SIN.

"SIN is lawlessness" (1 John iii. 4). John means that lawlessness is of the very essence of sin; that in every sin there is a disregard of that divine law which should determine not only the acts and the words of men, but their spirit and temper. It may be necessary, for some purposes, to distinguish between careless sins and deliberate sins,—between sins for which some palliation may be found in the circumstances in which they were committed and sins which cannot be palliated; but to a man who considers the true nature of sins, every sin is grave, for in every sin there is lawlessness—a disregard of the divine authority, a violation of the divine order of human life.

There is something difficult and abstract, perhaps, in this account of sin as "lawlessness." In the Authorised Version the passage reads: "*Sin is the transgression of the law.*" The old translation, though less accurate, seems simpler and clearer than the new.

I.

"*Sin is the transgression of the law*": this is an account of sin that a child can understand. We are born under a Law which has an absolute authority over conduct. It determines how we ought to regulate our *personal life*; and we transgress it when, for example, we are guilty of drunkenness, or of gluttony, or of indolence, or of any other sensual sins. It determines our *duty to others* and we transgress it when we deceive other men or treat them unjustly, harshly, or ungenerously; or when we disregard any of the obligations which arise out of the structure of human society,—

the mutual obligations, for example, of husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, masters and servants, rulers and subjects. It determines our *duty to God*, and we transgress it when we fail to reverence Him, to trust Him, to love Him, or to obey Him. All the demands of this Law, whether they relate directly to the ordering of our personal life or to our conduct to other men, or to the duties which we owe to God Himself, are sustained by God's authority. The Law is God's Law; and as the old version reads: "Sin is the transgression of the Law."

That account of sin is perfectly clear; and, as far as it goes, it is perfectly true. The awful crimes and the foul vices which darken the history of mankind—murder, adultery, nameless deeds of lust, drunkenness, lying, theft, the injustice and oppression of tyrannical governments, the furious violence of nations in revolt, the cruelty of parents to children and of children to parents, perjury, blasphemy, profanity—all these are transgressions of the Law of God; they are all sins. The men who have been guilty of them have God to reckon with. The Law they have broken is God's Law.

We ourselves have been guilty of transgressing that Law. We can recall the definite acts by which we transgressed it. We have transgressed it knowingly. We have transgressed it after making solemn resolutions to obey it. We have, perhaps, committed the same transgressions over and over again after we had been filled with distress by them, after we had confessed them to God, and entreated Him to forgive them. If "sin is the transgression of the Law," we ourselves have sinned.

II.

But have we discovered the whole truth about sin when we have learnt that it is the transgression of the Law of God?

Transgression—what is it? According to the common meaning of the word, it is a definite and voluntary act. To transgress the Law which requires us to speak the truth is to tell a wilful lie; to transgress the Law which requires us to be honest is to commit—and to commit voluntarily—an act of dishonesty. To transgress the Law which requires inward purity, is voluntarily to surrender ourselves to foul thoughts and sensual desires. This, I say, is what the word means according to its common use—it stands for a definite and voluntary act. But there are sins which are not included in the definition. It is sinful for a child not to love a parent and for a parent not to love a child; but love is not a volition, and it cannot be commanded by the will. It is sinful not to be grateful for kindness; but though a man may be ashamed of his ingratitude and feel the guilt of it, the will has no power to command gratitude. Some of the fiercest and most prolonged conflicts of the moral and spiritual life are against evil passions which, though beaten down by the will, are not destroyed. Envy, jealousy, covetousness, suspicion and distrust, pride, vanity—all these are sinful; they are resisted by a good man because they are sinful; they could have no place in a heart perfectly free from sin; but the will, though it may prevent them from breaking out into evil words and evil deeds, cannot extinguish them. They may gradually lose their strength and, at last, disappear under constant repression; they may be cast out by the power and grace of Christ in answer to prayer, as the evil spirits were cast out of men during His earthly ministry, but while they remain in the heart a man is conscious of sin and of guilt, even when the whole force of the will is being exerted to conquer them.

