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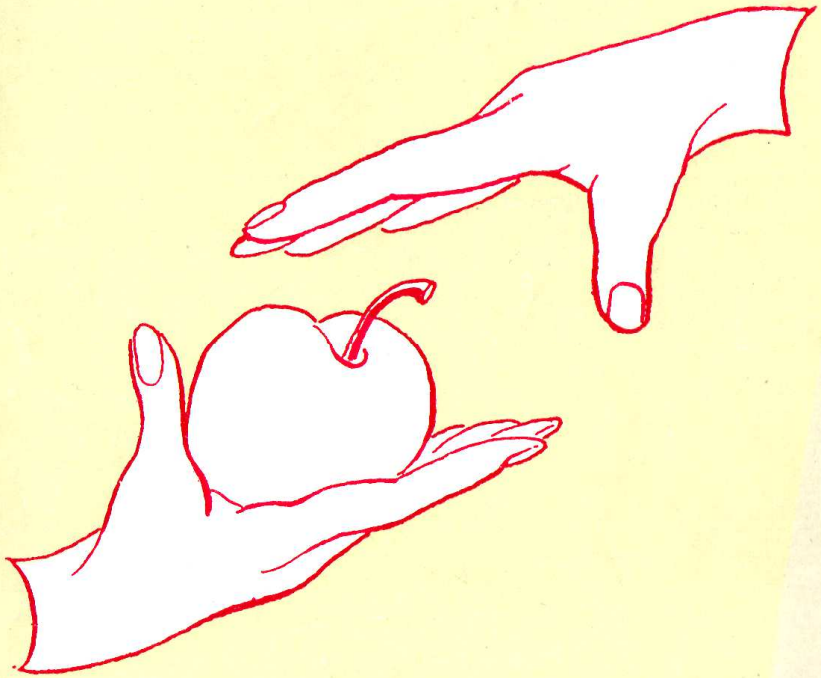
WHAT IS SIN?



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WHAT IS SIN?

By Walter Jewell

STRANGE that so small a word should split the world in two. Yet so it is.

On the one hand, sin to a materialist is no more than a resentful shade lurking in the twilight of superstition. To a fatalist it is merely an unpleasant element in a story that is told, and could be told in no other way. To a subjectivist, to whom the external world is robed in unreality, sin is a delusion within a dream.

To the Catholic, on the other hand, and to those who think with him on this matter, sin is easily the greatest misfortune that can attend a man in his voyage through life, and yet a tragedy that need never have been.

For some centuries a dense kind of fog has slowly gathered upon the road leading to a clear understanding of the nature of sin. It is a gloom born of puritanical notions which regard a number of perfectly innocent and natural pleasures, like tobacco, alcohol, dancing and Sunday recreation, as damnable. It is true of course, that such ideas are rapidly ebbing with each year that passes, but the strange tide has left its mark. It is widely felt that any man who found himself able to dispense with sin as a constant companion would have to pick his way through life with the greatest fastidiousness, fearful of offending God at every step. It is not generally believed that a really good man could be uproarious, like Chesterton's Manalive, who broke all the conventions and kept all the Commandments. The world does not expect gloomy adulterers and jovial saints, although it has them.

A careful study reveals that, according to the Catholic view, sanctity has nothing to do with a gingerly approach to life, and sin

nothing to do with hilarity and joy of living. The Church, in fact, has always held that there is nothing in all the universe which can possibly be evil in itself, for everything is God's handiwork. Unlike man, God makes a thing from the very core of its being. We have to start with the ready made wood, metal or clay which we find available. We have learned some remarkable truths about matter, and can put it to a great many uses, but we cannot make it. Our practised hands can do nothing with empty space—they must grasp something already existing if anything new is to be fashioned. In consequence, all our products bear our human hall-mark only partially, whereas all that God makes bears His hall-mark in its essential being. And that hall-mark, of course, is the stamp of Divine goodness.

