

THE SCARS OF SIN

by Ray C. Stedman

Some time ago one of our youth leaders and I were discussing problems that were present in our young people's groups. Among other things, this man said,

"You know, our youth are very responsive in many ways; certainly they know right and wrong. But one thing baffles me. Many of them have the attitude (they openly admitted this) that if there is something they know to be wrong, but they very much want to do it, they will say to themselves: 'I'm going to go ahead and do it, and afterward I'll ask God to forgive me.'"

"What can you do about an attitude like that?" he asked.

Let me bluntly reply that anyone who says something like that betrays a vast ignorance of what sin is, and the results that inevitably follow it. I do not want to leave the impression that this is a problem for young people only. I am sure that without exception every one of us has had this reaction to temptation. Very probably most of us have succumbed to it at one time or other, for this is a widespread attitude among young and old alike. Perhaps it is to the credit of young people that they are honest enough to admit it upon occasion, whereas we older ones cover it over with an excuse, or hide it deep in our hearts and never admit that this is the attitude we often reflect. But if we take the attitude, "I'll go ahead and do it and trust God to forgive me, cleanse me, and wash my guilt away so it will have no evil effects," it does betray that we are in the grip of satanic delusion. We have already succumbed to the wiles of the devil and have no real understanding of what sin is or what it does.

This is what we shall examine together today:

- What sin is, and
- How it acts,

especially in respect to this common reaction.

I want to begin by saying that I do this sympathetically. I am not sitting in judgment or condemnation upon any individual, for I sit with you under the judgment of the Word of God, where all Christians must sit if our lives are to be pleasing to God at all. One of the Beatitudes says,

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." {Matt 5:8}

The word *pure* does not mean someone who has never been exposed to evil. It means literally "the purged" in heart. Blessed are those who have been cleansed, those who know the grace of forgiveness. As David put it so beautifully in the 32nd Psalm: "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute iniquity," {cf, Psa 32:2}. It is in this attitude that I examine this subject now as one who has felt, with you, the full force of temptation, the seductive allure of some desirable thing (sin always has its pleasures -- that is what makes it so attractive) and heard the whisper of the hidden voice within that says, "Oh, go ahead, you can be forgiven afterward."

What is sin like, and what happens when we give way to temptation? According to the Scripture, what happens when we decide to cast our lot on the side of evil, to entertain a wrong desire that has risen within us, and translate it into an action? It is clear that several things occur.

1. First, we always go farther than we intended to go. This is invariably true when we choose to sin. It does not make any difference what kind of sin is involved. I am not speaking specifically of any one

kind of sin, for you can apply these principles I am going to be giving you to any kind of sin, whether it be to tell a lie, to rob a bank, to be false to a friend, to betray someone's confidence, to give way to gossip, to become wrongly involved sexually. It makes no difference whatever it may be, any sin will do. Always, the first thing that happens is that we go farther than we intended to go.

We all know how this is. Which of us has not told a lie, intending to tell only one lie, but before the day was over we found that that one lie forced us to tell another to support it, and then another, and yet another. Before the thing was over, where we had intended to tell but one lie, we ended up telling twenty-five, each one worse than the one before. We have all felt, as one little boy once put it, that a lie is an abomination to the Lord, but it is a very present help in time of trouble. But as we look back on our lies, we discover that they are not a help at all; they have taken us much farther than we wanted to go.

This is true with other types of sin as well. It is easy for a young couple, a boy and a girl, to go riding together in a car. They meant only to hold hands or exchange a kiss or so, but before they knew it they were in the grip of a force that carried them further than they wanted to go, and sometimes as far as you can go. When that happens there is guilt, remorse, and shame, and other evil things that follow, and there is the realization that they have fallen into the trap of the devil. This is exactly what Paul had in mind in the sixth chapter of Romans when he said, "Do you not know that when you yield yourself as a servant to something, you become the slave of that which you obey," {cf, Rom 6:16 RSV}. Sin has a gripping effect. We give way to it and we think we can keep it under control, that it will only take us so far and then we will draw the line and stop. But we discover that the Word of God is true. We cannot draw that line. We go further than we intended to go. That is the first result of sin.

