt of all those sins which we tempt or assist others to commit; of all the sins which we voluntarily or carelessly occasion by our influence or example; of all the sins which we might but do not prevent; and of all the sins against which we do not bear testimony when we have opportunity to do it. On each of these particulars it would be easy to enlarge and to confirm our observations by appropriate quotations from the Scriptures, but these quotations will be more properly introduced in succeeding parts of our discourse.

Now from these observations it follows, 1. That ministers make themselves partakers in the sins of their people, when those sins are occasioned by their own negligence, by their example, or by unfaithfulness in the discharge of their official duties. But why do I mention this to you? Not because you are in danger of partaking in this way of other men's sins, but because my subject naturally leads to this remark; because I am willing to preach to myself as well as to you, and because this remark suggests a sufficient excuse, if excuse be necessary, for the pointed observations which I may be called upon to make in the progress of my discourse; for from this remark it follows that, if you are in danger of sharing in the guilt of other men's sins, it is my duty, as a minister of Christ, to warn you plainly of that danger, and to point out the way in which you may avoid it; and should I neglect thus to warn you, I should myself share in the guilt of all your sins, and of all the sins of which you make yourselves partakers.

Now this I can by no means consent to do. I am willing to participate in all your sorrows and afflictions, but I am not willing to share in your sins. I have enough and more than enough of my own to answer for, without participating in yours. Let this be my apology, if in this, as well as in my other discourses, I use great plainness of speech. 2. Parents participate in the sins of their children, when they occasion, and when they might have prevented them. That this remark is perfectly just, when applied to such parents as set before their children a vicious example, I presume none will deny.

Should a parent voluntarily pain the bodies of his children, or communicate to them a dangerous and infectious disorder, all would unite in reprobating his unnatural conduct. But is it not as abominable for a parent to pain the minds, as the bodies of his children? And can any poison operate upon their bodies more fatally or more certainly, than the vicious example of a parent will operate upon their minds? If he be intemperate, or indolent, or profane, will not his children, unless a gracious providence prevent, most probably resemble him?

And may he not be most justly considered and punished as a partaker of their sins; sins, which come, if I may so express it, recommended, and, as it were, sanctified to them by the example of those, whom God and nature had constituted the guides of their youthful steps? But while almost all unite in justly execrating the wretch, who thus poisons the souls of his unsuspecting offspring, there is another class of parents, who, though perhaps equally guilty in the judgment of God, meet with scarcely a censure from the lips of man.

I mean those who set their children an irreligious example. This class includes every parent who is not himself truly and exemplarily pious. And why should this class be thought less guilty, than that already mentioned? Is not irreligion as surely destructive to the soul as immorality? Are not impenitence, and unbelief, and insensibility to religion, as positively forbidden, and as severely censured in the word of God, as are intemperance or profanity or theft? Will not every impenitent or irreligious character be as certainly doomed, as a robber or murderer?

Why then is an irreligious, less guilty than an immoral parent? But many, who belong to this class, will reply, we teach our children to treat religion and its institutions with respect. We speak of the Scriptures to them with reverence, and bring them with us to the house of God on the sabbath. True, you do so, but they can perceive but too clearly that you do not cordially love the Bible, or honor its Author, or comply with the instructions of the sanctuary. They there hear many duties inculcated which they do not see you practice.

They see, they hear nothing of religion in your families, they see you turn your backs upon the Lord's table; they see you live without God in the world; they see you anxious for their success in this life, but perceive no concern for their happiness in the next. Now what shall prevent them from following your example? And what shall save them from endless perdition if they do? And by what mode of reasoning will you prove, should they perish, that you were not partakers of their sins, and accessories to their eternal ruin?

My friends, it will be terrible to hear a ruined child exclaim at the last day, Lord, I lived as my parents taught me to do, I trod in their steps, I omitted nothing which they prescribed; but they led me along, they were the cause of my sins, and of my destruction. My hearers, if it be true that he who provides not for the temporal wants of his own house, hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel, what shall be said of those parents, who, instead of providing for the spiritual necessities of their children, voluntarily occasion their eternal ruin?

