

Holiness

Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots

J.C. Ryle

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Sin

... *sin is lawlessness*

(1 John 3:4)

He who wishes to attain right views about Christian *holiness* must begin by examining the vast and solemn subject of *sin*. He must dig down very *low* if he would build *high*. A mistake here is most mischievous. Wrong views about holiness are generally traceable to wrong views about human corruption. I make no apology for beginning this volume of messages about *holiness* by making some plain statements about *sin*.

The plain truth is that a right understanding of *sin* lies at the root of all saving Christianity. Without it, such doctrines as justification, conversion and sanctification are 'words and names' which convey no meaning to the mind. The first thing, therefore, that God does when He makes anyone a new creature in Christ is to send light into his heart and show him that he is a *guilty sinner*. The material

creation in Genesis began with 'light', and so also does the spiritual creation. God 'made his light shine in our hearts' by the work of the Holy Spirit – and then spiritual life begins (2 Cor. 4:6).

Dim or indistinct views of sin are the origin of most of the errors, heresies and false doctrines of the present day. If a man does not realize the dangerous nature of his *soul's disease* you cannot wonder if he is content with false or imperfect *remedies*. I believe that one of the chief needs of the contemporary church has been, and is, clearer, fuller teaching about sin.

1. I will begin the subject by supplying some definition of sin.

We are all, of course, familiar with the terms 'sin' and 'sinners'. We talk frequently of 'sin' being in the world, and of men committing 'sins'. But what do we mean by these terms and phrases? Do we really know? I fear there is much mental confusion and haziness on this point. Let me try, as briefly as possible, to supply an answer.

'Sin', speaking generally, is, as the ninth Article of our church declares:

the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.

Sin is that vast moral disease which affects the whole human race of every rank and class and name and nation and people and tongue;

a disease from which there never was but one born of woman that was free. Need I say, that One was Christ Jesus the Lord?

I say, furthermore, that 'a sin', to speak more particularly, *consists in doing, saying, thinking or imagining anything that is not in perfect conformity with the mind and law of God*. 'Sin' in short, as the Scripture says, 'is lawlessness' (1 John 3:4). The slightest outward or inward departure from absolute mathematical parallelism with God's revealed will and character constitutes a sin, and at once makes us guilty in God's sight.

Of course, I need not tell anyone who reads their Bible with attention that a man may break God's law in *heart and thought*, when there is no overt and visible act of wickedness. Our Lord has settled that point beyond dispute in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21-28). Even a poet of our own has truly said that 'one may smile, and smile, and be a villain'.

Again, I need not tell a careful student of the New Testament that there are sins of *omission* as well as *commission*, and that we sin, as our Prayer Book justly reminds us, by 'leaving undone the things we ought to do', as really as by 'doing the things we ought not to do'. The solemn words of our Master in the Gospel of Matthew place this point also beyond dispute. It is there written: 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire ... For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink' (Matt. 25:41,42).

I do think it necessary in these times to remind my readers that a man may commit sin and yet be ignorant of it, and imagine himself innocent – when he is guilty. I fail to see any scriptural warrant for the modern assertion that 'Sin is not sin to us – until we discern it and are conscious of it'. On the contrary, in the fourth and fifth chapters of that

unduly neglected book, Leviticus, and in the fifteenth of Numbers, I find Israel distinctly taught that there were *sins of ignorance* which rendered people unclean, and needed atonement (Lev. 4; 5:14–19; Num. 15:25–29). And I find our Lord expressly teaching that the servant who *knows not* his master's will and 'does things deserving punishment' was not excused on account of his ignorance, but was 'beaten' or punished (Luke 12:48). We will do well to remember that when we make our own miserably imperfect knowledge and consciousness the measure of our sinfulness, we are on very dangerous ground. A deeper study of Leviticus might do us much good.

2. Concerning the *origin* and *source* of this vast moral disease called 'sin', I am afraid that the views of many professing Christians on this point are sadly defective and unsound. I dare not pass it by. Let us, then, have it fixed down in our minds that the sinfulness of man does not begin from *without* but from *within*. It is not the result of bad training in early years. It is not picked up from bad companions and bad examples – as some weak Christians are too fond of saying. No! It is a family disease, which we all inherit from our first parents, Adam and Eve, and with which we are born.

