

The Doctrine of Sin

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The sermon explores the concept of sin, its types, and the need for redemption, highlighting God's hatred of sin and its consequences.

Scripture: John 3:16, Romans 3:23, Romans 5:8, Romans 5:12, Romans 6:23, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:3, Ephesians 2:8, 1 John 3:4, Revelation 21:1

Topics: "Original Sin", "Redemption Theology"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the concept of sin, emphasizing the importance of understanding its various classifications such as personal sin, individual depravity, and racial sin. He explains that personal sin is a responsible violation of God's law, while individual depravity refers to the inorganic condition of an individual's life inherited from birth. Curtis also discusses the broken brotherhood resulting from sin, highlighting the need for redemption in three aspects: forgiveness and unity with God as a moral person, reorganization and harmony of one's being, and transformation of mankind into a new race with a divine center.

Transcript

The term sin is used in so many ways that it is, in systematic theology, especially important to secure more rigid classification of phases under the general term. The underlying idea of any kind of sin; is that of lawlessness, or *anomia*. In the widest sense a sinner is anyone who does not measure up to God's perfect law. Taken in this generic meaning the Westminster definition is perfect: "Any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God."

Personal Sin. But when John Wesley said that sin is "a voluntary transgression of a known law" he was not thinking of sin in this sweeping manner, he was thinking of a responsible violation of God's law. For such violation it is evident there must be knowledge of what the law is, and a personal intention to break it. Why may we not say, then, that under generic sin there is' personal sin, or that sin for which the moral person is accountable? Precisely analyzed, in relation to ethics, there are three features in all personal sin, namely: 1. A moral standard; 2. This standard in actual grasp by the personal judgment as to right and wrong; 3. Personal intention. Surely you can see that this personal sin cannot be inherited? No man can inherit another man's personal bearing toward moral judgment. In fact, no personal act, or activity, or experience, can be inherited. Strictly speaking, nothing personal can ever be passed from being to being. And inasmuch as the personal deed, or attitude, cannot be inherited, it is inconceivable that the personal

responsibility for such deed or attitude can be inherited. The theological conception of "an inherited guilt" results from a full failure to understand what personal life is, on the one hand, and what moral life is, on the other hand. With a few verbal changes, I would adopt Bishop Foster's words: "Sin is something which the sinner does; it is an act. There is no sin where there is not a sinner; and there is no sinner where there is not an act committed by him which constitutes him a sinner."

Individual Depravity. In considering depravity we need to bring up again the distinction made in this work between the individual and the person. Under the fact that man is a person is the fact that he is an individual being with body and soul. Before a babe comes to self-consciousness he has a fundament of being with a complex of characteristics which are some of them physical and some of them psychical. The sum total of such characteristics I call the individuality of the child. This individuality is developed, and even modified, as the child grows. Indeed, the whole complex of native characteristics is at last treated from the standpoint of self-consciousness. And the ultimate man is, as I have said before, the individual personalized by the self-decisive rejection and indorsement of original traits.

By depravity we mean that this basal individual life of a man is not organic. The native characteristics are a clutter of items unrelated as the odds and ends one finds in an attic. The term total depravity is one of those unfortunate phrases with which the scholastic theologian is fond of weakening his message; but there is a profound sense in which a man is, as he comes into the world, totally depraved. The point was brought out in our study of morality, and is this: No man can organize his individual life under the demand of conscience. He is totally unable even to start an organism. And the greater his development in moral personality the greater the impossibility of that adjustment which secures wholeness and peace in manhood. It is this inorganic condition of a man's fundamental, individual being which I understand to be depravity. Every man comes inorganic into the world. Concerning this inorganic condition of depravity, there are two things so patent that they require no proof whatever: The first is the fact that depravity is universal. No organic man is ever born. The second thing is that depravity is inherited. The person is a new creation, personality is never repeated, no man receives ability for self-consciousness and self-decision from his ancestors. But the individual has his complex of traits under the law of heredity. In other words, individuality is a racial matter and personality is not. Thus, inorganic individuality is inherited.