2. The second is, we invariably expose someone else to danger or to hurt. Remember that story in the Old Testament of Abraham, the man of God, called of God out of the land of Ur into the land of Canaan to walk in fellowship with God and to live with him in the land? The first thing that is related about Abraham after he came into the land is that a famine arose, and Abraham's faith in God as the provider of all his needs was put to the test. Abraham failed the test, and we read that he forsook the land and went down to Egypt. The first thing he did in Egypt was to tell a lie about his wife. As we have the story, Sarah was a beautiful woman. The amazing thing is that at this point of the story she is sixty-five years of age, yet she was still a beautiful woman. Abraham said to himself, "I know these Egyptians, these licentious rascals. If they see my beautiful wife the king will want her for himself," {cf, Gen 12:10-13}. So he told Sarah to tell a lie and say that she was his sister and not his wife. It was only a half-truth but a half-truth is always a half-lie. She actually was his half-sister.

What was the result of that lie Abraham told? Immediately it got Sarah into trouble. Pharaoh, seeing her, said, "Here's a beautiful woman. I'd like to add her to my harem. And isn't this nice? She just happens to be the man's sister and not his wife, so I'm free to take her for myself," {cf, Gen 12:14-16}. Abraham's lie was the very thing that opened the door to expose Sarah to the shame and ignominy through which she was dragged. Fortunately, God intervened and stopped the process before it went too far, but Abraham was called before Pharaoh and publicly rebuked for his folly {cf, Gen 12:17-20}.

Because we are tied up in one bundle of life with all of our friends and relatives, even, in fact, with the whole human race, what we do always affects someone else. If you had watched, as I have watched, the agony in parents' eyes and seen the tears they have shed over the folly into which their children have fallen, you would know what I mean when I say that when we sin we always hurt someone else. Sin is not a private affair, it always touches someone else. No one can sin in private, for God who sees the hearts always works to uncover that which is hidden. Eventually it all comes out, to the hurt, damage, sorrow, and despair of others whom we didn't mean to hurt at all.

One of our Sunday school teachers told me not long ago that she was on the verge of quitting her class because the children would not behave, and would not pay attention. She was a good teacher, and they liked her very much. They didn't mean to do any harm, but were simply expressing their good spirits. She had told them how hurtful this was to the class, but they loved the feeling of talking and disturbing, and they wanted to satisfy themselves. They didn't know what they were doing, but they

drove the poor teacher to distraction until she was almost ready to quit. They almost made it impossible for her to continue, and were thoughtlessly wrecking a wonderful learning experience that would have meant much to them later. This is but another example of how thoughtlessly and carelessly we can spread danger and hurt on every side.

3. There is also a third thing that happens when we sin. Notice that these things are not optional, they invariably happen whenever we choose to sin. The third effect is that we find that repentance becomes increasingly difficult. The longer we go on, the more we give way and choose the evil, the harder it is to turn around or stop, the harder it is to cast ourselves upon the forgiving, redeeming grace of God, and to stop the evil thing. In fact, if we go on too far this way, we may find it impossible to turn around. This is the thrust of the warnings that are found on page after page of the Bible. Five times in the book of Hebrews alone you will find this kind of a warning note, "Be careful! If you go too far you will find that you cannot come back."

This is pictured for us in the story of the Old Testament prophet, Balaam, who was attracted by the money that was offered him to curse Israel. He knew it was wrong to curse Israel, he did not have to seek the mind of the Lord about that. He did not need "to pray about it," as some of us glibly say when we know a thing is wrong. You do not need to pray about things that are revealed. Balaam knew it was wrong to curse Israel, but he wanted the money. So he came to the Lord and asked him for permission to go. God said "No," but Balaam decided to go anyway, and he went. On the way he found God's angel blocking his road. So stubborn was he that God had to give sound to a dumb animal and speak to him through his donkey before he would stop and turn around {cf, Num 22:22-31}. Sometimes God must treat us rather roughly because we will not listen. We have turned a deaf ear to his word and we find that it is easy to keep on doing so. So one of the disturbing things about the nature of sin is that once we get started on a wrong path we find it hard to turn around.