The existence of evil in the universe is a mystery, certainly, but one upon which the Church sheds a great deal of light. We must begin by firmly grasping the truth that man himself, and everything with which he deals, finds its origin in creative love and is therefore essentially good. But if man can only lay clean hands upon clean objects, how does he sin? If creative light is everywhere, from whence comes the darkness?

The problem is a little deepened by the undoubted fact that the will of man can only reach out to the good. Unless he sees some charm, benefit or satisfaction in whatever occupies the stage of his mind, his will moves at once in another direction. Just as eyes and ears could not function in a dark and silent world, neither could the human will exercise itself if there were no elements to captivate it. But if the will can only move towards that which attracts it as good, how do we sin?

The Catholic reply begins by insisting that evil has no *positive* existence at all. It is always an *absence*, the privation of some good which clearly belongs and ought naturally to be present. Evil is divided into two main sections, *physical* and *moral*, and the above rule applies equally to both. By physical evil we mean the various misfortunes which assail the individual as distinct from any morally wrong act on his part. Thus, if a man loses an eye, he may be free of all blame whatsoever in the matter. Even if the loss was due to carelessness or mutilation on his part, his condition is merely the consequence of his sin and not the sin itself. But as it clearly belongs to a man's natural perfection to have two seeing eyes, his condition

may be truly described as an evil one. There is the absence, the privation of some due good needed to complete him. And the absence of due good is evil.

Moral evil, on the other hand, is sin—the absence of due good in the moral order. Something is withheld which ought to be given. We have seen that all things are essentially good, and that the will of man can only be attracted by the good which he sees. But there can be disproportion in his devotion and there can be disorder in his choice. For a satisfactory picture, more than perfect colours are needed. There must be arrangement, setting and good order, or we are left with brilliant chaos.

Sin is defined as any thought, word or deed contrary to the Will of God. It will be noticed that the operative word "contrary" is negative, for sin is always the great negation. The Will of God is the fundamental test, and we might note here that in our creation there lies a very profound mystery, with a very rich light in the heart of that mystery. Revelation has given us a magnificent answer as to why we were made: "to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in the next." Yet it is certain that God, the infinite Perfection, could have no need of us. We could not enrich His life or provide some necessary outlet for His desires. He must contain in Himself complete happiness and final satisfaction, or He would be less than God. Our creation, therefore, was a *free* act of infinite goodness containing a strange, deep generosity of which we can have only a faint conception.

But one fact shines very clearly through the mists of that mystery —we belong to Him, and nothing ultimately matters but what He wants of us. This may sound like a sermon, but it is really no more than seeing life as it is in broad daylight. Being made by God from nothing, there is nothing worth doing but to please Him. This kind of living has a strong note of personal adventure and romance, and clearly goes far beyond the mere keeping of laws engraved upon a tablet. Lying is wrong because God is the eternal Truth, and meanness is wrong because His generosity is beyond all our conception.

To understand the position a little better, we must look once more at the mystery of creation. Everything that God makes moves in time or at least in some kind of sequence. But clearly the infinite

Being could no more be bound by time than He could be limited by space. He must rise high above every consideration of that kind. This means that there never was a moment when any individual (the present reader, for example) was not fully present and utterly known to the Divine mind. Creation is not simply an event which took place remote ages ago. Our created universe, of course, is conditioned by time, but the creative act itself belongs to eternity. It is with us now and always. We exist now because God wills it now.

