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The Insanity of Sin

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THE INSANITY OF SIN

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Ridicule is an almost universal attitude toward sin in our time. Mental illness, emotional need, educational deficiency, social wrong, and other observable conditions are often taken as the only possible meanings for an often misused word—"sin."

The Bible, however, tells us of sin's universality. "For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The Bible also makes clear sin's pernicious method. James, writing his general Epistle, reveals sin's method for all its destructiveness when he says, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempteth no man: but each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed. Then the lust, when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is fullgrown, bringeth forth death" (James 1:13-15).

The Bible also teaches the result or product of sin. "For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," Paul teaches in Romans 6:23. The modern contempt for sin is rebuffed by our actual and painful experience with sin's universal, pernicious method, and dire product. For the prejudiced and arrogant we ask only, "Read any newspaper in the world today and then explain the murder, inhumanity, strife, unrest, misery, crime, and other manifestations of evil." We offer today a three-letter word explanation—"sin."

Nothing demonstrates more vividly and convincingly the terrible nature of sin and its grip on us than Christ's sacrificial death. Peter explains of Christ's death, "who his own self bare our sins in his body upon the tree, that we, having died unto sins, might live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed" (I Peter 2:24). Paul, in a moving passage in Romans 5, talks of the time in our lives when we were "weak," "ungodly," and "enemies" concluding that "Christ died for the ungodly," and that God "commendeth his own love toward us" in that death, with the result being our reconciliation to God through Christ (Romans 5:6-10). Where else do we turn for the greatest evidence of God's love for the world than to Calvary?? Here, more than in any other place or situation, one faces the thought, "Christ died for my sins."

Yet, we persist in sin, even after God's extreme attempt to save us. Man's rebellion, not only in his sin but in his rejection of God's offer of release from guilt, points to an insanity—"the insanity of sin."

The Bible offers many powerful examples of what I mean by the "insanity of sin" but one seems to dominate the scene. I refer to the parable of the prodigal son or the loving father told by Jesus and recorded by Luke in his Gospel, chapter fifteen, verses eleven through thirty-two. This story from the Master teacher poignantly displays the pathos of a fallen sinner and the pride of a haughty legalist. In the midst of these contrasts stands the loving father whose unimpeachable conduct toward both sons assures us of a loving Heavenly Father.

But our lesson today must deal only with the younger or prodigal son. His story is found in verses eleven through twenty-four of Luke 15. Listen as we read it together. "And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of thy substance that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, there arose a mighty famine in that country; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to
one of the citizens of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. But when he came to himself he said, how many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight. I am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But while he was yet afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat, and make merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry” (Luke 15:11-24).

As one reads this story the younger son’s descent to a prodigal becomes clearer. As in so many of our lives there is a perceptible step-by-step process of turning away from God into total ruin. Notice the following steps that created a prodigal out of the younger son. As we consider these conditions my prayer is that we will see “the insanity of sin.”

First, the younger son made a total break with home and father. His request was more than a simple desire to have his inheritance. He desired a final break with all that would cast a restraining influence on his life. “Not many days” after his request was answered, and having converted his holdings into immediate capital, he “took his journey into a far country” (Luke 15:13). It is difficult for us, living in the jet age, to appreciate such a trip “into a far country.” But how typical a course of action! Remember how Adam and Eve acted amongst the trees of the garden (Genesis 3:8). “And they heard the voice of Jehovah God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Jehovah God amongst the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8).

Man always voluntarily separates himself from his Father. But such rebellion cannot go unnoticed without denying the very nature of a Just and Holy God. Once Adam and Eve made their decision to “hid themselves from the presence of Jehovah,” as the younger son “decided” to take his journey into a far country, we understandably read, “So he (God) drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden the Cherubim, and the flame of a sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24).

In further evidence of the younger son’s descent into prodigality we learn of the misuse of his inheritance or gift. Upon arrival in the strange, distant land, and thereby thoroughly removed from any restraint of friends, father, and home, “he wasted his substance with riotous living.”

There are many ways to allow such misuse to darken our lives. Jesus talked about the misuse of fearful inaction in the Parable of the Talents. The one-talent man said, “Lord, I know thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not scatter; and I was afraid, and went away and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, thou hast thine own” (Matthew 25:24, 25). But the Lord replied, “Thou wicked and slothful servant,” and directed, “cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness” (Matthew 25:30).

Jesus also talked about the misuse of greedy hoarding. The rich man of Luke 12 could not handle the prosperity that came to him. He failed to properly answer his own question, “What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits?” (Luke 12:17). When he decided to hoard it all for himself he heard the Lord say, “Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?” (Luke 12:20).

But there is also the misuse of ignorance. Paul counsels Christians to “try themselves” so as to determine their true spiritual condition (II Corinthians 13:5). But the younger son turning prodigal misuses his gift or inheritance in selfish dissipation. His mistake is not simply “wasting” his substance, but rather the degree of his depravity increases as “he wasted his substance with riotous living” (Luke 15:13).

In further complication of his spiritual and moral condition, the younger son became totally unprepared for adversity. Jesus says, in the parable “And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country; and he began to be in want.” (Luke 15:14). His life in this new and strange land had been one of continual avoidance of anything unpleasant and discomforting. He had not learned that “tribulation worketh stedfastness; and stedfastness, approvedness; and approvedness, hope; and hope putteth not to shame,” as Paul explains in Romans 5:3-5.

