

Passiontide Sermons  
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SERMON XXI.  
THE IDEA OF SIN

Preached at St. Paul's on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 19, 1890.

Psalm li. 4.

Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight;  
that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when  
Thou judgest.

NO one but David could have written this fifty-first Psalm. The language is David's: the temper is David's: the circumstances are David's. He must have written it just after the visit of the prophet Nathan, which had at once brought him to see the real character of his sin with Bathsheba, and of his murder of Uriah, and had left him penitent and forgiven. For in this Psalm David prays not only or chiefly for cleansing and forgiveness, but for a restoration of the graces which had been lost by his sin; and it is this feature of the Psalm especially which has made it in all later ages the favourite of all true penitents. Not only does David exclaim and pray—

Turn Thy face from my sins,  
And blot out all mine iniquities.

But he adds—

“Make me a clean heart, O God: And renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence: And take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. O give me the comfort of Thy help again: And stablish me with Thy princely Spirit.”

And these prayers presuppose the confession of the text: “Against Thee only have I sinned.”

This confession teaches us several truths; but there is one truth in particular which it teaches very plainly: it teaches how to think of sin.

We employ many words to express the idea of wrongdoing; some of them describe it gently, some energetically, but none of them so vividly and so truly as the word Sin. When we speak of a mistake, we imply that something has been done in consequence of a pardonable ignorance; when of a fault, we are thinking of what a man owes to himself, his own standard of right action, which he has failed to achieve; when of a crime, we have more or less distinctly before our minds the law of the land, the acts by which it is violated, and its methods of asserting its supremacy. But when we speak of sin—do what we may—our thoughts turn away from self, away from human standards of goodness, human law; and we think of God. Sin is more than a mistake, more than a fault, more than a crime, although each of these words may be labels which we have placed on acts that really deserve the name of sin. Sin is an act of hostility to God; and the sense of sin is that altogether solitary and unique impression upon the soul which

results from the commission of such an act.

“Against Thee only have I sinned.” David, in his own Hebrew language, uses these words to describe his wrong-doing; but they all enter into what we mean by Sin. “According to the multitude of Thy mercies, blot out my transgressions:” here he thinks of sin as an act which traverses the known law or will of God. “Wash me throughly from my wickedness”—more literally, ray perversity: here he thinks of sin as a malign force which has twisted his moral being from the right way. And “Cleanse me from my sin:” here he uses a distinct word from the other two, a word which includes and goes beyond them, and which describes an act whereby a man misses the one true aim of action—namely, conformity to the Perfect Will. All of these three words enter into and are expressed by one word, “sin,” which means an act or movement of the will freely directed against God, and which, as such, transgresses His Will, perverts man’s nature, and misses the true aim and purpose of man’s life.

“Against Thee only have I sinned.” This is what every true penitent says in his heart of hearts when he knows that he has offended God. His act may have wronged his fellow-creatures, it may have injured himself. David’s did. David murdered a faithful servant; degraded a weak woman; forfeited the old love and loyalty of his subjects, and prepared the way for Absalom’s rebellion. But in his penitence these aspects and results of his act, real as they were, are shut out from view. He sees before him God, only God: God, Whose Power had saved him from so many dangers: God, Whose Wisdom had guided him through so many difficulties: God, Whose Goodness had sustained and brightened his life in innumerable ways. He had singled out his strongest, wisest, kindest Friend to treat Him as an enemy. For sin, as I have said, considered as an act of the will directed against God, is an act of hostility; it is an act which would, if possible, annihilate God. This is not a rhetorical exaggeration, it is a plain statement of fact. For consider. Sin violates and defies the Moral Law of God: and what is God’s Moral Law? Is it a law which, like the laws of nature, as we call them, might conceivably have been other than it is? Certainly not. We can conceive much in nature being very different from what it is—suns and stars moving in larger or smaller cycles, men and animals of different shapes; the chemistry, the geology, the governing rules of the material universe, quite unlike what they actually are. God’s liberty in creating physical beings was in no way shackled by His own laws, whether of force or matter. But can we, if we believe in a Moral God, conceive Him saying, “Thou mayest lie”? “Thou mayest do murder”? We cannot, any more than we can conceive His denying that things that are equal to the same are equal to one another. The very mind and soul which He has given us bears indelibly impressed on it His Moral Truth, just as much as the first truths of mathematics. But then these truths must have been always true; and if always true, then truths co-eternal with God; and if co-eternal with Him, not things outside Him, not independent of Him, for in that case He would not be the Alone Eternal, but they must have been essential laws or integral parts of His Eternal Nature. The Moral Law is not a code which He might have made other than it is; it is His own Moral Nature thrown into a shape which makes it applicable and intelligible to us His creatures; and therefore in violating it we are opposing, not something which He hits made, but might have made otherwise, like the laws of nature,—but Himself. Sin, if it could, would destroy God; and it is this, its malignant character, which underlies David’s passionate exclamation, “Against Thee only have I sinned.”

And this conviction explains the words that follow. I make this confession, this protestation, the Psalmist says, "that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when Thou judgest." Whatever sentence God may pronounce must, David sees, be just. Man must justify God, must admit and acknowledge His Righteousness, however He may punish man's sin. For the gravity of sin, when it is disentangled from the lower conceptions of wrong-doing—mistake, fault, crime—and seen to be an act of hostility directed against the Being of God, warrants any penalty that God may impose. Nothing is due to man but punishment; nothing can be hoped for from God but free forgiveness.

One of the most necessary concerns, then, of a serious Christian at all times should be to accustom himself to think of his sins in this way; to free himself from the false opinions and standards which lead him, in his self-love, to make little of it. And this is the proper work of Lent. Think over any offences which you would least wish those whom you most love and respect on earth to know you to have been guilty of, and then place them in the Light of His Countenance, Who has known and knows all about them, and Who is much more deeply wronged by them than any of His creatures. Think of the violent gusts of anger, which would perhaps have taken the life of its object if it could; of the pride which has ruled the mind and will, it may be for long periods of time; of the envy which has darkened every relation with others with the shadow of malignant passion; of the lies which have gone far to shatter the fundamental sense of rectitude; of the sloth, the gluttony, the lust, which have left the mark of degradation deeply imprinted on the body, more deeply still upon the immaterial spirit; and then reflect that each and all of these were wrongs aimed at the Author of your life, the Author of all the happiness with which it has been accompanied from youth until now, the Being to Whom you are indebted for all the blessings of these many years, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory; your Creator, your Redeemer, your Sanctifier.

And if this be done, David's words, like the old Jewish law, will prove a schoolmaster to bring your soul really to Christ; closer to Him perhaps than ever before; for the sense of sin discovers a want which He, and He alone, can relieve. On the Cross of shame He was made to be sin for us, Who knew no sin; He blotted out the handwriting that was against us, nailing it to His Cross: He is the Propitiation for our sins. These words of the Apostles do not lose their virtue with the lapse of years; they are as true now as eighteen centuries ago. Now, as then, guilty man has nothing that He can plead before the Sanctity of God, save the free Self-sacrifice of the All-merciful Redeemer, in looking on Whom the Eternal Father pardons the sin of the penitent,

"Thou shall purge me, O my Saviour, with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Thou shalt make me hear of joy and gladness,  
That the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice."