

Sin, Guilt, Forgiveness. A Classic Sermon

By Rev. Othmar Tobisch

March 03, 2002

Bible Reading

Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, "Yea, hath God said, 'Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"

And the woman said unto the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden. But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, 'Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.'"

And the serpent said unto the woman, "Ye shall not surely die. For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. (*Genesis 3:1–7*)

Reading from Swedenborg

Real repentance is examining ourselves, recognizing and acknowledging our sins, holding ourselves guilty of them and confessing them before the Lord, asking for help and power to resist them, and so desisting from them and leading a new life—and doing all of this as if we were doing it by ourselves. Do this once or twice a year when you go to Holy Communion. And afterwards, when the sins you have found yourself guilty of recur, say to yourself, "I do not want to do these things because they are sins against God." This is real repentance. (*True Christian Religion #567.5*)

Sermon

What about sin? Sin is a strong Anglo-Saxon word; a three letter word capable of covering the whole gamut of human failure. It is used in particular to express the rebellion of man against the divine order; against the commandments of God.

In the Old Testament, sin is a stumble, a fall, a breach of the covenant with God. It has the connotation of breaking one's word, disloyalty, treason. In the New Testament, the severity of the term softened. It becomes more psychological; less legal. "Missing the mark"—meaning failure to achieve the goal—is the root meaning. Also to fail in one's purpose, to commit an error.

Some of our contemporaries try to shy away from this word, particularly when under the influence of modern psychology and psychiatry. The attendant complex of guilt feelings has prompted some mind doctors to abolish the word "sin." Unfortunately for the patients, the fact of sin cannot be eliminated. By whatever name you call a skunk, its odor is still offensive.

We should first clarify the meaning of this state of the soul called sin. The word "evil" is closely allied, but is not identical. Our doctrine defines sin as an evil act not against man, but against God. Therefore an atheist cannot commit a sin because he has no one to commit it against. He may lead an evil life; he may steal, he may lie, he may commit adultery, as it is done all over the world, in all religious and atheistic nations; but he cannot sin.

It takes a man who believes in God to commit a sin. To sin is to turn away from God. To sin is not to obey the Divine truth that a man knows, and so to avert himself from God. In Swedenborg's words, "To sin is to do and to think what is evil and false, intentionally, and from the will" (*Arcana Coelestia* #8925). In other words, "I want to do this, though I know God forbids it."

To sin, therefore, is to add insult to injury. In sinning we insult our own intelligence, because we know better. In sinning we insult God, because we are quite aware that this is against his desire, his order, his will to provide eternal happiness for us. Sinning is an aggravated condition of doing evil. It adds intention and will to the knowledge of what is wrong.

Man cannot sin in ignorance. It is insanity to condemn a newborn baby who dies without baptism to the hell of damnation. Only a perverted theological mind could have dreamed this up. And can a Christian church teach that the "heathen" go to hell unless they are converted to the particular brand of Christianity that is preached to them?

Our church has no part with such doctrines. We consider them false, unchristian, and unscriptural. No one can be convicted of sin who has not realized what sin is. This means that he first must acknowledge a God—in particular, a God whom he has accepted freely and without compulsion from anyone. This Divine Being whom he has acknowledged has revealed a certain way of life, a series of commandments to live by. Only when someone knows, acknowledges, and willfully transgresses such commandments, in defiance of the Author, can we speak of sin.

The mythological being called Adam, and his wife Eve, define exactly this condition in a simple story. They knew the commandments of God, "Thou shalt not eat from the tree in the midst of the garden." It could be expressed, "Look: there are plenty of fine fruit trees all over the place. Just leave that one alone." Was this not a test of their obedience? If there had not been a choice to do or not to do, how could we know about man's ability to withstand tests of this sort—called temptation?

But the selfish nature of man, pictured by the serpent, kept nagging away. The serpent said to the woman: You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of this fruit, your eyes will be opened; you will be really enlightened; you will be in on the secret that God kept away from you. You will be like God, and know good and evil.

The result of this test is called by some theologians the original sin: the beginning of all sin. In a way, it is. It is a simple way of telling that man was tempted from the beginning to set himself up as a god. He is still trying to do this very thing. There is something in man so godlike that it always tempts him to usurp

the power of godhood for himself, and run the world and his life as if he were the originator of all this power and this life!

