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DEGREES OF SIN AND THEIR PUNISHMENT

THE QUESTION is often asked, "Is there any special punishment for thieves, murderers and other criminals, or will they, if repentant, be received into the Kingdom along with those who have tried to do right throughout their lives?"

This question can be viewed from two standpoints. God Himself is the great Determiner of right and wrong. Everything that is right God approves; everything that is wrong God disapproves. The things that God approves are those things that are good, helpful and favorable for everybody. The things that God disapproves are the things that are wrong, unjust, injurious to every one. Therefore God has condemned certain things as sin, because He would have us free from those things that are unjust or injurious to ourselves or to others. Whoever, therefore, commits sin, violates, first of all, a Divine command, and to that extent has a certain penalty attached to him for that wrong doing.

We speak of certain persons as "sowing their wild oats." What does this expression signify? It means that they are now contracting habits which are injurious, not only to their own health and happiness, but probably to that of others. As a result of practising sin they are sure to bring upon themselves a degradation of both mind and body. Thus sin brings its own reward in a natural way. Whoever sins will suffer, is the general Law. But aside from that Law, there is a God, who has given certain commands and certain penalties that go with those commands. [R4991 : page 93]

WHO ARE THIEVES AND MURDERERS?

God's standard of righteousness is much higher than is man's present standard. Our Lord gave very fine meanings to the words "thief," "adulterer," and "murderer." He taught that anyone who is angry with his brother without a cause is in danger; that he who looks

upon another's wife with impure desire has committed adultery. (Matt. 5:22,28.) These are very fine distinctions. Moreover, we must all admit, as Shakespeare has said: –

"Who steals my purse steals trash;

.....

But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed."

Many people have been guilty of stealing the good name of others; many have been guilty of murder in the sense that they hate others. When it comes to the point of deciding who are the most guilty murderers and thieves, we are not competent to judge, for we are not able to know the qualities of mind and the weaknesses with which each person was born. God only could tell the degree of wrong in any of these cases. There are some people who are, we might say, naturally good; others seem to have been born with less patience. Some who, naturally, would not get angry with their brother, nor with any one, as soon as some one else would, may never be in danger of committing murder, either literally or figuratively; for they are born with the quality of forbearance.

As these may not manifest any special patience [R4991 : page 94] more than that with which they were born, so others may manifest special qualities because of the condition in which they were born.

The world has learned the necessity of restraining those who are injurious to others. The judgment of the people of the State of New York is, according to the law, that no murderer shall be at large. He shall be confined; for a murderer is not a safe person to permit in society. Therefore, he is put into prison or is executed. This is the general judgment, outside of God's judgment. The best thing for him and the world in general is that he go down to *hades, sheol* – the great *state of death*, where he cannot murder anyone else. The

Scriptures agree with the laws of the State of New York, that if a man commits heinous crimes he should be punished.

GOD IS TRAINING THE JUDGES NOW

But so far as taking the position of a judge is concerned, we are not capable of doing this. God alone, at the present time, knows how much more worthy of punishment some are who are in prison than some who are out of prison would be for something else. The offense of the prisoners might outwardly be the greater crime; that of those who are not confined might be just as great a crime from the Divine standpoint; for they might be sinning against greater light and ability. No one but God could tell. Therefore, "Judge nothing before the time." – I Cor. 4:5.

When is "the time"? People are always glad to get the chance to judge others. Someone may ask, "When may we have the chance to judge? We would like to have it now." We reply, "Yours is the wrong spirit. Get rid of it or you will never be a judge at all. God is selecting another class to be judges – a saintly class that will be fully satisfied to judge nothing before the time, but to leave everything to Him. He says, "This is the kind I want. I will select them." The Apostle says, "Know ye not that the saints shall judge the world?" – I Cor. 6:2.

