

THE FAILURE WHICH IS SIN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 11, 1960 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The most tragic word in the English language is the word sin. It is a deceptive word, a discouraging word, a disappointing word, a disturbing word. In the New Testament the word that is used more often for the word sin than any other word is the Greek word hamartia. Hamartia simply means sin. The apostle Paul used it sixty times in his writings. The noun form which I have given you is paralleled by the verb form hamartanein which means "to sin." The word was not invented by the apostle Paul, but used by him out of the marvelous instrument, the Greek language, which by providence had been brought to the place that it could convey God's truth to men in a way that no language before it was quite capable of doing.

The word originally meant, in classical Greek, the idea of failure. Sometimes it is translated as "to miss the mark." The illustration is of a soldier with a spear, aiming at a target. He throws his spear but he misses the mark. The idea presented in this word originally was the negative concept of failure, an aiming at something, but a failure to achieve it. In the New Testament it is given a richer meaning. It conveys not so much the negative quality of failure as it does the idea of a great power that has mankind in its grasp. It is more of an atmosphere, more of a spirit, than it is a single act.

I cannot help but illustrate it in terms of a fog. All of us at one time or another have seen thick fog. Clouds had settled so near the earth that we could not see very far. Our progress was impeded. We turned on our lights, if we were driving a car; we traveled more slowly; everything was slowed down because of the density of the fog. The New Testament word, hamartia suggests the idea of unrighteousness or evil fastening itself on the whole human race. Out of it come sinful acts, but it is more of a great power that has man in its grasp. Carrying our illustration further, as fog slows travel and impedes normal activity, so sin--hate, lust, greed, lying, murder and the like--slow the progress of mankind. Sin constantly grips the human race as fog sometimes grips a great city.

Sin Is Universal

For a little while let us look at some of the things that the New Testament teaches us about this very significant word. Hamartia, sin, first of all is universal. That is to say that you do not know, nor have you ever known, anyone who was not contaminated by sin. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." That is as broad as the human race; it includes all. There is a similar passage in I John 1:8: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Sin is not a disease that some people contract and others escape; sin is a universal disease. All have sinned. Everybody that has lived long enough to have reached that difficult-to-define age of accountability has sinned. Sin has fastened itself upon them.

A second characteristic that the New Testament emphasizes in regard to this word sin is that it is a power and that it has men under its grasp. Notice these facets, as various passages point them out. In Romans 3:9 we read this: "We before laid to the charge both of Jews and Greeks, that they are all under sin." The words used here, translated into English as "under sin," are the same words that indicate that a child is under his parents. Sometimes the same word is used to say that a soldier is under his commanding officer. So, Paul writes that just as a child is under his parents or a soldier is under his officer, we are all under sin.

Romans 5:21 uses the expression "as sin reigned in death." The word here is the word, basileiein, which means the rule of a king. As a king reigns or rules, sin reigns in this world. This world is Satan's world; he is the prince of this world and we are under his rule.

Romans 7:23 uses this phrase, "Bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members." The idea of being brought into captivity in the Greek language is the idea of taking prisoners captive, bringing them home as prisoners or war.

Romans 6:17 and 20 use the expression, "Whereas ye were servants of sin ..." The Greek word is the word, doulos, which means bondservant or slave. I cannot comprehend what it would be like to be a slave, to be told when to get up, when to go to bed, what to do, what to think, and to have no freedom. Yet, this inspired writer says, "Whereas ye were slaves to sin, bondservants of sin." As we look back through these three or four verses, there is the idea that we are under sin, that it rules over us like a king, that we are its captives, like a soldier brought home in battle, and finally that we are slaves to it.

Greatest Gift

I recalled as I made this study, a sentence from Brother McGarvey's great sermon, preached seventy years ago, "The Deceitfulness of Sin": "I would esteem above every other gift that could be bestowed upon me as a preacher the power to adequately conceive what sin is and to adequately set it before the people." I am sure what Brother McGarvey in his mature judgment was saying is something that all of us have felt to some degree. We are all against sin. You remember the statement the taciturn Calvin Coolidge made when he had returned from church services and his wife asked him, "What did the preacher preach about?" He answered with the characteristic brevity, "Sin." And she said, "Well, what did he say about it?" Coolidge's answer, at least the story says, was, "He was against it."

We are all against sin, yet we are all so involved in it. Like a fog, it is so much around us, we do not properly appreciate what sin really is and how great a hold it already has upon us. These passages add up to the fact that we are all under sin, that it is a deadly, devastating thing and that we need to be alarmed and concerned. Nobody ever thinks that his sins are very sinful. The man who gambles will tell you that it is a mere pastime. He does not mean anything by it; he is quite willing to lose as well as to gain; it is to him a way of passing a few hours in recreation. But he does not see that gambling creates a desire for more, and to gamble a little means that when he loses he will want to venture a little further to recoup what he has lost. If you have ever been around a race track you have seen the pitiful people who come as slaves to the institution of gambling. There are not many people who can gamble a little and leave it alone. It becomes a disease, a covetousness for money. Many have thus wrecked their lives.

