

Concerning Sin

by G. Campbell Morgan

Jesus teaches that sin is a principle at work in the universe, antagonistic to God and to goodness, and that it is a volitional act of rebellion against God, a failure to grasp or miss the mark.

Scripture: Isaiah 45:7, Matthew 8:17, Matthew 9:6, Matthew 26:27-28, Mark 3:29, Luke 24:46-47, John 8:34, John 9:41, John 15:22-24, John 16:8-9

Topics: "Forgiveness", "Sin"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan addresses the profound nature of sin, emphasizing its reality and the moral responsibility of individuals in the face of it. He highlights Jesus' authority to forgive sins, the necessity of repentance, and the dangers of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, which leads to eternal damnation. Morgan explains that sin is a volitional act of rebellion against God, and that Christ's mission was to confront and forgive sin, offering redemption through His sacrifice. The sermon underscores the seriousness of sin while also proclaiming the hope found in Christ's power to forgive and transform lives.

Transcript

"The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins" (Matthew 9:6).

"Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28).

"But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation" (Mark 3:29).

"And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

"Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34).

"Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:41).

"If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father" (John 15:22-24).

"And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me" (John 16:8-9).

THE subject of sin is arresting, absorbing, and abstruse. In the broadest sense sin may be defined in the words of Kant as that which ought not to be.

Dr. Orr opens his volume on "Sin as a Problem of Today," with an illuminative paragraph, which; venture to quote:

"What we name sin is, from the religious point of view, the tragedy of GOD's universe. What it is, how it came, why it is permitted to develop itself into the havoc and ruin it surely entails, what is to be the end of it, above all, how its presence and working are to be reconciled with goodness, holiness, love, in the GOD Who has permitted it - these are the crushing questions that press upon the spirit of every one who thinks deeply on the subject. In its very conception sin is that which ought not to be; which ought never to have been. How, then, or why, is it here, this awful, glaring, deadly, omnipresent reality in human history and experience? For sin is here: this, conscience and universal experience attest. The evidences of its presence are not slight or intermittent. Men may belittle it, try to forget it, treat it as a superstition or disease of imagination - there are no lack of such attempts in the thinking of to-day-but the grim reality asserts itself in the dullest consciousness, and compels acknowledgment of its existence and hateful power. Drug conscience as deeply as you may, a time comes when it awakes. Turn in what direction one will, sin confronts one as a fact in human life-an experience of the heart, a development in history, a crimson thread in literature, a problem for science, an enigma for philosophy."

In view of this, we turn with reverent interest and expectation to the teaching of CHRIST; and recognize at once that there is nothing in His teaching in the nature of an attempt to solve for us such problems as are suggested by the paragraph quoted.

Sent of the Father, He came into the midst of conditions which He recognized, and with which He proceeded to deal. There is abounding evidence in these Gospel narratives of His keen and clear consciousness of the fact of sin. It is equally evident that the deepest meaning of His presence in the world was that of grappling with this fact of sin, both in itself and in its results.

As in previous studies, so also in this, even in the absence of clear definition, we are able to apprehend His conception of the subject under consideration by His references to it. In the course of His teaching, moreover, we discover certain outstanding declarations which reveal man's relation to sin, and his responsibility concerning it.

Then let us consider

First, the revelation of His references to this fact of sin; and

Secondly the teaching of certain outstanding declarations which enable us to understand our relation to, and responsibility concerning sin.

First, then, as to the revelation of the references.

There is no subject for which the Bible uses a larger number of descriptive terms than this of sin. The Old Testament has at least eleven entirely distinct and separate words by which to describe it; and of these words Girdlestone has said, "The pictorial power of the Hebrew language is seldom exhibited more clearly than in connection with the various aspects of evil. Every word is a piece of philosophy; nay, it is a revelation" (Old Testament Synonyms," p. 76).

When we turn to the New Testament we find an equal number of words; indeed, it would seem as though every Hebrew word has its equivalent in the Greek language of the New Testament; and of this fact Girdlestone further remarks, "With regard to all these words, it is to be noticed that the New Testament leans upon the Old Testament, and that the vivid teaching of that latter is taken for granted as authoritative by the writers of the Christian Scriptures" (Old Testament Synonyms," p. 86).