Human conduct is not a succession of isolated acts: it reveals certain permanent moral qualities which constitute what we call character. There are elements of good and of evil in the very life of a man. What he says and what he

does disclose what he is. He is a bad man—not only because he voluntarily says and does many wicked things, but because he himself is wicked; his very life is corrupt. He is a good man, not only because he voluntarily says and does many good things, but because he himself is good; his very life is pure and just and kindly. An habitual liar is a liar not only while he is actually telling a lie, but before and afterwards; while he is silent he is a liar as well as when he is speaking falsely, for in his very life there is a want of reverence for the authority of truth. And so a man who is habitually truthful is truthful, not only when he is speaking the truth under strong temptation to speak falsely, but before he has spoken and afterwards; for in his very life there is an intolerance of falsehood. There is sin and there is righteousness, not merely in acts which are voluntarily done, in words which are voluntarily spoken, in thoughts and feelings which are voluntarily permitted to take possession of the mind and heart, but also in the very elements of our life. No doubt this is a great mystery. Life is known to us only in its activities; and I suppose that we are wholly unable to conceive how the moral and spiritual life can have a vicious taint in it, or how it can have in it qualities which can be described as good and virtuous. But we are certain of the fact for which the words stand; and every conception of sin is fatally defective in which this fact does not hold a large place. There is sin and there is righteousness in what we are as well as in what we do.

III.

It may, however, be contended that all a man's sin may be ultimately traced to his will, because what he is to-day is the result of all that he has voluntarily thought and felt and said and done in past years. If to-day he has a covetousness which his will can check, but cannot expel from his heart, it is because he has allowed himself for many years

to think too much of money and to care too much for it, and has not voluntarily encouraged the spirit of generosity. If to-day he can no more rid himself of vanity, or jealousy, or suspicion by an act of the will, than he can rid himself of some bodily disease by an act of the will, it is because, in past years, he has voluntarily yielded to vanity, to jealousy, or to suspicion. The evil passions which have acquired such enormous strength that they defy all his efforts to extinguish them, have become strong by his own consent; he might have quenched their fires years ago, but he voluntarily allowed them to burn more and more fiercely; he fed the flames; and therefore, though they are now beyond the control of his will, he is responsible for them.

In this there is a very large measure of truth, and the truth is of immense importance in relation to self-discipline and the formation of character; but it is not the whole of the truth. For is it not certain that the vices and imperfections of parents and of still remoter ancestors reappear in their children and descendants? Are not men so born that if they are to live a good life some will have to fight hard against tendencies to drunkenness, some against tendencies to gluttony, some against tendencies to indolence, some against tendencies to still graver forms of sensuality? Are there not men who may be described as constitutionally cowardly, so that when a lie promises to save them from trouble they find it hard to tell the truth? Are there not others who are constitutionally cold, selfish and suspicious? Others who are constitutionally vain? Others who are constitutionally proud? Others who, by some fatal fault of nature, seem incapable of pity? Others who inherit a temper which makes them tyrannical and cruel? Whatever explanation we may give of these mysterious facts, are not the facts too obvious and certain to be doubted?

Many of us can remember that tendencies to certain forms of sin appeared in our childhood—appeared before our con-

science was sufficiently developed to condemn them as evil; and against these very tendencies we have had to maintain a conflict for years. Through God's grace we may have mastered them at last; but they had to be mastered, or we should have been ruined for ever. They were therefore evil—very evil. They were not temptations which came upon us from without; they were part of our very life; we were born with them.

Under the law of heredity, the definite moral evils which are constitutionally present in parents are transmitted—we cannot tell how—to children and to children's children. I am not sure that the word "transmitted" accurately represents the facts. It may; I cannot tell. We are, perhaps, on surer ground when we say that the definite moral evils which are constitutionally present in the parents *reappear* in the children. Families have their characteristic vices and their characteristic virtues. Sometimes, indeed, a generation escapes the taint and it appears in the next. Even when there are great moral contrasts between the individual branches of the same stock, it is often possible to discover that their character has a common root and that the contrasts are due to accidental differences of condition and environment. There is what may be described as a community of moral life between those who have descended from the same ancestors; for good as well as for evil they are one. And so we say that certain vices or certain virtues run in the blood of particular families. In other words, qualities, whether good or evil, which belong to the very life of a man are derived, in part at least, from his parents; they are not wholly the results of his own volition.