To sin, then, is to seek to deny God. It is to unseat God from his throne and act as if he did not exist at all. To sin is to become an antideist, working against God. Let us repeat, then. To sin requires several conditions of mind:

- Man must know good and evil, not as a philosophical discussion, but as experienced conditions of human life.
- He must know these aberrations from divine order to be such, namely, transgressions against divine order, not merely against human order and discipline. A child, therefore, who has a very limited understanding of this order and its Author, can hardly be said to be able to sin. A child can do evil, but cannot sin.
- Sin requires a conscious, willful, intentional breaking of a commandment, and this against God—against the highest authority man knows.

This, in turn, brings on a state of guilt. I feel guilty when I have not told the truth. I feel guilty when I have laid plans to defraud someone, to deceive someone, to commit adultery by harboring desires to steal another's husband or wife. Now, this is quite a modern sport among secular permissives, which may become a social evil; but it cannot be a sin with them. I doubt that they have a guilty conscience from it.

Guilt is a feeling that we have done something wrong, and in particular something that we knew was wrong. We acknowledged it to be wrong and yet did it. And when we are overwhelmed with guilt, we may cry like David when Nathan the prophet came to him and pointed out his adultery with Bathsheba:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy everlasting love. According to thy abundant mercies, blot out my transgression. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done that which is evil.*(Psalm 51:1–4)*

Now, the feeling of guilt is not something that should hound us forever. It is but an intermediary stage between sin and forgiveness. Forgiveness can be had freely from God when sin is acknowledged—when there is a feeling of guilt followed by repentance. Thus the stage is set for divine forgiveness.

But there can be no forgiveness without repentance. . . . and acts of repentance. This the Lord made clear in the Sermon on the Mount, where he made it a condition of divine forgiveness that we first forgive our own debtors. The correct translation of this phrase in the Lord's prayer is: "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors." Divine forgiveness is to be had freely under this one condition.

The orthodox term for this act of divine love is "grace." This is the nature of divine love: that it must forever draw all men unto itself. Thus it must continually give opportunities for men to acknowledge their sins, and repent of their transgressions.

This is a very important religio-psychological law. No one needs to be saddled eternally with any guilt. Anyone who feels that way is mentally ill. I once observed a woman in a state hospital who had this affliction. She could not be shaken from her fixed idea that she was unpardonably guilty. All sins are

pardonable except one, which is the firm denial in heart, mind, and action of truth when a man knows it. This is the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Guilt, then, is an instrument of divine love to bring about man's regeneration. "The heart of the matter," says the Swiss physician Paul Tournier, "is that the word 'confession' denotes for the doctors a psychological event, and for the cleric an act of piety. We doctors consider that confession has occurred when there is an intense shudder of shame and humiliation over that which a man knows he is guilty of, and which he has concealed up to that time with the greatest determination."

Confession of sin can take place alone with one's God, as the Lord prescribed it. Or it can take place with a group of people, as John the Baptist practiced at the occasion of the washing off of sins in the Jordan—or as the apostles James writes: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous man has great power in its effects" (*James 5:16*).

After confession—in whatever way practiced—there descends the feeling of having been forgiven. One is washed clean of guilt. One's sin is blotted out. There is no condemnation for the one who sincerely confesses and repents. The effects of the law are then dissolved. One is paroled into life once more. "Go and sin no more" is the Lord's own advice. "If no one has condemned you, neither will I condemn you" (*John 8:11*).

Guilt is dissolved, the slate wiped clean. Man can begin afresh. This is the path of regeneration. This is the way of life.

Prayer

Dearest Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we thank you that you are always near, and ready to forgive. We long to accept your forgive-ness; yet we know that only a changed heart, mind, and life can heal our sin, put away our guilt, and open us to your grace. Give us the strength, we pray, to leave behind the wrongs that we know we are doing—the wrongs against your commandments and your way of love. When we are tempted, and are beginning to falter, come into our hearts and minds with new resolve to stay on the path that you have shown us. Help us to direct our lives by your Word, so that we may find new forgiveness and new life. Amen.

Rev. Othmar Tobisch