Approaching the study of these words of the New Testament, Archbishop Trench declares, "A mournfully numerous group of words . . . Nor is it hard to see why. For sin . . . may be regarded under an infinite number of aspects, and in all languages has been so regarded; and as the diagnosis of it belongs most of all to the Scriptures, nowhere else are we likely to find it contemplated on so many sides, set forth under such various images" (Synonyms of the New Testament," pp. 239, 240).

In the course of His teaching our Lord made use of seven different words when referring to sin; two of them constantly, the other five incidentally, and only on two or three occasions in each case. In the first two of these words we discover His conception of the essential nature of sin; and in the other five we have revelation of certain aspects of sin.

But our words are inadequate, and constantly cause trouble in our thinking; and a criticism like that is warranted by the fact that the one so criticizing is face to face with a difficulty.

We speak of evil and take up our Bible and read, "I" - the Lord - "create evil" (Isaiah 45:7); and are conscious almost of a shock, which is caused by the fact that we forget that the word evil may stand for a great deal more than is intended in any one use of it. That may be the reason for the variety of words employed in the Bible - at least twenty-two different words, eleven in each language - and of the fact that our Lord described this appalling and awe-inspiring fact by different words, two of them constantly recurring in the course of His ministry.

The first is *poneros*, which is commonly translated evil. The root idea of the word is that which is hurtful. The first essential meaning of the root from which the word comes is that of pain; and the word itself suggests pain and that which causes pain; that is, hurtful or harmful.

The use of the word has reference to that which causes trouble, and to the trouble which is caused. It describes the active principle producing all calamity, material, mental, and moral; and it is also used of the calamity which is thus produced.

In the case of the statement already quoted, "I" - the Lord - "create evil," we should be more accurate if instead of the word evil we understand the word calamity; only we must interpret it by the context, which shows that it refers to calamity falling upon a guilty city. It is simply a declaration of the sovereignty of The Lord over the working of evil, so that it must, within the realm of the Divine overruling and government, issue in calamity.

This word CHRIST constantly used, certainly over forty times, and it suggests the active principle which produces calamity, whether material or mental or moral; and refers to the calamity so caused.

When we group the occasions upon which our Lord is recorded to have used the word, we find that He used it as descriptive of Satan, of demons, of men individually, of the age in the midst of which He wrought His work; and upon occasion, in the abstract sense. By His employment of this word certain facts are made perfectly clear. He recognized the existence of a force contrary to the good and perfect and acceptable will of GOD. He referred to this force, as having its fountainhead in a person, Satan. He recognized that other spiritual beings, that man, that the age itself, had passed under the influence of this force, and were mastered by it.

By repeated reference He made clear His understanding of the fact that this force was in itself corrupt, and in its influence was corrupting; that it marred the handiwork of GOD, prevented the realization of His purpose, was against His holiness, and contrary to the deepest intentions of His love. He gave no single word of explanation as to the genesis of this force in the universe.

The second term, hamartia, is the most common word in the New Testament for sin; and is usually so translated. The root of the word is quite uncertain.

There are two suggestions.

The first is that of a failure to grasp;

The second that of missing possession. But if we are in doubt as to the root signification of this word which we translate by sin, we have no doubt as to its significance as we observe its use. It is a word that signifies failure, or quite simply, the missing of a mark.

In material things the word is used in classic Greek of the missing of a mark, as when a man flings a spear, and it does not strike its intended target.

In the mental realm, with regard to art, music and literature, the word is used of the artist, also of the musician, or the writer, who fails of the highest.

Gradually, even in Greek literature, the word gained a moral significance, and was used of the man whose character and whose conduct were lower than the highest. The idea is that of failure.

This, then, was a common Greek word which New Testament writers appropriated, and used only in the moral sphere.

The Lord's use of the word was invariably ethical, and such as to imply responsibility. There is not a single instance in which our Lord made use of this word so as to suggest that it was a disease apart from a personal and immediate moral responsibility. And another matter is equally noticeable and is full of gracious light, that CHRIST's principal use of the word was in connection with the central purpose of His mission, that of forgiving sin.

There were occasions when He used the term apart from such reference; but in the majority of cases His references to sin were related to the thought of forgiveness. He uttered stern denunciation of those who refused this forgiveness; but in the view of CHRIST, sin was moral failure with which He had power to deal, so as to forgive the sinner. The glory of the redemption of the Cross shines through the references

that CHRIST made to sin, even though some of them were of the nature of the sternest denunciation.

From this survey of His references to evil and sin I make these brief deductions.

Our Lord's outlook upon evil was that He considered it to be a principle at work in the universe, antagonistic to GOD and to goodness. Sin, according to the conception of CHRIST, is the volitional act of rebellion against GOD in submission to this principle of evil; and consequently it is failure, the missing of the mark, the falling short of the highest.

Now for a brief and yet more hurried glance at the five other words of which our Lord made use.

He employed a word, *paraptoma*, commonly translated trespass in our New Testament. It describes the fact of falling where one ought to have stood. It admits the possibility of the fall being non-volitional, but nevertheless recognizes it as a fall. A trespass is a fall, whether the man intended to fall or not. It is failure and imperfection in the sight of GOD; and that is why the saint can never cease using the prayer for forgiveness of trespasses to the end of the pilgrimage. I may be delivered from volitional sinning, but in the light of heaven's unsullied purity there is no hour in which I do not come short of the highest; and in the light of the eternal holiness; am a trespasser, and need the infinite grace of His mercy and His forbearance.

Another word, *anomia*, of which our Lord made use is commonly translated iniquity, but more accurately lawlessness. It does not describe the condition of a man who has never had the law, but rather the attitude of the man who refuses to obey the law. In the use of that word our Lord revealed His recognition of the principle upon which a man acts in the committal of sin.

Sin is a missing of the mark, a failure, and it is iniquity or lawlessness when it is the result of refusal to walk in the light, and to obey law. Therein is revealed the active principle of sin in the life of the individual, which indicates responsibility.

Another word, *kakia*, is generally rendered malice. To understand this translation we have to remember how constantly words change in use. Our word malice is used to-day almost exclusively in the realm of emotional life. But the first meaning of malice is badness, and that is the suggestion of the word of which it is a translation in the New Testament. The Greek word so translated means badness, whether it be material, mental, or moral. It is a word describing evil in itself; not so much the suffering produced, but the principle of evil which results in suffering.

It is a searching word. Our Lord is only reported to have used it once, and that in somewhat remarkable application; but the value it suggests must be borne in mind when we face this fact of sin according to the teaching of CHRIST.

Another word, *akikia*, is commonly translated unrighteousness. It literally means out of the straight. It reveals sin in its relation to holiness and righteousness; holiness being rectitude of character, and righteousness rectitude of conduct. Sin is the opposite in character, and in conduct. It is life and activity out of the straight.

One other word, *phaulos*, He used, only once or twice, but upon supreme occasions. It is translated evil, and yet it is a word with which we have not already dealt. It describes the condition of good-for-nothingness, and constitutes one of the most appalling revelations of sin and evil. It is evil as that out of which good can never come; and thus the word reveals the unutterable hopelessness and corruption of

sin in itself.

In these words we are brought face to face with the thought of CHRIST about evil and sin.

To understand that thought we need to turn to the references themselves; and observe our Lord in the midst of a world in which this principle of evil was at work, confronted and surrounded by sinning men; we need to hear what He said to them, to observe His method with them, to catch these words as they pass His lips. Only by such careful consideration shall we be able to discover His conception of evil, and find His outlook upon sin.

He has given us no explanation of the problem; there is no word in all His teaching which declares what the ultimate is to be, either in the case of the individual, or in the case of the race, or in the case of the universe. He uttered great words that show results, harvests, and inevitable sequences; and words which reveal His conception of the appalling nature of sin and evil.

To accept His view as revealed in these words, will be to be delivered from any superficial thinking about sin; and will more and more make us tremble in its presence, and fear it with all the heart and soul and mind.

We pass in the second place to the consideration of four declarations He made; quite simple, and yet most sublime; incidentally uttered, and yet bringing men face to face with their own relation to sin, and demanding our careful consideration. These words do not deal with evil in the wider sense, but with sin in human life.

The first passages contain His words recognizing the element of personal responsibility in sin.

For example, to the Pharisees:

"If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:41).

Again, not to the Pharisees, but to His disciples about the Pharisees, and those who had rejected Him:

"If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father" (John 15:22-24).

Of course there are many values in these words of CHRIST with which we are not now dealing, in which we are not now interested. We take them now simply to draw attention to what He taught concerning the element of responsibility in sin.