In the light of this fact sin is seen as something astonishingly absurd—the most ludicrous thing imaginable. Illustrations occur to the mind, only to be dismissed as inadequate. Thus we might speak of a man sawing off the bough upon which he is sitting. It is true that he is becoming the author of his own disaster, but the analogy falls short in two ways. He really is damaging the tree, whereas no one could injure God. He depends upon the tree only for bodily support, not for his very existence. Or we might consider that imaginative but real fear in the hearts of many people that advanced scientists, with the new and terrible forces at their disposal, might engage in experiments which could split and destroy the very world in which we live. This consideration has some value, for there is certainly a true sense in which we can call the earth our mother. She is the solid ground under our feet, and from her we draw air, warmth and food—all essentials for our bodily life—whilst to injure her is to make an attack upon ourselves. And yet this, or any other kind of serious sin, goes much further. Although the earth may be called our mother, we do not spring from her body and soul. The invisible, spiritual life of the human soul, the subtle activity of thought and love, could not be born of earth's natural laws. Matter could not give birth to something so immeasurably above itself. Sin attacks the Author of all our being—that Power upon which the material and spiritual worlds depend utterly and at every moment. It involves war with the meaning of the created universe, war with our origin and destiny, war with ourselves.

We seldom realise the certain fact that sin is a flight from reality. Long ago, Moses asked God for His name. The reply was immediate and awe-inspiring: "I am who am. Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: He who is hath sent me to you." Human reason is first arrested and then satisfied by this answer. Clearly the infinite intelligence underlying *all things* could not be caused, and nothing

could be its source or origin. The question "Who made God?" dies on the lips of a thoughtful man. God simply exists, and His reality is infinitely above ours. We ourselves are not walking dreams or subjective ghosts of the mind, we are real enough, but our reality is not our own—it is given to us. Any thought, word or deed in opposition to the Will of God is in fact a movement against reality.

WHAT SIN DOES

It is always possible to fly from the ultimate reality but never possible to escape from it. All the universe expresses it and is maintained by it. This solid fact has been expressed with great power and poetry by David:

> Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy face? If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there: if I descend into hell, Thou are present. If I take my wings early in the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea: even there also shall Thy hand lead me: and Thy right hand shall hold me.

But in what way, exactly, do we fly from reality? It can be done by ignoring the purpose for which we were made by the ultimate Reality, thus missing our very meaning. The consequence is described very briefly in scripture:

> The soul that sinneth, the same shall die.

Now this, on the face of it, is puzzling. It is certain that we shall die, quite irrespective of the question of actual, personal sin on our part. Can it mean that for sinners there is to be no life beyond this one? Scarcely, for this would run counter to Our Lord's teaching when He described the final judgment of the entire race. What, then, is this mysterious death of the soul?

A careful examination of the New Testament reveals the striking fact that man is offered a double birth and a double life, involving the possibility of a double death. His first or natural birth makes him the son of human parents, brings him into a human family and gives him natural powers enabling him to see and appreciate the things that God has made for him. His second, supernatural birth, coming to him at baptism, makes him, by the gift of grace, a son of

God. It brings him into the Divine family, uniting him to all others in the same happy condition, and gives him powers over and above his nature, enabling him at last to see God directly as His son. Now, a man may be separated from his human family at any time by bodily death and, similarly, he can be cut off from the family of God at any time by the death, in his soul, of the Divine life given to him at the font. Mortal sin is the only element that can bring this about.

This is clearly an infinitely deeper tragedy than natural death, for it separates us from our Author instead of merely from our bodies. But to grasp the full nature of the tragedy we must remember that we were never made for any other purpose than to receive the higher life, become sons of God and enjoy intimate life with Him in eternity. Our natural life is no more than a kind of prelude or first chapter. We cannot rest in it, for it was intended always to receive the touch of grace and climb beyond its natural powers. We are meant by our Author to climb at last through the veil of sense and through those natural barriers separating us from the direct knowledge of God. To lose that end is to lose our meaning and to be stripped of direction and purpose. Heaven—the direct vision of God—is our true and proper home, although we have never yet reached it.