We shall judge the world, not now, under present conditions, but after we shall have been changed in the First Resurrection, changed in a moment. The Apostle explains what that change will mean to us – "Sown in weakness, raised in power; sown in dishonor, raised in glory; sown an animal body, raised a spirit body." (I Cor. 15:42-44.) When we reach that condition of bodily likeness, as well as character-likeness to our Lord, we shall be His associates, His Wife, the Royal Priesthood. Then there will be plenty of time for us to judge the world. All the lessons we get now will only develop us for that time. All the experiences we have with ourselves – you judging *yourself* and I *myself* – the better we shall be prepared for the opportunity which God will give us by and by.

A JUDGE MUST POSSESS PERFECT SELF-CONTROL

Whoever has not learned to *rule his own spirit*, is in no condition to rule others. Whoever has not learned to judge *his own heart motives* and has not put a restraint on them to the best of his ability, is not prepared to sit in judgment upon another. Those who are now being selected of the Lord are not by nature free from imperfections, but have many of the same weaknesses that others have.

Nevertheless, they are seeking to judge themselves, to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, to get self-control, or as the Bible says, to "overcome." All those who will be with the Lord in Kingdom glory and power and the work of the Millennial Age will be "more than conquerors through Him that loved us" and bought us with His own "precious blood." – Rom. 8:37; I Pet. 1:18,19.

Various qualities of murder, lust, covetousness, etc., are more or less seen in the unbalanced mental and moral conditions resulting from the fall. We see how this is operating in the whole world. Some are so mentally unbalanced they are put into asylums. Some are so morally unbalanced they are not permitted to be at large, but must of necessity be put into prison. Others are able to be about in the world and have their liberty, but they are not sound of mind. "There is none righteous; *no, not one*" (Rom. 3:10), is the Bible declaration.

Since we have learned to appreciate the Bible teaching, to see that a great fall came upon our race six thousand years ago, and that all are born in sin and "shapen in iniquity and in sin did our mothers conceive us" (Psa. 51:5), it gives us a great deal of sympathy for many poor people; and as we have more strength of character, mentally and morally, than some of them, we thank God and say, "Who hath made thee to differ?"

We were, perhaps, born differently from many; and what we did not get by heredity, we got through grace; so our strength of character is not of ourselves. It is all by God's grace that we are better than

others; and it is not for us to glory, but to give thanks. So we have sympathy for murderers, thieves and vagabonds in general; and we believe the Lord has.

This does not mean that we have the kind of sympathy which would say, "Open wide the prison doors and let every one out!" No, no! Some who have received the Truth while in prison have asked us to intercede in their behalf, that they might be released; and we have answered that we were not sure but that they were *better where they are*; for in prison there is less temptation than in the world. Liberty is a good thing; but it brings a responsibility and additional trials as well.

SIN AND DEATH ARE HEREDITARY

As we consider the weakness and sinfulness of humanity, the question naturally arises, "*Why is this so?*" The Scriptures, not the Evolution theory, give us a satisfactory answer to the question.

When God placed our first parents in the Garden of Eden, He made this proposition to them: "If you do right, as I command, you may continue to live; but if you do wrong, contrary to My command, you shall die." Our first parents disregarded the Divine command and were disobedient. God immediately sentenced them to death. Death was the penalty of disobedience. In other words, God said, "If you are a sinner I will not permit you to live. Those to whom I wish to grant eternal life are those who will gladly obey My Law." For, as Jesus said, true worshippers will "worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him." – John 4:23.

But in addition to having the death sentence passed upon him – whether that death come sooner or later – Father Adam received other punishment, aside from that penalty. Ejected from the Garden of Eden, he was brought into contact with thorns and thistles; he labored with sweat of face; he had the sorrows and troubles that come with the decaying body. All these things were the result of sin.

But so far as God was concerned, the penalty of sin was the death sentence merely. In effect God had said, "You are not fit to live; you are not fit for everlasting life; you shall not have everlasting life." But through the sacrifice of His human nature, Jesus, by the grace of God, has tasted death for the whole world [R4991 : page 95] of mankind – Adam and all his children, all of whom will ultimately be redeemed from God's sentence. They will be redeemed from death in order that Jesus may, during His Messianic reign of one thousand years, lift them up out of sin and degradation.