Therefore tribulation had no place in his life and thought. But it came to him as it comes to all of us at one time or another! Rather than growing in wisdom and grace, he grew into want, emptiness, moral depravity, insecurity and faithlessness. By rejecting an obedient life at home for a carefree and irresponsible life abroad he failed to form an adequate philosophy of life, and certainly had no defense for adversity. The Christian, to the contrary, by the very nature of the Christian life possesses a stability this young man did not have. Paul instructs the Christian in Philippians 4:4-7. “Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice. Let your communication be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.”

Being so totally unprepared for adversity, the younger son turning prodigal, looked around for help. His help had to come from “new friends” in a strange land. How disappointed and surprised he must have been when “one of the citizens of that country,” possibly one of his friends while his money could purchase pleasure for all, “sent him into his fields to feed swine” (Luke 15:15). He was a long way from home but not far enough to not be able to forget a pattern of life that completely excluded the eating and handling of swine. He now learned that evil companions do not provide enduring concern. The very thing Paul, the Apostle, says in the New Testament (I Corinthians 15:33,34). Till now he had not recognized the insecurity of sin. In other words, he did not learn the lesson Moses learned. “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt: for he looked unto the recompense of reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

At this point we recognize the lowest point of his departure from his home and father. “And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him” (Luke 15:16). In a total break with home, further complicated by the misuse of his inheritance, coupled with his lack of experience in
meeting adversity, and now having been given the menial task of herding swine with their food he only food, the younger son has become the prodigal. The saddest expression of his condition comes in verse sixteen when we read, "...and no man gave unto him." Abject loneliness overwhelmed him. Friends of this world, because of its very nature, are not lasting friends (1 John 2:15-17).

Here among the swine the prodigal demonstrates the result of believing what George A. Buttrick calls "the primeval lie of liberty without law." The younger son had every right to spend his inheritance as he wished—as I have the right to jump headlong from the Eiffel Tower—but in the process he became a prodigal among the pigs. If I jump from the Eiffel Tower the law of gravity takes over when I reach the ground and crushes me! I tell you, sin is insane! Here as we look closely at the prodigal son is compelling evidence of the "insanity of sin."

Once this irrational condition is demonstrated we must also show how it can be repudiated. That is our real message today—the insanity of sin does not have to continue its destruction of your eternal soul. Notice how the prodigal son repudiated his sin.

First, he started thinking again. Let me emphasize, "thinking again." Verse seventeen reads, "But when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger" (Luke 15:17). The words, "when he came to himself" are from an Hebrew and Aramaic expression of repentance. Salvation always begins here.

In that classic passage in Romans, Paul makes this clear, as he declares, "For, Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they preach except they be sent? (Romans 10:13-15). Later, in the same reading, Paul concludes, "So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

His thinking about home as well as his own condition produced a sorrow of heart especially when comparing himself with his father's servants. He knew that he deserved nothing better but rather would be happy as a servant in his father's house. Turning to God begins with the same attitude. Paul remarks, "For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a return which bringeth no regret..." (II Corinthians 7:10).

The prodigal then made a decision. "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him. Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15:18, 19). But many of us have made similar decisions only to never see them realized. That is why we read with interest the next verse. "And he arose, and came to his father" (Luke 15:20). Out of reflection about home, recognition of the wrong in his own life, and resolution to return, came an obedient and humble act—he went home to his Father. This is Biblical repentance.

His father, like our Heavenly Father, saw him coming because he had been watching without fail since that first day his son had left. His love burned as brightly as ever. God says, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3). This is why that "while he was yet afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Luke 17:20).

Almost without listening to his son's confession of error and rebellion along with his plea to become just a servant, we read that "the father said to his servants, Bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring the fattened calf, and kill it, and let us eat, and make merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:22-24).

Prompt forgiveness—signified by the father's kiss, full restoration—indicated by the robe, ring, and shoes, and jubilant celebration marked the prodigal's return to full sonhood. A. M. Hunter suggests that "What we are entitled to learn from the parable is that God loves the sinner before he repents, and that when he does, God forgives him and restores him to his great family" (p. 63, Interpreting the Parables).

As a result of the younger son's repudiation of the "insanity of sin" a resurrection and a rediscovery occurred. The father exclaimed, "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." Today you can be resurrected with Christ through your baptism as a penitent believer (Romans 6:1-6). Paul explains very clearly that when properly prepared through genuine faith, thorough repentance, and open confession we are baptized into Christ, we thereby are "united with him in the likeness of his death" and "in the likeness of his resurrection." Alive again, to God, like the prodigal to his father.

Through the reconciliation that God provides sinful man in Christ we are spiritually "rediscovered." Paul concludes, "Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new" (II Corinthians 5:17). Come to Christ in full obedience today and be "rediscovered" by God in the reconciliation created by your surrender to the commands of God.

There is no reason for continual sin in our lives (Romans 6:1-6). The "insanity of sin" is overcome through our return to God in Christ. We conclude today's lesson with the remark from the early Christian teacher and preacher, John Chrysostom, who said, "There is only one calamity—sin."