To talk of the degradation of sin may sound a little trite, but it is important to our study to consider the immensity of the ruin that it brings. Even from the purely natural point of view man is, in a true sense, the lord of creation. The words of the Psalmist: "Thou hast crowned him with glory and honour, and hast set him over the works of Thy hands," is confirmed by ordinary observation. Below man is all the vast field of animal and insect life—innumerable beings without his intellect but vibrant with powerful instincts. Below that is the great range of plant and vegetable life, and lower still plain matter in a million various forms. But with all this below him, man can search all the world for his own equal. His spiritual soul, manifesting itself in his thought, tools, art and government, is unique. Yet by sin he becomes as far as his purpose is concerned, something less than "the meanest flower that blooms." The flower has a very minute purpose by comparison with his own, yet what purpose it has it fulfils. With his remarkable power of free choice man can give a service born of liberty, which was a quality beyond

anything possible to the lower fields of creation. But the measure of his greatness is very naturally the gauge of his fall.

There is a powerful illusion at the heart of sin—an element carefully encouraged by ourselves. The illusion which can possess us as we regard any attractive object is twofold. We can look upon it as a benefit we shall never lose, and we can also see it as something which can never fail to give complete satisfaction. These pleasant dreams, of course, sail serenely upon the misty seas of our imagination, for the thinking mind recognises them as notions which have no relation to experience. But it is quite easy to treat things according to our imaginative regard of them rather than what our minds tell us about them.

A further profound illusion is that indulgence in sin brings with it the fresh air of liberty. We are sometimes possessed by the feeling that the road provided by God is too restricted and that what we need is all the length and breadth of experience. Yet it is clear that a definite road will get us somewhere, which is really more expressive of freedom than an aimless wandering around the fields. Furthermore, the road promises to bring us to our full self-expression as understood by our Author, which is freedom indeed.

"Everyone who acts sinfully," said Our Lord, "is the slave of sin," and He promised that the truth would set us free. A man is often drawn to sin by what we call bravado, that is, not for any pleasure in the act itself, but the desire for popular esteem connected with it. It is an experience new to him which other men have enjoyed. He may have no idea of the enjoyment itself, but the very notion of new experience is an attraction in itself. The first few samples might even repel him, but facility comes as the years pass until at last he is faced with a very different difficulty—the difficulty of leaving that particular indulgence alone. The experience which was so remarkably free and deliberate in its origin has come to dominate his life and close around him like a prison.

Conditions

To sum up, the general effect of sin is to kill, to degrade and to enslave. But does every offence against the moral law bring about this threefold disaster? Hardly. The insistence by the early Protestant Reformers that all sins were equally devastating has done

much to clothe the present-day notion of sin with unreality. It would be as sensible, in fact, to say that the common cold was as deadly as smallpox or that a passing slight must infallibly ruin a friendship. We can be sick without dying and we can be inconsiderate without making an enemy. Similarly we can sin without losing God. In carefully distinguishing between damage and death, danger and tragedy, the Church restores realism to a subject which has been taking on a very ghostly appearance.

Every sin carries a threat and involves a loss. But some threats fail to materialise and some losses can be restored with little difficulty. Serious or mortal sin, as we have seen, kills the Divine life which would ultimately bring a man to intimate life with God, puts him outside the Family and brings about so utter a collapse that only God can raise him. The lighter or venial sins, as they are called, bring a certain lowering of spiritual health, earn punishment *within* the Family and bring about weakness in the "limbs", *i.e.*, those faculties of ours by which we must correspond with grace.

In order to distinguish between the sins which kill and the sins which damage, we must look a little into the subtle workings of the human mind. Our memories will tell us that a large number of our acts, which we are bound to judge adversely, certainly involved no intention of deserting God or quitting light for darkness. As the acts were wrong, there was clearly a clash between the created and uncreated Will. Yet there was no intention of rebellion, except in a very indirect and petulant sort of way and to a small degree. But mortal sin has about it an element of idolatry, understood in a broad sense. As we have seen, God is our proper end and supreme objective. To regard Him in that light and to regulate our lives accordingly is no more than the honour and worship due to Him. To regard anything else in any ultimate, final sort of way, is to transfer what belongs to Him to something infinitely less. We know, of course, that these lesser objects cannot finally satisfy. But if to obtain them means trampling in a serious way upon God's Will as made known to us (as, for example, in the desire for another man's wife), then to tread that road is to turn away from God in favour of some element in His creation. It is this change of direction, this *aversio*, as it is called, from our Author to something which He has made, which is the really distinguishing factor and deadly element in mortal sin. On the other hand, where there is no change of course,