But now, supposing you do turn around. Suppose, at this point, you do see the folly you are engaged in, and you do not want to go any further but are genuinely repentant about it and come to God and confess it to him and forsake it. Even here we can kid ourselves. We may say to God, "Please, forgive me, I did this thing," yet, down in our hearts, we have every intention of doing it again at the next opportunity. Let us remember that we are dealing with One who reads the hearts. He knows what is going on down there and he pays no attention at all to the words that come from our lips. All the evil, guilt, and shame will still be present in our lives, even though we have asked for forgiveness with our lips. God reads the hearts.

But suppose we find genuine forgiveness? Suppose we do repent (which means to turn around) and we stop the evil thing, what happens then? Immediately all the estrangement that was between us and God is gone, and we are restored to a sense of fellowship with him. Our guilt is removed, we are cleansed and we do not need to beat ourselves over the head any more. We are washed, and set free, and, in God's sight, treated as though the thing never happened. That is the amazing wonder of forgiveness, that we can find genuine relief from the inner torment of our hearts and are set free. But does that mean the thing is all ended and that nothing more will happen to us as a result of that sin? No! There are still certain inevitable results which must occur. God's forgiveness does not affect these because they are part of another aspect of God's character -- his function as moral governor of the universe.

4. What are these things? First, or rather, fourth in our overall list, despite the fact that we have been forgiven and restored to God's favor, our sin has left a permanent area of weakness at one point in our life. Once we have given way to temptation it will forevermore remain an area of weakness where we can easily give way again. It does not matter how long we live: It will remain an area of weakness. We can fall again, and more easily than we did the first time. That explains why Abraham, some thirty-odd years after his lie in Egypt, finds himself in a similar predicament with the king of the Philistines and does the same thing all over again; he lies about his wife. The time in between when he walked with God did not make any difference. We are capable of being again whatever we once were, whenever we fall back into the flesh. Sin leaves a permanently weak place in the wall, and we will forevermore have to fight a particularly difficult battle at that point. It does not mean that we have to fail, or give way again. By God's grace, we need not. But we will always find ourselves peculiarly subject to temptation at that point.

That is why young people who give themselves to a dissolute, rebellious life where they try everything once, will find that when they come back to living with Christ and walking with him, they will be engaged in severe and difficult battles that seem unending, and which they would never have had to fight had they not fallen into those sins. Those who have come out of a life of blatant and open wickedness and come to Christ and been forgiven, sometimes talk about those former sins as though one had to experience all this in order to realize full forgiveness, and the wonder of God's grace and riches in Christ: Nothing could be further from the truth. God can show us what he has kept us from, as well as to take us out of it. As we mature in the Christian life, and see how God's protecting hand and our obedient heart have kept us from things that would defile us, we can have as great an appreciation of the wonder of God's grace, the fullness of his love, and the richness of his Person as we could ever have had if we had sunk to the depths of sin. Besides, we will not have to fight the severe battles with temptation that are otherwise involved.

5. The fifth effect that sin has is that when we fall into evil deeds there are certain temporal blessings from which we are forevermore permanently excluded. Now, notice, I said temporal blessings, i.e., certain advantages or blessings which we could have had in this life but from which we are excluded permanently because of our fall.

The preeminent Biblical example of this is Moses. In leading the people through the wilderness he found them in need of water. God said to him, "Strike the rock and the water will come forth," {cf, Exod 17:6}. He did this, and the water came gushing forth to meet the needs of the people. Some time later in the wilderness wanderings they came again to a place of great thirst. But God said to him this time, "Go and speak to the rock and the water will come out," {cf, Num 20:7-8}. Moses was angry at the murmuring of the people and, in his anger, instead of speaking to the rock, he took his rod and struck it again. God immediately rebuked him. He said, "Because you have not seen fit to glorify me in the eyes of this people, you are unfit to lead them into the promised land," {cf, Num 20:11-12}. When they came at last to the edge of that land and Moses saw it lying before him, he asked God to release him from his restriction. But God said "No," he would not. It was to be a permanent restriction. As long as Moses lived he could not do that which his heart was set upon doing, because of his sin.