It may be objected that if, in any sense, a man derives any of his moral qualities from his parents he is not responsible for them; but I do not find that we regard the truthfulness, the justice, and the generosity of a man with diminished

admiration or honour, if we discover that his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather before him were truthful, just and generous; nor do I find that if a man is hard, selfish, grasping, tyrannical, merciless, our moral condemnation of him is diminished by the discovery that these vices disgraced the long line of his ancestors. We make very large allowance for men whose *circumstances* have been against them, for men who in their childhood and youth lived among coarse, reckless, immoral people, who had hardly a chance of knowing their duty, who breathed a poisonous moral atmosphere from their birth; but we make no such allowance for men whose vices are the expression of their own life, and not in any sense the almost inevitable results of their circumstances.

A vice like drunkenness which in some extreme cases appears to be a physical disease as well as a vice, and which may perhaps admit of cure by physical remedies, may be judged mercifully; the man who inherits from drunken parents an almost unconquerable physical craving for drink may be pitied, as we pity a man who inherits a weak heart or weak lungs. But reckless and unscrupulous ambition, intense selfishness, lying and other sins of the spirit—for these we regard a man with no pity, even though it be notorious that his fathers through twenty generations have been guilty of the same vices. It is enough that he himself is wickedly reckless in pursuit of greatness, that he himself is hard-hearted, that he himself is a liar. Whatever his ancestors may have been, we condemn him for his own crimes.

Nor do I believe that when the moral life is quickened and the conscience awakened, and a man discovers the evil of sins of this description, his condemnation of himself is at all lessened by his knowledge that the sins of which he is guilty are the sins of which his fathers were guilty. I appeal to those who are earnestly endeavouring to live a

righteous and Christian life, not to those who are morally careless, for you are not judges on these questions. The sins into which you are sometimes betrayed are, perhaps, the very sins which you remember in your father or your mother. The moral weaknesses of which you are conscious were the moral weaknesses which you saw in one or other of your parents when you were children. The evil temper or disposition which mars your life is the very temper or disposition which marred their life. Your sins, your moral weaknesses, your evil temper, were theirs as well as yours. But does your conscience for this reason condemn you for them less sternly? Do you for this reason feel less humiliation, less shame, less self-reproach, when you entreat God to be merciful to you and to grant you forgiveness? On the contrary, are there not some, at least, to whom it seems that it is precisely in these sins, in these weaknesses, in these evil dispositions, that they find the last and most decisive proofs of their own sinfulness? Other moral failures may perhaps be in some sense the result of accidental circumstances. These are the certain indications of deeply rooted moral evil; they are the proof that the very life is corrupt.

IV.

I have spoken of the community of moral life which exists between members of the same family, descendants of the same parents, and which is illustrated in the appearance and reappearance through successive generations of the same virtues and the same vices. Is there not also a community of moral life between all mankind? And does not the common life of the race include a certain "lawlessness" which is impatient of the supreme authority of God and resents His grace, a lawlessness which is sometimes at first vividly revealed, though afterwards subdued, by the Christian Gospel?

The experiences of those who have found in Christ the Son of God and the Lord and Saviour of men are, indeed, infinitely varied. Sometimes as soon as the great discovery is made it inspires perfect faith and perfect submission, and there follows an instantaneous sense of restoration to God. I have seen the face of a man troubled and distressed at one moment, filled the next with a sudden glory. But in other cases there is a prolonged agony before the soul finds life and peace in Christ. There is a self-assertion which refuses to receive eternal salvation as the free gift of God's grace and which revolts against the personal authority of God. The man knows that he ought to receive the grace and to submit to the authority; but at the very centre of his life there is a hostile force which resists the authority and rejects the grace. He is conscious that it is he himself, and not another, that resists and rejects. The powers which are acting upon him to produce submission and trust, powers which he welcomes and whose victory he longs and prays for, are divine; the resistance and the rejection are his own, and he knows it. The very freedom and glory of the Divine grace fill him with despair. What must be the malignity of the sinfulness which refuses this wonderful redemption, a redemption achieved by the incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of God's eternal Son! He says that he "*cannot*" receive the divine grace, and that he "*cannot*" submit to the divine authority. "Cannot"; and yet while he pleads that he "cannot" he is conscious that this is the supreme and damning proof of his guilt.

