

XIII.

Sin a Power in Reversed Action.

"If ye live after the flesh ye shall die."—*Rom. viii. 13.*

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Altho sin is originally and essentially a loss, a lack, and a deprivation, in its working it is a positive evil and a malignant power.

This is shown by the apostolic injunction not only to put on the new man, but also to put off the old man with his works. The well-known theologian Maccovius, commenting on this, aptly remarks: "This could not be enjoined if sin were merely a loss of light and life; for a mere lack ceases as soon as it is supplied.

If sin were merely a loss of righteousness, nothing more would be needed than its restoration, and sin would disappear. The putting off of the old man, or the laying down of the yoke of sin, etc., would be out of the question. The light has only to dispel the soul's darkness, and its health will be restored. But experience shows that after we are enlightened, and the Holy Spirit has entered our heart, there is still a fearful power of evil in us; and this together with the oft-repeated command not only to accept the righteousness of God which is by faith, but also to put off, to lay aside, to be separate from all that is evil, proves sin's positive character and evil power in individuals and in society, in spite of its privative character.

Hence the Church confesses that our nature has become corrupt, which of course refers us back to the divine image. Our nature did not disappear, nor cease to be our nature, but in its original features and organs it remained the same; the divine image was not lost, not even partly lost, but remained stamped upon every man, and will remain even in the place of eternal destruction, simply because he can not divest himself of his nature except by annihilation. But this being impossible, he must retain it *as man* and in *man's nature*. Wherefore Scripture teaches long after the fall that the sinner is created after the image of God. But concerning the *effects* of its features in the fallen human nature, the very *opposite* is true: these features have totally disappeared; the ruins which remain speak at the most only of the glory and beauty which have perished.

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Hence the two meanings of the divine image should no longer be confounded. Forasmuch as it lies *in our nature* it will remain evermore; so far as its effects upon the quality, *i.e.*, the condition, of our nature are concerned, *it is lost*. The human nature can be corrupted, but not annihilated. It can exist *as nature*, even tho its former attributes be lost, and replaced by opposite workings.

Our fathers discriminated between our nature's *being* and its *well-being*. In its *being* it remained uninjured and unharmed, *i.e.*, it is still the real, human nature. But in its *condition*, *i.e.*, in its attributes, workings, and influences, in its *well-being* it is wholly changed, and corrupt. Tho a poisoned insect-sting destroys the sight, yet the eye remains. So is the human

nature; deprived of its luster, checked in its normal activity, internally sore and foul, yet it is the human nature.

But it is corrupted by sin. It is true man has retained the power to think, will, and feel, besides many glorious talents and faculties, even genius sometimes; but this does not touch the corruption of his nature. Its corruption is this, that the life which should be devoted to God and animated by Him is devoted with downward tendencies to earthly things. And this reversed action has changed the whole organism of our being.

If the divine righteousness were essential to human life, this could not be so; but it is not. According to Scripture, death is not annihilation. The sinner is dead to God, but in this very death throbs and thrills his life to Satan, to sin, and to the world. If the sinner had no sinful life, Scripture could never say, "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth," for it is impossible to mortify that which is dead already.

Let not similarity of sound deceive us. Human life is indestructible. When the soul is active in conformity to the divine law, Scripture says that the soul lives; if not, it is dead. This death is the wages of sin. But for this reason man's nature does not cease to work, to use its organs, to exert its influence. This is the life of our members which are in the earth—our sinful life, the inward festering of evil in our corrupt nature; for this reason it must be mortified. Hence since sin does not stop our nature from breathing, working, feeding, but it causes these activities, which under the sway of the divine law did run well and were full of blessing, to go wrong and be corrupt.

The mainspring of a watch when detached from its pivot does not stop it immediately; but, being uncontrolled, it turns the wheels so rapidly as to ruin the mechanism. In some respects human nature resembles that watch. God has endowed it with power, life, and activity. Controlled by His law it worked well, and in harmony with His will. But sin deprived it of that control, and, while these powers and faculties remain, they run the wrong way, and destroy the delicate organism. If this condition lasted only for a moment, and the sinner were immediately restored to his original state, it could not lead to a positive evil. But sin lasts a *long* time; sixty centuries already. Its pernicious influence has its *effects*; a *secondary* disease after the *primary*; accumulations of sinful *dregs*, and increase of festering sores. The threads of our nature's woof pull awry. Everything wrenches itself out of joint. And, since this secondary *activity* continues unchecked, its pernicious working becomes more and more critical.

What causes a felon? A sliver in the finger slightly checks the circulation. But the blood continues to circulate, trying to overcome the obstacle. The additional pressure against the walls of the capillaries produces more friction, and raises the temperature. The surrounding tissue swells, the delicate blood-vessels contract, the friction increases, and the boil throbs. Altho this is but the continued normal action of the circulation, yet it causes positive evil.



There is a local congestion; poisonous matter inflames the healthy tissue, and the parts are thoroughly diseased.