The grace of God is evident on the Mount of Transfiguration for when our Lord Jesus was there with his disciples, there appeared also on the mount, Moses and Elijah {Matt 17:1-5, Luke 9:28-33}. In his resurrected body Moses was permitted to enter that which he could not enter in his physical body, for that remained as a permanent restriction to Moses because of his sin.

This is what Paul means, also, at the close of the ninth chapter of First Corinthians, in which he has been speaking about his own life and ministry. He says, in effect. "I'm running a race to win. I don't want to lose it. I'm not fighting as one who shadow boxes, as one who beats the air in vain, but I pummel my body, and bring it under subjection. I insist that it obey my will lest, having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified, disapproved," {cf, 1 Cor 9:24-27}. Most of us read that as though Paul means that he is afraid God will lay him aside, out of the ministry. Surely this is a possibility and it could have happened to him, for it has happened to other servants of God who fall into gross sin; God sets them aside and they are no longer permitted to minister. But I do not think that is all it means. Paul is recognizing that in whatever degree he gives way to the indulgence of the flesh he is to the same degree disqualified in some form of ministry.

I know what this means. I have felt myself disqualified at times. I cannot help people with a certain kind of problem because of things I have done in the past. I have disqualified myself in that area. This is the danger which lies before us all when we give way to evil.

6. Then a final thing, number six, is the effects of sin in human life. The long-range fruit of evil must be reaped. Remember how Paul wrote to the Galatians? "Do not be deceived" {Gal 6:7a RSV}, that is, don't kid yourself about this and don't let anyone else kid you about it. "God is not mocked" {Gal 6:7b RSV}, i.e., God is utterly faithful to himself, he is utterly dependable in what he says he will do. "Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap. If he sows to the flesh, he will of the flesh reap corruption" (death, emptiness, frustration, boredom, evil) {cf, Gal 6:7c-8a}. "But if he sows to the

Spirit," he shall likewise reap a crop, the quality of life that is eternal -- "eternal life," {cf, Gal 6:8b}. That is what is called the law of inevitable consequences. When we sin, even though our relationship to God is restored in forgiveness, and God promises to go with us through all the results that will follow, nevertheless, these results will still follow.

This was very vividly dramatized when a father once took his son out to the garage and drove a nail into the wall. Then he said to his son, "Son, pull the nail out with this hammer." The boy took the hammer and pulled the nail out. His father then said to him, "Now, pull out the nail hole."

Yes, certain aspects of sin can be changed, but not all. Because God is a moral governor as well as a loving Father, certain results must be allowed to continue to establish and vindicate God's righteousness.

We find this occurring in certain places of Scripture. When David lusted after Bathsheba and, as king of Israel, did that terrible thing that led first to adultery and then to murder, though it was confessed and we have in the wonderful words of the 51st Psalm the expression of David's wholehearted confession of his evil before God, yet God said to him, "The sword shall never depart from your house," {2 Sam 12:10b RSV}. It proved to be true. The next thing David knew, his own son rose in rebellion against him and David had to flee before Absalom. Then warfare broke out among David's generals. For the rest of David's life there is unceasing warfare, bitterness, and battle from which he cannot escape.

By the way, is it not interesting that the greatest and godliest king that Israel ever had did exactly the same thing as the most wicked king they ever had? King Ahab saw something he coveted, just as David did. He plotted for Naboth's vineyard and committed murder to get it {cf, 1 Ki 21:1-14}. David did the same essential thing. What a revelation of the nature of the flesh! In this good man, David, and this evil man, Ahab, you find exactly the same reaction when confronted with temptation.

