

## **On Sinfulness and Perfection**

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From an abstract, purely logical viewpoint, we sin when we decide to reject the will of God and choose what we ourselves desire. We bear responsibility for our choices, and so, we deserve punishment when we sin. And likewise, I suppose, we should acquire merit for our righteous choices.

Existentially, however, there are few or no purely logical choices, few or no unhampered decisions. Most of the time when we decide to sin, we are in the grip of desire or revulsion. We can build a complex and reasonable argument at the time to justify our sin. But when we examine ourselves afterward, we see that the foundation and structure of the argument was desire for the goal of the sin or to keep away from ourselves what we repelled from ourselves by our sin.

Desire perverts clear thought. When we are gripped by desire, or by revulsion—its opposite—we are held helpless slaves of the power of the emotion. We can do destructive, sometimes tragic, things then, as for example, when my friend H., in an argument with his twelve-year-old daughter, shot himself in the head before her eyes.

Jesus understood this pathos of sin. It's true that he taught us to "be perfect." But he did so not because he expected anyone to actually attain perfection, but as an encouragement for us—to set for us a goal, an end to keep ourselves focused on. In truth, he knew that human perfection is unattainable. Indeed, he taught that "no one is good except God" and with these words, denied even his own human goodness—recognizing in doing so that we are good only to the extent that we become transparent conduits of God's goodness flowing through us to others.

We can never be good. There is always a whiff of self-enhancement or self-benefit in the charitable, loving things we do. The best we can do is to "repent and be saved" by the Cross of Christ. Our best selves are helpless and fully reliant on the goodness of God for forgiveness, for protection, for direction, for embrace in the loving arms of Christ. Our best is not what we do, but who we admit that we are, in truth. Our best is this: "I was helpless so he saved me" (Ps 116).

Whenever we seriously consider ourselves near to perfection of virtue, we open ourselves to self-satisfaction, to pride, to superiority (and to clericalism, if we are clergy). In our consideration of our own virtue, we have no need of repentance, except of the ritualistic formulas, which we might interpret as the contrition of a virtuous heart. We have no need for grace; we believe that our achievement of virtue stands us in good stead with God. We are righteous in our own estimation. We have no need of the Cross of Christ. We think that it has done its work successfully in us.

In this kind of thinking, our pride deceives us. The Cross of Christ is our life-raft in the churning sea of sin. We must cling to it tightly, knowing that only it, not we, can save us.

The Cross of Christ is the singular sign of the boundless love of God for us. It says, “See how much I love you. I will give everything I have—my very life—for you.” – As Christians, we may openly claim to give our assent to this truth. However, we may know this truth in our belief without accepting it in our hearts. We may hold ourselves back from the unfathomable, inexhaustible love of God for us—perhaps because the possibility that it could really be so frightens us with its power; possibly (more probably) because we recognize ourselves as unworthy of the love of God—as sinners deserving punishment rather than love. But that’s just the point. “While we were yet sinners, he died for us.” We can never on our own be anything other than sinners, and we will continue to sin in our weakness. Nonetheless—nonetheless—our God opens himself to us and invites us into his love.

We have just two possible responses to this infinite divine love. Either we can continue to hold ourselves back, to resist his invitation, and that is sin in itself—to resist God’s will that we throw ourselves into his love. Or else, we can do just that. We can bravely step into the loving light of God and accept that the immensity of his love is pouring out on *me*. Regardless of my sin, regardless of my unworthiness, he floods me with his grace, and that grace washes me clean and frees me from everything—including my own sense of unworthiness—everything that holds me back from him.

The point is that we must not be timid. We must plunge into the pool of God’s love. We must shuck off from ourselves our guilt and unworthiness, and stand naked in the healing love of God. We must want God’s love so much that we throw off all our fears and hesitations, and violently take God’s grace by force. We must ask; we must seek; we must knock; we must push open the door of our hearts and walk through into the light, or we will forever remain outside in the dark.

The psalmist offers us God’s invitation: “Open wide your mouth and I will fill it” (Ps 81). When we open our mouths in this way, as above, God will fill them with the fruits of the Spirit, with peace, love, joy, kindness, and all the others, inexhaustibly. And we will rejoice that we have come home, that we are in the loving presence of God, at home in the house of the Lord.

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