This, though, only raises a larger question: "Why is it that the free moral person cannot organize his individual being under his moral ideal?" This question, you will remember, we answered thus: The natural moral life is one of fear, and fear is not an organizing motive; the man needs to have for organization the motive of moral love. In a simple word, no man can be complete unless he actually loves the Holy God. Now we must push the discussion into a further recess. Why does man have this fear under moral authority? Because, I say, man now lives under the dominion of conscience alone, and he was not made so to live. Conscience itself is a ragged, unfinished item. Man was planned to live in constant personal intimacy with God, and to have his moral life perfectly saturated with that blessed holy fellowship. Just as one of our children is born into a home, and gradually, as the little human life opens into personality, comes to the personal grasp and regard for the father and mother, so it was intended that a man should be at home with God. But now man is an outcast from the personal vision and intimacy with God. No wonder he is afraid all alone out there under that vast, vague, ever-growing, absolutely pitiless moral demand. "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden the Cherubim, and the flame of a sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." This, then, is my understanding of depravity: Man's entire individual being is inorganic in its relation to the moral person. It is thus inorganic because the moral person lives under moral fear. And he lives under fear because he

has been banished from the divine fellowship and is but a lonely slave under moral law.

The Broken Brotherhood. In the Arminian sense (responsible transgression) there can be no such thing as racial sin; but the race can be racially *anomia*, it can be out of joint with its under plan, it can be a failure. This is what we should mean by racial sin. Let us urge the meaning for a moment. The human race was designed to be an organic brotherhood of moral persons, in which every member would fit into the life of all, and minister to the progress and joy -- of all, and receive stimulus and social companionship and positive supplement from all. But this great plan has been defeated by sin. Precisely as the individual man is inorganic, so the race is inorganic. The brotherhood is broken. Here and there we have a pathetic group of men trying to help each other, but often a large part of their effort is sheer waste. Of course, it is easy enough to contribute to the surface comfort of men; but to enter their real life, to understand them, profoundly to enlarge them and bless them, is an extremely difficult matter. Now think of doing this for all men, and you will begin to realize the awful extent of our racial failure! The cause of this racial failure is twofold: First, every individual member of the race is born depraved, and many members of the race are living in personal sin. Thus, the racial members are not capable of racial coalescence. And, second, the race has lost its center of organism. That center was to be God in immediate personal companionship with all men. To say that the race now exists only through the omnipresence of God is to miss the point altogether. The point is not that God is needed as a present power, but that God is needed as a present personal companion. Men need to enjoy the actual vision of God as their supreme Friend. And all aims should begin in this vision, and all activities should feel the warmth of this vision even as in a cloudless day every growing thing feels the warmth of the sun. This conception is so sublime that we are timid before it, but we must dare to seize it. Never can we understand the work of our Lord until we can see that the original purpose was to have a brotherhood of men made complete by fellowship with God.

God's Hatred of Sin. When we try to explain this recession of the divine personal companionship from the race and the individual man there are several halfway things which can be said in the spirit of euphemism; but it is much more wholesome to state at once, and with plainness, the final fact. The recession is due to God's hatred of sin. But this hatred must be carefully related to our sentiment; for this is one of those places where the Christian feeling is fully as important as the Christian idea. We must not go to the one extreme of holding that the divine hatred is arbitrary, is a thing merely of God's naked and unrelated will. We must not feel that "God could have a different attitude toward sin, if he only would." We must realize that God could not be God, that he could not exist at all, without hating sin. But we must not go to the other extreme of holding that this divine hatred is but an intense smiting by an impersonal law, and that there is no personality involved. If in any way you drop the personal element out of the hatred, you will lose, altogether or in part, its mighty ethical stroke. In the deepest sense, no impersonal bearing or performance can be ethical. No, we are to think (and then to feel it) of the law of God's holiness as plunging eternally into his absolutely exhaustive self-consciousness, and there furnishing motive for an active, personal hatred of all sin as a violation of that fundamental holiness. Thus, God not only hates sin, but he means to hate it.

This divine hatred of sin is expressed not only in depravity and the broken brotherhood, but also in the natural world. I have said several partial things about nature, but it is now necessary to give a thoroughly Christian view. The reason why nature is such a bewildering jumble -- now declaring the glory of God, and then becoming as voiceless as the sphinx; now as gentle as a mother, and then as cruel as a monster; now suggesting the most noble mood, and then actually violating every known moral principle -- the reason for this bewildering jumble is that nature also is a broken organism. In a low sense, it is an

organism still, it is organic as a physical system, and it appeals to the individual. But the world of nature is no longer competent for man as a moral person. God has not withdrawn from the cosmos as its cause, its present force, its life, its beauty; but as a divine revelation, as a word from the Infinite, Moral, Personal Being, the universe has been cast aside. Just as the individual man and the whole race are broken, so the home of man and the race is broken. Consequently the cosmos is to be finally destroyed. There is to be not only a new man, and a new race, but also a new universe. Redemption is to cover the person, the race, and their perfect home.