Created in the image of God, innocent and righteous at first, our parents fell from original righteousness, and became sinful and corrupt. And from that day to this, all men and women are born in the image of fallen Adam and Eve, and inherit a heart and nature inclined to evil: '... sin entered the world through one man'; 'Flesh gives birth to flesh'; '... we were *by nature* deserving of wrath'; 'The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God'; '... it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality'

and the like (Rom. 5:12; John 3:6; Eph. 2:3, italics mine; Rom. 8:7; Mark 7:21).

The fairest child, who has entered life this year and become the sunbeam of a family, is not, as his mother perhaps fondly calls him, a little 'angel' or a little 'innocent', but a little 'sinner'. Alas! As that boy or girl lies smiling and crowing in their cradle, that little infant carries the seeds of every kind of wickedness in its heart! Only watch it carefully, as it grows in stature and its mind develops, and you will soon detect in it an incessant tendency to that which is bad, and a backwardness to do that which is good. You will see in it the buds and germs of deceit, evil temper, selfishness, self-will, obstinacy, greediness, envy, jealousy and passion – which, if indulged and let alone, will shoot up with painful rapidity.

Who taught the child these things? Where did he learn them? The Bible alone can answer these questions. Of all the foolish things that parents say about their children, there is none worse than the common saying: 'My son has a good heart at the bottom. He is not what he ought to be, but he has fallen into bad hands. Public schools are bad places – the teachers neglect the boys. Yet he has a good heart at the bottom.' The truth, unhappily, is diametrically the other way. The first cause of all sin lies in the natural corruption of the boy's own heart – and not in public schools!

3. Concerning the extent of this vast moral disease called 'sin', let us beware that we make no mistake. The only safe ground is that which is laid for us in Scripture. '... every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart' is by nature 'evil', and that 'all the time'. 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure' (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9). Sin

is a disease which pervades and runs through every part of our moral constitution, and every faculty of our minds. The *understanding*, the *affections*, the *reasoning powers*, the *will* are all more or less infected. Even the *conscience* is so blinded that it cannot be depended on as a sure guide, and is as likely to lead men wrong as right, unless it is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. In short, 'From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness – only wounds and bruises and open sores' (Isa. 1:6). The disease may be *veiled* under a thin covering of courtesy, politeness, good manners and outward decorum – but it lies deep down in the constitution!

I admit fully that man has many grand and noble faculties left about him, and that in arts and sciences and literature he shows immense capacity. But the fact still remains that in spiritual things he is utterly 'dead' and has no natural knowledge, or love, or fear of God. His *best* things are so interwoven and intermingled with *corruption* that the contrast only brings out into sharper relief the truth and extent of the Fall. That one and the same creature should be in some things so high, and in others so low; so great, and yet so little; so noble, and yet so base; so grand in his conception and execution of material things, and yet so grovelling and debased in his affections; that he should be able to plan and erect buildings like the pyramids in Egypt and the Parthenon at Athens, and yet worship vile gods and goddesses and birds and beasts and creeping things; that he should be able to produce histories like that of Thucydides, and yet be a slave to abominable vices like those described in the first chapter of the epistle to the Romans – all this is a sore puzzle to those who sneer at 'God's Word' and scoff at us as *bibliolaters*.

But it is a knot that we can untie, with the Bible in our hands. We

"I only know it is far easier to be a Christian among singing, praying, sympathising Christians in a public room than to be a consistent Christian in a quiet, retired, out-of-the-way, uncongenial home."

J. C Ryle wrote this timeless classic on holiness over a hundred years ago, yet how poignant his words still are for us today. Sadly, we all know how easy it is to appear godly in public, while behind closed doors to continue in our own sin.

This modern English version will challenge a new generation of readers to live a Christ-like life. Ryle's timeless wisdom reminds us that holiness shouldn't be cold, distant and unobtainable, but that Christ himself is the root of our godliness. Be exhorted not to simply settle for half-hearted holiness, but to strive to be holy in every area of our lives.

Holiness, Ryle argued, was not simply a matter of believing and feeling, but of doing.

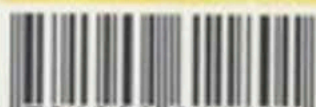
Holiness is by far Ryle's most important doctrinal and practical work... In any list of must-read books, this one should be somewhere near the very top.

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'J.C. Ryle's Holiness'

John Stott's reply when asked what one book would he recommend to someone starting out in ministry.

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