But further, parents partake in the guilt of their children's sins when they might and do not prevent them. If it be true, as the Scriptures assert, that a child, trained up in the way he should go, will not depart from it when he is old, then it follows that, whenever children do forsake the right way, it must be ascribed, either wholly or in part, to the negligence of their parents. Either their parents did not warn, and teach, and restrain them as they ought, or they did not pray for a blessing of their endeavors with sufficient earnestness, or they did not seek for wisdom from above to enable themselves to perform parental duties in the most wise and prudent manner.

It is probably in this last respect that Christian parents are most deficient. They do not properly realize how much heavenly wisdom is necessary to the right education of children; and, therefore, though they warn and pray for their children, yet they do not pray sufficiently for wisdom for themselves. This omission renders many parents, whose conduct is otherwise unexceptionable, partakers in the sins of their children,

and their children's children. They will, probably, unless divine grace prevent, educate their children as we educated them; and their children, when they become parents, will follow their example, and where the spreading mischief will end, God only knows.

How careful, how diligent, how prayerful, then, should parents be. Every parent should consider himself as a fountain, from which proceed streams, that will grow broader and deeper as they run, and should recollect, that it depends on himself, under God, whether these streams shall prove poisonous or salutary, convey virtue and happiness, or vice and misery, wherever they flow. Remember the story of Eli. His sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not, and his negligence not only made him a partaker in their guilt and punishment, but entailed the judgments of God on his descendants, to the latest generation.

3.

The remarks, which have been made respecting parents, will apply, though perhaps somewhat less forcibly, to masters and guardians, and all who are concerned in the government and education of youth. Human laws, you are sensible, make masters answerable, in many instances, for the conduct of their apprentices and servants, and the law of God does the same. It is a maxim in both, that what a man does by another, he does by himself. If a master allows his servants or dependants to use profane language, to neglect the institutions of religion, to profane the Sabbath, to spend his leisure hours with vicious companions, or to indulge in any other wicked practices, when he might prevent it, it is nearly the same in the sight of God, as if he were guilty of the same things himself; and he will be considered as partaking in their sins.

You might almost as well spend this day in the streets or ill places of amusement, in idleness and sin, as suffer your children, servants or dependants to do it. Hear the character and blessing of Abraham, ye parents, masters, and guardians. And the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham the thing that I do? seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

4.

Churches become partakers of the sins of an individual member, when these sins are occasioned by a general neglect of brotherly watchfulness and reproof, and when they are tolerated by the church in consequence of a neglect of church discipline. When this is the case the sins of an individual become the sins of a whole church. This is evident from Christ's epistles to the seven churches of Asia. He commends the Ephesian church because they could not bear them that were evil, while he severely reproveth and threatens other churches for tolerating among them those things which he abhorred.

In a similar manner St. Paul rebuked the Corinthian church for neglecting to excommunicate one of their members who was guilty of a notorious offence; and charges them to put away that wicked person. To these remarks we may add, that every member of a church makes himself a partaker of the known sins of his fellow members, when he neglects to bear testimony against their sins, and to use proper means for bringing them to repentance.

5. We all make ourselves partakers in other men's sins, when we either imitate or in any other way countenance and encourage them.

In this way the whole human race make themselves partakers of the sin of our first parents. They imitate them in desiring forbidden fruit, in disobeying God's commands, in endeavoring to hide themselves from his presence, and in attempting to excuse their sinful conduct when called to an account for it. By this

conduct all men tacitly justify our first parents, and do in effect say, had we been in their place we would have acted as they did. Thus, to use a law term; they become accessories after the fact.

In a similar way do persons often make themselves partakers of the sin of their wicked ancestors. They imitate and then justify their conduct. An attention to this truth will show us why God threatens to visit the iniquities of the fathers upon the children, and why he often executes this threatening by punishing one generation for the sins of those who have gone before them. He does so because those, whom he thus punishes, imitate and thus participate in the sin of their ancestors.

This is evident from the case of the Jews in our Saviour's time. Behold, says he, I send you prophets and wise men and scribes; and some of them ye will kill and crucify, and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues; and persecute from city to city; that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias, son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily, I say unto you, it shall all be required of this generation.