the winds and currents of grace are still with us. There is delay and damage but no shipwreck.

But it should not be supposed that this *aversio* necessarily involves any open declaration of war—any shaking of our fists against the skies. A formally hostile frame of mind is quite possible to us, and there is something peculiarly satanic in deliberately raising a standard against God in the mind, and, strong in malice, bidding Him to do His worst. But this mental condition is rare and exceptional. What usually happens is that we quietly forget God for the time being and smother the light with some sort of excuse. Shakespeare gives Lady Macbeth more frankness than we usually allow when he makes her say:

> Come, thick night,
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell
> That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes,
> Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
> To cry, Hold, hold!

But whatever smothering goes on, where we succumb to the attraction of some object presented to us, whilst seeing a deeper moral reason for leaving it alone, there is sin. And where the matter involved is of a serious nature, then it is sin that kills.

A distinction can be drawn between what might be called sins of strength and sins of weakness. When the higher considerations are powerfully brushed aside in order that we may grasp what we want, the situation is clearly different from that in which we retreat backwards into the sin, putting up some sort of resistance. We have a similar situation on the brighter side of the picture. As we have seen, a good man is not just a gingerly man. Virtue is vigorous, and the saints are people who have arrested the attention of the world with their living strength. When vigour sweeps in the opposite direction, it is unlikely to stop at venial sin. Accordingly it has been said that sin born of malice is of a mortal kind, whereas sins of infirmity can be catalogued as venial. But this lamp does not light up all the forest, for the vigorously sinful man *could* stop short of grave matter, and a serious break can occur in our relations with God as a result of weakness. Thus a soldier might carry out highly immoral instructions through fear of ridicule or punishment. And so we must look

a little further to discover where the border between mortal and venial sin really lies.

The weight of sin can be reduced from the mortal to the venial scale by a lack of what is called advertence. Sometimes we act in broad daylight, fully conscious of the nature of what we do, and at other times almost complete darkness veils the consequences of the act. Between these extremes we have a scale of varying light and shadow, and only God can really judge the extent of the malice which enters into anything we do. Still it is clear that in any given case we either know or fail to know what is involved, and we cannot escape by declining to let the mind dwell upon the moral aspects of our acts. It is a question, not of what consideration is poised before our thought at a given moment, but of the extent of the knowledge residing in the mind. I once heard someone remark: "If I think it over I shall change my mind, and I don't want to." A statement of that kind, of course, really implies full advertence and responsibility for whatever is contemplated, but it can often happen that there is insufficient light in the mind to illuminate the true nature of what we propose to do. If we are in no way to blame for that darkness, there is, in fact, no sin at all. If it is through our own fault that the light has been obscured, then our ignorance only reduces the guilt. Certain twilight states of consciousness, such as intoxication and hypnosis, can strip sin of its mortal nature, as full appreciation of the malice involved cannot be grasped. The morality of entering into those states is a matter which must be considered quite separately.

Secondly, sin is greatly reduced in its deadly nature if the will is not freely and fully exercised in the act. This can happen in a variety of ways. Fears, passions, inherited tendencies and certain physical states can all place fetters upon the will. They can, if sufficiently powerful, sweep away responsibility with the force of tidal waves, but what usually happens is that they damage freedom without destroying it. The moral acts of a normal man, in ordinary circumstances and reasonable health, are born of that mysterious mental liberty we call freedom of the will. But anything which really clutches at that freedom, leaving the individual in only partial control of his own vehicle of action, must, of course, dim his responsibility and lessen the sin as such.