And such is sin's course. The action of our powers continues, but in the wrong direction. This causes disorder, and irregularities, which inflame our nature toward evil. This sinful inflammation creates unnatural and wicked deformations, which excite the tissues of the soul to a morbid growth, compared by Scripture to foul matter. And from this unholy marsh poisonous gases rise continually throughout our entire nature. Thus the whole economy is disordered. Having run away from the divine law without discipline, body and soul become unruly. Hence, incited by its own inherent action, it involves itself more deeply and runs farther away from God. As a train that is derailed destroys itself by its very speed, so does man, having left the *track of the divine law*, compass his own ruin by the inherent impetus and working. Nothing more is needed. Destruction results necessarily from the very life of our nature.

Hence the sinner is without knowledge, the feelings are perverted, the will is paralyzed, the imagination polluted, the desires are impure, and all his ways, tendencies, and outgoings are at once evil; not in our eyes, perhaps, but because everything fails to meet the demands of God, who wills that everything should meet Him at the terminus of the road, *i.e.*, to be with Him and in Him, making His glory the final end of all things.

And this makes many things sinful, unrighteous, and wicked that we consider fair and beautiful. Not our taste, but God's, decides what is right or wrong. He that wishes to know what that taste is, let him learn it from the law of God. That law is standard and plummet. But whatever the sinner seeks or desires to please God, he will not do this; *e.g.*, he may be perfectly willing to hang his coat on the wall and do it gracefully, but not on the nail that God has struck in the wall of our life; everywhere else, but not there. Thus everything in him becomes evil, his entire nature corrupt, incapable of any good, inclined to all evil, yea, prone to hate God and his neighbor. The deed may not be born, but the very inclination and desire are sin.

Like the Romish and some Lutheran theologians, Dr. Böhl denies this. He teaches that there was this desire in holy Adam and even in Christ; not indulged, but held in with bit and bridle—as tho God had created man with this ravenous animal of desire in his heart, while He endowed him at the same time with the power to restrain it. To keep this desire in constant check would have been man's greatest excellence.

But this is not according to Scripture. Nothing shows that holy Adam had any desire for the things he saw. The possibility of desire was created only by the prohibition: "Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat." ([Gen. ii. 16](#)) And even after that we do not discover a trace of desire in him. Such eager looking at the fruit was not witnessed until Satan had inwardly incited Eve *not to eat of the fruit*, but *through it to become like God*.



This is the first desire awakened in man's heart, and that only after his eye was opened to see that the tree was good for food and pleasant to the eye.

In the righteous state Adam was filled with peace, harmony, and divine success; without a trace of the anxiety necessarily springing from the task of restraining a dangerous monster. And in the heavenly glory it will not be an endless desire to restrain desire, but a complete deliverance from desire; not the suction of a great deep in our bottomless heart, but all its depths filled with the love of God.

The commandment "Thou shalt not covet" ([Exo. 20. 17](#)) is absolute. The Lord Jesus was a total stranger to covetousness. He never desired what God withheld. In Gethsemane's terrible dénouement He desired, yet not to receive a gift, but to retain His own, *i.e.*, when under the curse not to be forsaken of His God.



XIV.

Our Guilt.⁷

“Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.”—*Rom. v. 12.*

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Sin and guilt belong together, but may not be confounded or considered synonymous, any more than sanctification and righteousness. It is true guilt rests upon every sin, and in every sin there is guilt, yet the two must be kept distinct. There is a difference between the blaze and the blackened spot upon the wall caused by it; long after the blaze is out the spot remains. Even so with sin and guilt. Sin’s red blaze blackens the soul; but long after sin is left behind, the black mark upon the soul continues.

Hence it is of the greatest importance that the difference between the two be clearly understood, especially since confounding sin and guilt must lead to confounding justification and sanctification, much to the injury of the earnestness of the Christian life.

If there were but one man on earth, he might sin against himself, but he could not be in debt to others. And if, in accordance with modern theology, there were no living God, but only an idea of good, he might sin against the idea of good, and be exceedingly bad, but he could not owe God anything.

Men owe God because He lives, exists, never departs, forever abides; and because from moment to moment they must transact business with Him. With men we open accounts at will; and the firms in town with which we do so we will owe, but those with which we do not deal we will never owe. Many apply this to God, under the mistaken notion that if they have no dealings with God they can not owe Him anything and have nothing to do with Him. To them He is non-existing; how, then, could they be in debt to Him?

But He does exist. It is not left to our choice to have dealings with Him or not. No; in *all* our affairs, *at all times* and under *all* circumstances, we must deal and do deal with Him. There is no business transacted from which He is excluded. In all things whatever we do, He is the most interested. In all our dealings and enterprises He is the Preferred Creditor and Senior Partner, with whom we must settle the final account. We may bury ourselves in Sahara, or go down to the bottom of the ocean, but our account with Him never ceases. We can never get away from Him. Working with head, heart, or hand, we open an account with God; and while we can deceive other partners and withhold part of the accounts from them, He is omniscient, He knows the most secret items, He keeps account of the smallest fraction, charging it to us; and before we have begun our reckoning, He has already finished it and laid it before us.

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⁷ The Dutch word “*schuld*,” literally, “debt” includes the ideas of *guilt* and of *indebtedness* in general.—Trans.