Now the reason assigned for requiring of that generation all the righteous blood shed by their ancestors, is, that they imitated and thus justified their conduct. Their fathers murdered the prophets, and they did the same to Christ and his apostles; thus making the sin of every preceding generation their own. In the same way we may make ourselves partakers of the sins of our contemporaries. When a province rises up in rebellion against its sovereign, every rebel partakes in the guilt of his fellow rebels, since by his example he encourages and justifies them.

So in this rebellious world, every impenitent, unbelieving sinner, partakes in the guilt of all other sinners. In justifying himself he justifies them, by persisting in sin he encourages them to do the same, and thus in effect makes their sins his own. 6. Members of civil communities partake of all the sins which they might, but do not prevent. When a person has power to prevent any sin, he is left to choose whether that sin shall, or shall not be committed. If he neglects to prevent it, it is evident that he chooses it should be committed, and by thus choosing it he does in effect make it his own.

He shows that he does not hate sin, that he has no concern for the glory of God, but is willing that God should be dishonored and offended. If he is deterred from attempting to prevent sin by fears that he shall draw hatred or trouble or expense upon himself, it proves that he loves himself more than God; and that he is more concerned for his own interests, than for the welfare of society. Besides, all allow that men ought, if possible, to prevent gross crimes and public calamities, and even human laws would condemn as an accomplice the man who should witness a murder or robbery without preventing it or giving an alarm, when he had power to do it.

And why then may not God justly condemn us as partakers of all the sins which we might have prevented! My friends, whether you think it just or not, he will do it; and you will hereafter be called to an account for all the violations of the Sabbath, all the profanity, all the intemperance, all the vice of every kind of which you have made yourselves partakers by neglecting to employ those means for their prevention, which God and the laws of your country have put into your hands. 7.

If private citizens partake of all the sins which they might have prevented, much more do rulers and magistrates. To prevent and punish vice is the very object for which they are appointed, the great duty of their office; their office is ordained of God, and they are required by him not to bear the sword in vain, but to be a terror to evil doers, and a praise and encouragement to such as do well. To the faithful and impartial performance of this duty, their oath of office also binds them; and when they thus perform it, they

are indeed what they are called and designed to be, ministers of God to us for good.

But if they neglect their duty, violate their oaths, and prove false to God, they must answer to him for the incalculable mischief which they will occasion; and all the sins, which they might have prevented will be set down to their account. Next to the doom of unfaithful ministers, that of unfaithful rulers and magistrates will probably be most intolerable. Lastly: Subjects who have the privilege of choosing their own rulers and magistrates, make themselves partakers of all their sins, when they give their votes for vicious or irreligious characters.

I hope, my hearers, it is not necessary to assure you that this remark has no party political bearing. In making it I certainly do not mean to censure one party more than another, nor do I intend the most distant allusion to any of our rulers or magistrates; for I am taught not to speak evil of dignities. I merely state it as an abstract principle, which cannot be denied, without denying the truth of Scripture, that when we vote for vicious or irreligious men, knowing them, or having good reason to suspect them to be such, we make ourselves partakers of all their sins.

It is evident that the case bears a great resemblance to that referred to in our text. If Timothy made himself a partaker of the sins of every unworthy character whom he carelessly admitted into the ministerial office, then we certainly make ourselves partakers of the sins of every improper character whom we voluntarily assist in appointing to any public office. But as many, even, among good men, do not appear to think sufficiently of this truth, it may not be improper to insist upon it more particularly.

In the first place, God has plainly described the characters whom we ought to choose for rulers and magistrates. Thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, and hating covetousness, and place such to be rulers. And again, he that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. He has also told us, that when the righteous are in authority the people rejoice, but that when the wicked bear rule the people mourn. If then we choose different men for our rulers, we slight God's counsels and disobey his commands.

Again: We are taught in the Scriptures, that we must give an account to God of the manner in which we employ the talents and improve the privileges with which he favors us. Now the right of choosing our own rulers is undoubtedly a most precious privilege. This, I presume, you will readily acknowledge; for we frequently hear of the precious right of suffrage. Now what account of this privilege can they give to God, who have abused it by assisting to place in authority such characters as were enemies to himself and his government; such characters as he has forbidden us to appoint?