In a great many cases the human act itself, or the "matter" as it is called, is the clearest guide. There is, for example, the obvious and

sharp distinction between stealing a plain pencil and a gold one, between leaving a man in difficulty and leaving him in danger of death. Here we should remind ourselves that many acts which are physically identical with each other are widely different in their significance according to the circumstances in which they have their setting. Some people, for example, are very leisurely in their use of public telephone kiosks, sometimes to the annoyance of a queue of intending callers waiting outside. But however unpopular the man in the kiosk might become during an apparently endless conversation, it would be altogether too much to suggest that he was quenching the life of God in his soul by mortal sin. But suppose that one day, whilst engaged in this way he saw through the window of the kiosk that a house across the road was all ablaze. And suppose that it was obvious from the agitated face of a man outside that he was anxious to get into the kiosk to summon help. To do what he had done a hundred times before, to set his back against the door and casually proceed with a pleasant chat, would be, in those circumstances, hardly less than a crime against humanity. To assess the gravity of any sin, we have to see the whole picture, all the lights and shades, all the setting and the background. There is usually a story attached, and the story needs to be known.

Conclusion

Happily sin is a problem with which God Himself has dealt, as otherwise the drama of human life would have turned to tragedy. With our natural powers we can deal more or less effectively with physical diseases and mental disorders. But sin can kill the supernatural life in the soul by means of which we become sons of God, and we cannot deal with disorders outside the natural sphere. Further, human nature as a whole is damaged by sin, making us all patients, not physicians. How men *can* become physicians is told only in the story of our restoration.

It has been made known to us by Revelation that the entire race fell in Adam, the father of us all. He was first, he was alone, he was representative, and all humanity walked in him. The higher life was to flow from him to all his children to the end of time, and birth into a human family would have been at once accompanied by entry into the family of God by grace. As a result of his rebellion and fall we are born without the Divine life intended for us and are deprived

of much of the light and strength that should have been ours. As this unfortunate condition was never decreed by our Maker, our state is a guilty one, although, of course, it is not our personal individual guilt. It is a burden and a darkness that sits heavily upon the race as a whole, and to it we have added our own innumerable rebellions.

In order to deal with sin, God the Son, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, became man. An interesting question has long been debated as to whether the Incarnation would have happened had the world never known sin, that is, whether He would have come to a happy unfallen race to crown its perfection. But this question is speculative, and from the known facts it is clear that He came in mercy to redeem and to restore.

He took a human nature and made it utterly His own. The human feet of God walked the fields of earth and His human voice was heard by men and women. To reconcile man to God and to restore the lost higher life was clearly possible to Him in any way that He might choose—in fact, God and man already met in His Person. Quite literally, He had only to say the word, for His voice, although human, was the voice of the Creator.

But He chose no easy way. He made suffering the chief instrument of the restoration, offering all His life in general and His passion and cross in particular. To a deep though not to a full extent we understand why. Looking at Jerusalem, He said, with tears: "How often would I have gathered together thy children, as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldest not?" It is clear that if suffering had been possible to God in His Divine nature, then the rebellions of His children would have made Him suffer. Such pain was rendered impossible by the fact that perfection and happiness are found in God infinitely. His exemption from it does not take away the sting of malice from sin, for the fact remains that by it we oppose the Will of our Author and proper End. The sorrow which would have come to Him had it been possible was changed into reality by the Incarnation. He entered the realm of suffering and embraced it.

On no grounds whatever could we have expected this or complained had it been otherwise. But there can be no doubt that this surpassing generosity brings God immeasurably closer to our life and experience. It also brings final and vivid reality to our view of sin. Before the crucifix we unquestionably gain an intense vision of the true and tragic nature of sin which could have met us upon no other road.

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