This awful discovery of the evil which has corrupted the very springs of life is sometimes made long after a man has really begun to serve God. There are many persons who have sincerely trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal salvation, who love Him, and are honestly desiring to do His will, but who have the most imperfect conception of the nature of Christian righteousness. Their morals are the

traditional morals of the people among whom they live, with some slight modifications and corrections suggested by the traditions of the Church with which they are associated. There are wide provinces of their life over which the will of Christ has no authority. Many of His precepts are wholly forgotten. Others are regarded as "counsels of perfection" —intended for elect souls, and imposing no obligation on ordinary Christian men. But sometimes, to Christian people who have been living an easy and self-complacent Christian life, a life without any gross sins but without any of the intensity and energy which are inspired by a true conception of the perfection to which we are called in Christ, there comes a great moral and spiritual crisis. There is an experience under the Gospel which is analogous to Paul's cxperience under the Law: "I was alive apart from the Law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died." The endeavour to do the will of God perfectly, to bring the whole of conduct or, indeed, any considerable part of it under His authority, results in the discovery that in the obscure depths of the inward life there is an appalling antagonism to God's will. Resolutions are formed to forsake sins which had not previously been regarded as seriously sinful, and almost as soon as they are made they are broken. Attempts are made, earnest and vehement attempts, to discharge duties which had not previously been regarded as obligatory, and though they are renewed again and again they are defeated. In some happy hour a great passion of love for God is kindled in the heart, and there is exulting hope that in the power of it all righteousness will become possible; but before the day is over its fires are extinguished. The miserable man dwells on the "exceeding great and precious promises" of the divine grace, recalls all that he has ever heard of the power of the truth and of the Spirit of God, appeals earnestly to Christ, who came to preach deliverance to the captive and

the opening of the prison to them that are bound, but is terrified by the consciousness that he is still held fast by some evil power and that freedom has not come. It is he himself who is at fault; and while these awful experiences last it sometimes seems to him that deliverance is impossible. If the evil power that held him were altogether an alien power, then, indeed, he might escape, or he might be liberated by the grace of God; but in his anguish it seems to him that he would cease to be himself if he ceased to be sinful. He exclaims, not in order to palliate his guilt, but to express his full sense of its enormity, "Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me!"

V.

What explanation is to be given of these fierce agonies and terrible conflicts? And how are we to account for the common experience of ordinary men who know nothing of the darker tragedies of the moral life, but who are conscious every day of the infirmity of their better purposes, and who exclaim with Paul, "to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not." Is it possible to resist the conviction that there is present in the very life of man a force, a tendency, a bias, an element—call it what you will—hostile to righteousness? Can any other explanation be given of the appalling fact that in all countries and in all ages men have failed to illustrate the divinely ordained order of life? The virtues and the vices of mankind have assumed a great variety of forms—forms determined partly by differences in what seems to have been the original constitution of particular races, and partly by differences in the material conditions of men, differences in their intellectual development, differences in their political and social institutions, differences in their religious beliefs and discipline; but always and everywhere, according to the testimony of poets,

historians, moralists, and the founders of the great historical religions, men have failed to live the perfect life. The sense of failure has been most intense where the consciousness of personality and of moral freedom has been most vivid, and the ideal of goodness the noblest. Men have confessed that they saw and honoured the better life but did not live it. "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God"; this does not rest on the authority of a Christian apostle merely; history bears witness to it; and whenever a man's conscience becomes keen and vigorous conscience condemns him and says, Thou, too, art a sinner. There is a mysterious community of moral life between men of all counties and all ages. Individual men cannot stand absolutely alone and apart, isolated from the life of the rest of mankind. Within limits every man is morally free; but we are members one of another; and in the life which is shared by the whole race, whatever other and nobler elements there may be—and there are many—there is a power which makes for unrighteousness.

This is what theologians mean when they speak of the race as a fallen race. The race itself has fallen—not merely individual men, and from the fall the race needs redemption.

VI.