There is another experience out of David's life that reveals this same principle to us. In the last chapter of Second Samuel, almost the last event in David's life, he was tempted to number Israel. That does not look very serious to us, but it represented a departure from trusting in the arm of the Lord to a trust in the arms of men. The king was tempted to number his men so he could see how big an army he had with which to confront the enemy, and he was thereby expressing a doubt in his own heart of the faithfulness of God to give Israel deliverance regardless of how many men they had. That is why this was so important. David succumbed to the temptation and numbered the people. When the census was finished and the account was in, he was smitten in heart because of his guilt and confessed it to God. God sent the prophet Gad to David to say to him, "Because you have done this thing, I'll give you a choice among three punishments. You may choose three years of famine; or be pursued by your enemies for three months; or you may choose three days of pestilence among the people," {cf, 2 Sam 24:10-14}. David did a very wise thing. He said, "I can't make a choice like that, I don't know enough. I'll commit myself to the hands of God. God is merciful and gracious. Let him choose the one that is least dangerous and the least painful." Do you know which one God chose? He chose pestilence among the people for three days. A plague broke out that night in Israel and before it was over 70,000 people had perished for David's sin.

I am sure the severity of that sentence was due to the prominence of the king. When a king sins it is much more dangerous than when someone else does. The higher our position, and the more publicly exposed it is, the greater will be the results, the harvest, of sin.

This is why the Bible says that elders must be publicly rebuked if they sin, whereas other Christians' sins can be dealt with in private. If a pastor, an elder, or a leader sins, he is to be rebuked openly that others also may fear. God never treats sin lightly. It is that evil thing in the heart which has required the sacrifice of the Son of God to remove. Therefore it is a deadly, dangerous thing. It comes upon us, as we are so often warned in Scripture, as a snare, as a wile, looking to be innocent and attractive but really filled with viciousness, vileness, foulness, filth, hurt, pain, darkness, and death. That is why the exhortation of Scripture is to put our trust in God as would a little child. We do not need to

understand the nature of sin in order to avoid its evil effects; all we need do is to trust in the Lord, and, like a little child, obey him whether we understand what the results will be or not. Just obey him, that is all.

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and lean not to your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will direct your paths. {cf, Prov 3:5-6}**

7. I must add one other thing. The Scripture reveals to us that sin also affects the generations to come. God declared in Deuteronomy that he "visits the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation," {cf, Deut 5:9}. Again, this is but a recognition that we are all one big bundle of life together. Just as the blessings of the fathers are passed along to the children unto the third and fourth generations, so are the sins. What we do may show up in our children, or our children's children, as weaknesses or as areas of temptation to which they need not have been exposed had we chosen to walk in fidelity to God.

I say this to show us all, my own heart included, what a terrible thing sin is. We cannot glibly pass it off by saying, "Oh, well, it really doesn't make much difference. I'll go ahead and do it; God will forgive me." He will, he will! If there is genuineness of repentance, there is not a sin that cannot be forgiven, nothing evil that cannot be washed, nothing that cannot be cleansed in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. But with it will come these inevitable consequences that will darken the heart, shorten the opportunity, and remove from us possibilities we once could have had.

The restoring grace of God may open new doors of opportunity in other ways. God may give us occasions to grow and ways of maturing that we would not have had otherwise, but we can never remove the nail hole; it always remains.

What do you think about it?

Is the game worth it?

Isn't it best to trust a loving Father who warns us faithfully?

Let us obey him! That's the name of the game, isn't it? Obedience! Trust and obey.

Prayer

Our Father, our hearts have been made solemn as we have looked together with you at this matter of evil. It is not a light thing; it is a serious thing so serious that it took the mystery of the darkness of the cross to even make a dent in it. But that was enough. If we walk in the light of that cross and in the judgment that comes upon the evil in us, we can be kept from much heartache and much sorrow. We thank you, Father, that your restrictions upon us are not prompted by a desire to limit us but rather, to give us freedom; not prompted by a desire to hurt us but to help us and to keep us from harm. So we trust thee anew, Our Father, and commit ourselves anew, men and women, boys and girls together, that we might walk in obedience to you, loving you and trusting you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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