Even now we have not exhausted the expressions of God's hatred of sin. There is one more expression and that the most dreadful of all -- death. In relation to the death of Christ it will be necessary to bring out the full Christian interpretation of death; but a general, tentative word should be spoken in this connection. A most striking evidence of the success with which science has eaten into the very vitals of Christian opinion is seen in the typical modern Christian view of death, and even of the death of Christ. If one ever could die of a broken heart he might, I think, be justified in doing so after reading some of those popular poems and sermons and books which try to show that death is almost, if not quite, the most useful and the most beautiful event in human experience. But if I understand, even in the smallest measure, the substance of the Christian faith, death should be to the Christian consciousness an abnormal event, a monstrous action of physical law against man, to express in every movement of its loathsome and appalling process God's boundless hatred of sin. The race is a failure, and therefore it is to be destroyed. Beyond the grave there will be no Adamic race, but a new race in which our Lord will take the place of Adam. This racial destruction is by the method of death. The body, the old racial nexus, is to be torn from the man, and then to be made the starting point for another body, a new and a glorious social nexus. The entire divine bearing in death and depravity can, I think, be expressed in this way: God so loves man that he will himself pay the most costly price for man's salvation; but he so hates sin that he must secure, at every step of the way, a most extraordinary and even abnormal expression of his holy hatred. Man can be saved, because God loves him, but the path of salvation must be one violently out of course. Thus, we may say that depravity, and the broken race, and the wrench in nature, and the death of men -- culminating in the death of our Lord -- all manifest God's hatred of sin, but they manifest that hatred as an awful background from which stands out the infinite love of God toward men.

The Peril of Sin. Depravity in and of itself has no peril. As related to the work of the Holy Spirit, all depravity can ever do is to change the form of the conflict of the moral person. Nor is the peril of sin in a habit of vice. Vice is really a superficial thing, and, at its worst, but an expression of depravity or of personal sin. The peril of sin lies in the fascination of personal sin, in that extreme self-assertion which is selfishness. In the very nature of the case, every untested, every unsubdued person wants his own way. And if you place this untested person under a moral law he will have instant interest in breaking the law. Personality itself must be chastened by free choice into the enjoyment of lawfulness. But let the free person once break the law, once get the taste of lawlessness, once have wildly throbbing in consciousness the experience of an immoral freebooter, and the untrammelled self-assertion is endlessly fascinating. And just here lies the dreadful peril. For this personal bearing in selfishness will soon stiffen into personal habit; to endure any moral restraint will become more and more irksome; until finally there will be no motive to submit to moral demand. This means, indeed, that the moral demand itself has been emptied of all urgency. And that means nothing less than everlasting moral death.

Definitions

1. Sin -- In the most comprehensive generic sense, human sin is any nonconformity on the part of man to God's law. Most tersely, sin is lawlessness.

2. Individual Depravity -- When this nonconformity to God's law is an inherited inorganic condition of the individual man, the sin is individual sin, or depravity. Most tersely, depravity is irresponsible lawlessness in individuality.

3. Personal Sin -- When the nonconformity to God's law is an intentional violation, in act or bearing, the sin is personal sin. Theologically, personal sin is responsible lawlessness in self-decision. Ethically, personal sin is a self-conscious violation of the moral judgment. Practically, personal sin is selfishness.

4. Racial Sin -- When the nonconformity to God's law is in the rupture of the racial plan for solidarity in human fellowship, the sin is racial sin, or race depravity. Most tersely, racial sin is lawlessness in social life.

Man's Need of Redemption

Man needs redemption in three ways:

1. As a moral person, a responsible sinner before God, a man needs to be forgiven, and united with God.
2. As a disrupted man, individual, personal, and moral, he needs to have his entire being reorganized and harmonized and made complete.
3. As a shattered brotherhood, mankind needs to be made over into a new race, with a divine center, and a membership of perfect coalescence in love and service.

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