When we consider the immense importance which is attributed in theological systems to discussions concerning the sin of Adam, and the effects of that sin in the physical, moral, and spiritual ruin of his descendants, there is something surprising in the inconsiderable place which is given to this account of the origin of human sin in the Holy Scriptures. There is the story of the creation of Adam, of his sin, and of his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, in the second and third chapters of the book of Genesis; and in the fifth it is said that "Adam lived a hundred and

thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his own image, and called his name Seth," which may perhaps mean that Seth inherited those imperfections of Adam's nature, which had resulted from his fall, although it may be fairly contended that it means that Adam transmitted to his child that likeness to God which he himself had received in his creation—that is, the intelligence and moral freedom by which he was distinguished from the beasts; but there is not a solitary passage in all the rest of the Old Testament in which the sin of Adam is represented as having inflicted any injury of any kind on his descendants. Only twice indeed is the sin of Adam referred to at all; once in Job (xxxi. 33), where Job protests that he had not, "like Adam," covered his transgressions by hiding his iniquity in his bosom; and once in Hosea (vi. 7), in which the prophet declares that Ephraim and Judah, "like Adam," have transgressed the covenant. In the New Testament Paul, in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, attributes the physical death of all men to Adam, as he attributes the resurrection of all to Christ—"As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive"; and in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans he illustrates the transcendent glory of the redemption resulting from the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ by contrasting it with the results of the disobedience of Adam. The passage is one of immense importance as well as of great difficulty; and whatever uncertainty there may be about the precise meaning of particular sentences and particular clauses, it indicates very clearly that Paul believed that the sin of Adam had brought vast evils on the human race, just as the righteousness of Christ had brought infinite blessings. But even in this passage—the critical passage on the doctrine—the account of the evil results of Adam's sin is incidental; Paul speaks of Adam's transgression and of the effects of it, not for the sake of giving an explanation of human sin, but for the sake of

illustrating the greatness of the Christian salvation. In no other part of the New Testament is this relation between the sin of Adam and the moral and spiritual condition of mankind spoken of. Our Lord never speaks of it, nor does Peter, nor does John, nor does Paul himself except in the passages to which I have referred.

What the Gospel assumes, and what is insisted upon throughout the New Testament, is the fact that men are actually sinners—all men; that the race has fallen away from God and needs redemption. It is assumed that all men need the infinite mercy of God for the forgiveness of their sins. It is declared that that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that apart from the divine life which is given in the new birth, no man can have a place in the kingdom of God. The universality of human sin is assumed; about the mystery of its origin, except in the single passage in the Romans, the New Testament is silent.

But, explain it how we will, it remains true that we share the life of the race, as the branches share the life of the tree, and that in this life there is an evil power which must be resisted and overcome if we are to do the will of God. The question, whether we are guilty merely because we share it, or whether all our guilt lies in yielding to it, is one which it is not necessary to resolve, for we have all yielded to it, and have done evil things innumerable which we might have left undone.

Having yielded to it, we have become confederates with the evil power which is working in all men against the authority and the grace of God. There are times when, in addition to the burden of my personal transgressions, I seem to share the responsibility of that "fall of man" which has "brought death into the world and all our woe." There are times when I cannot think of the sins, even the grossest sins of other men, as though I were wholly free from the guilt of them; for, as I have said, we share a

common life; there is a solidarity of the race in sin; and there are times when I feel that in condemning other men for their sins I am condemning myself; for we are all members one of another.

But, thank God, if we share the sin of the race, we also share its redemption. The race was created in the Eternal Son of God, and was destined in Him to eternal perfection and eternal joy; nor has the divine purpose been finally thwarted by human sin. If, as members of a race which has fallen away from God, we are born to an inheritance of appalling evils, as members of a race which has the roots of its life in the eternal Son of God, we are also born to an inheritance of infinite glory. The whole race has sinned, but its sin has been atoned for; Christ is the propitiation for the sin of the world. There is a power of evil in the life of the race—a great and awful power, which, if unresisted, will destroy us; but the grace of God in Christ is infinitely mightier to redeem and to save. We are born to that redemption, to that salvation; it lies with each one of us to determine whether we will receive or reject it. If we are finally lost, it will not be because we belong to a sinful race, but because we have rejected the infinite mercy of God which has achieved the redemption of the race in Christ.

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