Or maybe it is some other kind of sin--the man who uses profanity does not think it very wrong. He does not really mean it to be profanity. It is just a bad habit he picked up when he was in the army. He does not really mean to discredit God, he will tell you. Yet God's name is used in vain and it is sin and it is so deep that God used one of the ten commandments to say, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."

Sin And Law

Turning to a different facet of sin, there is a close connection between this word, hamartia which means sin, and the word, nomos, which means law. First of all the law tells us or teaches us what sin is. Notice this sentence. Romans 3:20, "Through the law cometh the knowledge of sin." Romans 5:13, "But sin is not imputed where there is no law." Interesting is this idea that sin comes when law is made. An illustration helps me at this point. Think of a road that has been a two-way street. You can go in town or you can come out from town on this road. Then the city council meets and passes a law making it a one-way street. Now to go the opposite direction on that street is violation of law; it is a sin. What made it a sin? What made it a violation? The passing of the law. Sin is made by the passing of laws, and sin is made known by the declaring of those laws. Hence, these sentences from Paul, "Through the law cometh the knowledge of sin." "But sin is not imputed where there is no law." The law, in a sense, created sin.

In another sense the law creates sin. Human nature is such that when there is a restriction there is often a tendency more than before to want to do the things that one has been restricted from doing. I think I have seen that in young people. When you declare, "You cannot do this," you make them want to do this more than before. Let me read to you a longer passage from Paul on this phase of the subject. "Howbeit, I had not known sin, except through the law: for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet: but sin, finding occasion, wrought in me through the commandments all manner of coveting; for apart from the law sin is dead. And I was alive apart from the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died; and the commandment, which was unto life, this I found to be unto death: for sin, finding occasion through the commandment beguiled me, and through it slew me."

Augustine's Confessions

Way back in the early centuries Augustine did something, as a little boy, that he later told of in his *Confessions* which will illustrate this point. He and some other boys on a very dark night went down the road to a neighbor's orchard and there they stole quite a sizable number of pears. As he wrote of it later on, he said, "We did not need the pears; we ate a few; we carried the rest home and threw them to the pigs." He said, "We did not need the pears because we had more and better pears in our own orchard." Why then did he steal them? For the excitement of stealing, because it was forbidden. "Forbidden fruit," we say, "tastes better." And so in a certain sense this idea of the law creates a desire to sin.

You might say that the law, the law of Moses, was like a doctor who could diagnose a dreadful disease but had no power to cure the illness. The law of Moses told us, "Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal" and all the rest, but it had no power in itself to save us from killing and stealing and the other things. The law was like a doctor who could diagnose, but who had no curative power for this particular illness. Only Christ can save us from sin.

Sin Brings Death

Were there enough time in this study, I would like to emphasize the deadliness of sin and that sin costs man his soul's salvation. Just a sentence, "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned." (Romans 5:12). Also, "For the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23). We are speaking at the moment of spiritual death. Sin brings spiritual death.

Christ Brings Life

The law makes sin known, but only Christ can save us from sin. That is what Christianity is all about, and that is why I preach concerning Christ and his message. We are sinners and there is nothing that we can do about this deadly plague that is in our members except to come to Christ and let him cleanse us from our sins. In Matthew 1:2-21, the angel said to Joseph, "Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name

Jesus: for it is he that shall save his people from their sins.” That is why Jesus came, that the power that had us in its grasp might be broken, that we might be saved from our sins.

Notice another sentence or two from the scriptures. Acts 3:19 says, “Repent ye therefore, and turn again... “ Can you finish it in your own minds? “... that your sins may be blotted out.” Or Acts 22:16, “Why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins.” It is not the water, but it is the blood of Christ that washes away our sins. We make contact with the blood of Christ when we obey his commandments to become Christians. Become a Christian and wash away your sins. Another passage, I John 1:7, written much later by the apostle John says, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sins.” This is the glorious good-news of the gospel, that we can be cleansed of our sins. Acts 2:38 says, “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins.”

There is not a man alive who has not committed sin. We can do it in thinking impure thoughts, or we can do it even in thinking on things that are all right, but to the exclusion of the things that are of God. Many a man is decent and fine, but he has excluded spiritual matters. That is the sin of omission. We can do it in our minds by the attitudes that we hold; the hypercritical attitude that even some Christians hold is sin. We can do it in our words. Destructive words, words that condemn, words of anger, words of hate are sin. We can do it in our acts by failing to do good, and by doing wrong.

Conclusion

Sin is about us like a terrible fog and only Christ can keep us clean. So this word, hamartia, is used sixty times by the apostle Paul alone. It is the most deadly, dangerous word in the language. As Christians we rejoice that we have been made clean and we dedicate ourselves to keeping clean by coming often to the house of God, by reading God’s word, by prayer and by righteous living. This lesson closes with Christ’s invitation to the person who is not a Christian to come and be washed clean. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you are good enough, because no man is good enough until the blood of Christ washes him clean. Come and confess the name of Jesus, repent of your sins, be buried with him in baptism and be raised with him to live this new kind of life. Will you come?