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"SIN AND FORGIVENESS"

"Therefore to him that knoweth to do good
and doeth it not, to him it is sin."

-James 4:17

Sin is a subject most people do not like to think about, especially in relationship to themselves. Just as hell is considered a place to which other people are bound, so sin describes despicable conduct of which only others are guilty. We are not sinners. We just make mistakes or get confused.

As a minister I am often questioned about these two words, sin and hell. May I suggest that they are the religious equivalents of the juridical terms, crime and punishment. As long as there is such a thing as human society, there will be a certain consensus among men, based upon their experience, that some actions are good and some are not so good. If an action leads to man's satisfactions, his health and welfare, that action is considered good. If an action leads to suffering and pain, if it deprives man of the good things of life, it is generally considered to be bad.

Religion relates man's actions to the ultimate goal of life, and merely uses a somewhat different vocabulary. Christianity always puts the situation in affirmative terms. The text from the little epistle of James is typical: If you know something to be a good action and you fail to do it, you sin. But you have offended not only your fellow men; in the religious context you have also offended God who always wills the highest good for all mankind.

This, then, is the meaning of the word sin. It is not a word of which to be afraid and certainly not one which ought to be scorned. Is it not obvious that in our frail human nature everyone of us occasionally fails to do what he knows is good and therefore sins? He falls short of the mark. He fails to be at his best. We are all sinners.

Now I am not, in offering this analysis, trying to make light of sin. I am merely attempting to explain it in terms suitable to the twentieth century. If I am correct, then there can be no such thing as original sin. Man does not come into the world a sinner. Sin, by definition, requires knowledge of the good and a refusal to do it. This is beyond the capacity of a new-born infant.

There is however within man this thing called conscience. He comes to know, sometimes almost intuitively, that some things are good and some things are not good. He feels that life has, or ought to have, a goal; and he desires to do those things which will enable him to reach that goal. Anything which keeps him from that goal is evil. And so man has a consciousness or an awareness of sin. He knows he is a sinner whether he will admit it or not.

II

It is not far from the mark to say that sin is a spiritual disease. When a man is sick, the first thing is to accept the fact and admit that he is sick. Sin is a spiritual sickness and we will never be cured if we constantly run around telling ourselves that sin is not real; that we're not really sick, that all we have to do is spend a couple of hours on the couch and the psychiatrist will remove our sense of sin the way a surgeon removes tonsils. Our sin is real. We are sinners. We will never discover what is to be done about our sickness until we admit that we are morally sick.

Now I will concede that many men misuse religion more than they use it. When one sees uneducated men and women encouraged to crawl for miles on their hands and knees on a spiritual pilgrimage until those hands and knees are raw and bleeding, one may well doubt that religion is sincerely interested in human welfare. Many thinking men have rejected a religion that insists that man is a worthless, good-for-nothing creature that ought to be continually debasing himself before a God, when Jesus said God was a God of love and who held human life to be of infinite worth. Does there not seem to be some contradiction in it all?

One psychiatrist has said that a sense of sin is the most prominent symptom in mental illness. There are two things which can be done about this. One, which many have attempted, is to wipe this concept of sin out of men's minds by insisting that everything is relative. There is no such thing as right or wrong; therefore no such thing as sin. If there is no such thing as sin, it is reasoned, men will not get guilt complexes and there will be a vast reduction in mental illness.

This solution has not worked, however, as witness the Harris poll which appeared during the past week indicating that the majority of Americans consider themselves to be religious. Man does not consider himself religious if he has no sense of sin. Religion always makes demands and demands which men know they do not always fulfill. They may call their indiscretions and their failures by another name but the consequences are the same. If they do not obtain a sense of forgiveness, they will eventually become mentally sick.

Dr. Gordon Allport, whom I mentioned last Sunday, has something worth listening to on this matter:

"The clergyman has a clear duty, for the poor psychiatrist and psychologist are ordinarily baffled by sin. More often than not, they view it as they might view an outgrown vermiform appendix -- something that ought to be removed by a psycho-analytic scalpel. Here is one place where the minister has a more balanced wisdom. While there is a neurotic type of guilt, there is also in most people a deep sense of their own persistent, sinful, convulsive shirking. William James complained that modern Protestantism does not avail itself of sacramental confession often enough. I think he was right."

III

Now, any guiding philosophy of life that is going to be effective must include the concept of forgiveness. If it is true, as Christianity surely holds it to be, that most men have this sense of sin and wrongdoing, then we must find a way of alleviating the pressure and the tension caused by this sensitivity. Christianity, through the teachings of Jesus, has assured men that God is a God of love who does always forgive those who are truly repentant.

But modern man is sometimes just as confused about the doctrine of forgiveness as he is about the doctrine of sin. Surely it is not sufficient to say, "I am sorry", and then expect that everything will be as it was before the sin was committed. Things can never be as they were. What Christianity means by forgiveness is that once a man recognizes that he has sinned, and truly seeks to do better, he opens the way by which God can help him do better. His sin and his wrongdoing no longer stand between himself and God. But forgiveness does not mean, and never can mean, that the consequences of wrong-

doing are eliminated. The consequences cannot be avoided because we live in a lawful, orderly universe wherein every cause has an effect.

Let me illustrate. A man is tempted to embezzle some company funds. He finally succumbs and steals a thousand dollars. The next day he realizes what he has done. He has committed a moral and a legal crime. His conscience bothers him. He goes to his minister and confesses his crime, makes restitution of the funds, and the matter is closed. If the man is sincere he may feel certain of God's forgiveness. But he cannot hope to escape all the consequences of his action. He knows he is not quite the same man he once was. There is a blot on his record that can never be removed. He is not quite the same man he would have been had he never embezzled. Nothing can ever change that.

Returning to the matter of mental illness, therefore, if it is true as the psychologists are more and more insisting, that a sense of sin lies at the root of most mental illness, then an assurance of forgiveness is one of the most vital needs of men. And if forgiveness is essential, confession and repentance are no less essential; for there can be no permanent feeling of forgiveness until one has repented and confessed. The Roman Catholics learned this a long, long time ago and the rest of us are beginning to relearn it.

In my experience with men and women having marital difficulties I have discovered that right here lies one of the chief causes of marital unhappiness and divorce. Men and women are not mature enough to admit that they were wrong. They have too much pride and vanity to say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me." And so the pain and the hurt continue to gnaw away at the marriage until reconciliation is impossible.

Let me once more quote Dr. Gordon Allport:

"The main purpose of religion, I repeat, is not to make people healthy, but to help them fit themselves into the Creator's context for them. An adequate religion of this dimension serves, incidentally, to guard, maintain and restore mental health. It casts out demons. The clergyman knows that a personality, to be sound and fully human, requires a guiding philosophy of life."

Jesus, therefore, was not talking about matters irrelevant to life, but about matters which are at the very heart of life. Sin is a reality. Forgiveness is a necessity. Both must be understood in the context of our total philosophy if life is to be healthy and whole.