He declared directly to the Pharisees that sin is disobedience to light. He declared to His disciples when interpreting the fact of sin in the case of the Pharisees that He Himself had come into the world as light, that in His presence men saw; and that sin therefore consisted in their disobedience to the light which He granted them.

No man can believe in the infallibility of the teaching of JESUS and declare that man is not morally responsible. CHRIST declared that man is not morally responsible if he has had no vision; but He declared that the moment there is vision and sight and understanding, moral responsibility is created; that such a

man stands in the light, in the presence of good and of evil, and his sin consists in his refusal to answer the sight of his eyes when the light has broken upon him.

We may speak of degrees of light, and indeed we must so speak. To imagine that vast multitudes of the heathen are to be consigned to everlasting punishment because they have not obeyed the Gospel which we have never preached to them, is blasphemy of the worst kind. The measure of heathen responsibility is the measure of heathen light. Light creates responsibility. Sin is disobedience to light.

The next passage contains His words revealing the element of bondage in sin.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34).

The choice creates the compulsion. A man stands, seeing clearly. That is his opportunity. If he disobey the light, and turn to the evil thing, then that evil thing, gaining a victory over him, becomes his master, and he is the slave of that which he chooses. There is no need for illustration. A man yielding to some vulgar passion becomes the slave of that passion, and no matter how he strive he cannot break its power.

The next passages contain His words of warning as to the element of fixity in sin.

"But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation" (Mark 3:29).

I choose for definite purposes of illumination to put that passage into immediate connection with another. Our Lord was referring to the Holy Spirit, and He said:

"And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me" (John 16:8-9).

In the first of these passages our Lord warned men of the tendency of sin to become fixed. It is a terrible word. It is not strange that men tremble when they read it. "Whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is guilty" of perpetuity of sin, fixity in sin, age-abiding sin. The men to whom He was speaking at the moment had not committed that sin. He saw that they were in danger of it, for they were attempting to account for His work by attributing His power to the devil; and in a flash He revealed to them that the last method of GOD lay beyond the hour of His own ministry.

He said in effect, You can say anything against Me, and it will be forgiven you, but there is another age beyond this, that of the dispensation of the Spirit: "He, when He is come, will convict the world in respect of sin"; of sin because they do not obey the light of My presence. If you refuse that spiritual interpretation which is yet to come, then sin will become fixed, an age-abiding sin; and an age-abiding sin involves an age-abiding nemesis and punishment. It is the most awful peril of sin which our Lord revealed in these words.

The last passages to be quoted contain the words in which He declared the possibility of the forgiveness of sin.

The first is:

"The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins" (Matthew 9:6).

He had pronounced forgiveness upon a man who was sick of the palsy, and they criticized Him and said that He blasphemed; to which He replied, "Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house" (Matthew 9:4-6).

This is a wonderful picture, in which we see evil in the moral and material realms, the suffering resulting from the sin. CHRIST saw the connection. Then to the man He said, "Thy sins be forgiven"; and later, "Arise and walk." He never healed bodily affliction save upon the basis of removing spiritual malady. That is the meaning of the great utterance in which Matthew declared that when He healed all that were sick, He did so in fulfillment of the word of the prophet Isaiah, "Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses" (Matthew 8:17).

All His material healing was based upon His ability to deal with the spiritual and moral malady lying behind the material suffering. That was the authority to which He referred when He said, "The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins."

The next passage reads:

"Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28).

The setting of these words is perfectly familiar; the surroundings of the paschal board; the institution of the new memorial feast of Christianity; the Lord taking the fruit of the vine, and saying, with the sacred cup in His hand, "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

The final word was spoken after the Cross, and after resurrection:

"Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

Now mark the significance of these three words of CHRIST.

First, He claimed authority to forgive sins;

Secondly, He revealed His way of forgiving sins; and

Finally, He claimed the accomplishment of His work.

This then is the ultimate word of CHRIST about sin. It is a word that declares His victory over it, and His power to forgive it; and that by the way of a Cross that defies man's ability to explore it to its depths, or to speak the final word about its hidden mystery of pain.

Thus our Lord teaches us the awfulness of sin, and reveals to us our solemn responsibilities in the presence of the evil force in the universe; but He stands in the midst of all the malady, material, mental, and moral, - and claims that by the mystery of His Cross, He is able to forgive sin; and to give to every man the new opportunity by way of moral reconstruction, which shall issue in the full realization of the good and perfect and acceptable will of GOD.

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