Once more; rulers and magistrates are servants to the public. Now we have already reminded you, that what a man does by his servant, he does by himself. If then we voluntarily assist in appointing vicious or irreligious rulers, we make ourselves partakers of all their sins, and must account for all the good which might have been done, had we chosen different characters. Thus have I attempted to show when we become partakers of other men's sins. If any think I have asserted more than I have proved, I reply, we meet with instances in the inspired writings, in which God punished ministers for the sins of their people, parents for the sins of their children, children for the sins of their parents, churches for the sins of individual members, rulers for the sins of their subjects, and subjects for the sins of their rulers.

But surely he would punish none for the sins of other men, who had not made themselves partakers of those sins. These facts attended to are, therefore, a sufficient proof of all that we have advanced. I proceed, as was proposed, II. To state some of the reasons which should induce us to guard against

partaking of other men's sins. 1. The first reason which I shall mention is, that if we partake of their sins, we shall share in their punishment. Hence when God was denouncing vengeance upon the mystical Babylon, he says, come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.

Hence, too, the many woes denounced against the companions of sinners of different classes. Another reason that should induce us to guard against this is, that we shall have sin enough of our own to answer for, without participating in the guilt of others. He who realizes what sin is, what it is to answer for it, and how numerous and great are his own personal sins, will surely wish to avoid sharing in the transgressions of his fellow sinners. But on this part of our subject, time forbids us to enlarge, and requires us to hasten to the improvement.

In the former part of the day, my friends, I endeavored to make you acquainted with your own personal transgressions. I have now attempted to give you a knowledge of the additional guilt you may have contracted by partaking of the sins of others. And is there an individual present, who does not, in some of the ways which have been mentioned, partake of the sins of those around him? Look first, my friends, into your houses; reflect on the conduct of your children, servants, and apprentices, and see if there be no sins there which you might prevent.

In the next place, look through the town; that it is full of sin you need not be told. The cry of it ascends not only into the ear of God, but into those of man. Among all the vices which provoke God, ruin men, demoralize society, and bring down the judgments of heaven, there is scarcely one which is not practiced among us. If a man wishes to indulge in profanity, sabbath-breaking, intemperance, gaming, or debauchery, he knows where to find companions to countenance and assist him, and where to find places set apart on purpose for such abominations.

Many of these vices stalk abroad among us, in open day. There is not virtue enough in the community to drive them back into their dens, or to make them hide their heads. The inhabitants of our moral pest houses are suffered to range at large, and spread the contagion of their vices. No wonder, then, that our children inhale the infection; and that many of the rising generation promise to outstrip in wickedness every generation that has gone before them. If it should, God have mercy on our country; for surely nothing but infinite mercy can save it from destruction!

Now, my friends, it becomes its to inquire to whom is the prevalence of these vices to be ascribed? If we have no laws to restrain them, then the blame must rest upon our legislators; and those who choose them are partakers in their guilt. But if we have laws to restrain these abominations, then the blame must rest on those whose business it is to execute the laws; and all who prevent, all who do not assist in the execution of these laws, must share in the blame. For my own part, I am determined that, if loud and repeated testimonies against these things can prevent it, none of this blood shall rest with me; and I advise every one, who has any concern for his own soul, or for his eternal happiness, to adopt the same resolution; for it will be no light thing to be found partakers, at the judgment day, of the enormous sins which are committed in this town.

Happy will it then be for him who can truly say, I am clear from the blood and from the guilt of all men. 2. It is impossible not to perceive how completely our subject justifies the conduct of those much insulted individuals, who have voluntarily associated for the purpose of assisting in executing the laws, and suppressing vice and immorality among us. Their God, the God whom our fathers worshipped, and whom

we, their degenerate sons profess to worship, commands them not to be partakers in other men's sins.

They have obeyed the command, and what has been their reward? The same which all the faithful servants of God in all ages have received from those whose welfare they labored to promote, by separating them from their beloved sins. They have been ridiculed, insulted, turned out of those seats of office, which they honorably and faithfully filled; and are indebted wholly to a good Providence, and to the laws which he has given, for their preservation from worse evils. Many of you, my hearers, have calmly sat by and seen this done, if you have not assisted in doing it. And, my friends, those who thus revile and oppose the friends of virtue and religion, would treat Christ and his apostles in a similar manner, were they now on earth.

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