THE TRANSGRESSOR MAKES HIS OWN WAY HARD

But do you ever think to what extent man degrades himself? To that extent he will be more degraded than is necessary; and whenever the time comes for his uplifting, the lower he is, the more difficulty there will be in getting him up again. Since God's arrangement for lifting mankind out of the death condition is that he must help himself, each man must labor to rise from his degradation, and must be assisted in his labor. But by his own efforts he must get out of the difficulty. No man will get out by saying, "I would rather be out of this and have life." The way back to perfection will be an up-hill way. It will not be the narrow way of the present time – darkness on every hand, a strait gate, etc. – but a highway, an upward way, something favorable to the person going up. He cannot roll up, but will be required to put forth some effort to get up. He will not be required to put forth so much effort in a month or in a year or in ten years, as we have to put forth, but he will have a good share of the thousand years of Christ's reign in which he can gradually rise up out of his imperfection. [R4992 : page 95]

We, on the contrary, are required to turn from sin to righteousness and to make a full sacrifice of ourselves to the Lord. Then we must walk in the Narrow Way to the best of our ability. In this we have the Master to help us; but ours is a short, sharp period of fiery trial; and if

our trial is hard, we have the assurance that there is a great reward to those who come off victorious in this battle against self and sin.

In a word, then, when people die, that is the end of things, in one sense of the word, and not an end in another sense of the word. When a man is dead he has come under the full sentence of the Law, for the Law said, "Thou shalt die."

THE WORLD'S HOPE IS THE RESURRECTION

A junk heap represents the condition of humanity, as well as it can be represented. Some people will go to a junk pile and find a great deal of value there; they can do something with this, that and the other thing. Our Lord is the greatest Restorer ever known. When His Kingdom is set up, He will take over the world of mankind, approximately 20,000,000,000 of humanity – Adam and his children, all in their broken, fallen condition; and then the great work of refreshing and restoring will begin. The sawing, the hammering and the filing, if you please, will continue during the whole thousand years of the Millennial reign.

So, you see, the condition into which a man gets himself now has a great deal to do with his future. Many will be so degraded that when they come forth from the tomb they will have a very difficult time. Some of these are mentioned in the Scriptures. We are told that some will come forth to shame and lasting contempt. There are many people who will come forth to shame. After they had died, many have been found to have been defaulters; many people have been found to have indulged in very criminal acts; yet perhaps no one knew it while they lived. These things came out after their death, and some things may not have come out yet; but we may be very sure that when the Lord's time shall come for the general opening up, there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed. Therefore, *keep your records as clear as possible*. Whatever is *there* will surely be made *manifest*, is the Lord's declaration of the matter.

When the world's history shall all be known, some that we have thought to be very honest, just people, we may find to have been just the reverse; and others who may have been thought to be dishonest may be found to have been very honest. The judgment of the world is not always right. This is one reason why the Lord warns His people not to judge at the present time. We are not competent now. The Lord will judge in the future. When that time comes and the whole world of mankind are brought forth to have their trial before the "Great White Throne," the books will be opened. Then some will have shame, and some will have great contempt, which will last just as long as they are contemptible. How long will they be contemptible? Just as long as they remain in the wrong state of mind. But if they will obey the terms and regulations of the Messianic Kingdom they will rise daily out of their degradation and meanness, coming back more and more to the perfect likeness of God in the flesh, as represented in Adam.

As mankind rise from their fallen condition, so this contempt will pass away. At that time people will perhaps say, "Well, you know he was a very wicked man in his time. He suffered contempt when it was first realized what a degraded character he was." Or, "She was a wicked woman, but now see what a change has come over her! See how well she has gotten along! See what *effort* she is putting forth! See what *character* she is developing!" And all will rejoice to see the change.

By the end of the Millennial Age, one who was in shame and contempt at the beginning will, if he has taken the right course, have been lifted up above it. We see the principle illustrated in the Scriptures. Saul of Tarsus was in shame and contempt because he was a murderer and blasphemer. But *we* do not hold him in contempt. Neither do we hold St. Peter in contempt because he denied the Lord. At that time it will be said of the world just as we say of the Apostles when we see what wonderful characters they were afterwards. When the world shall have been brought to a knowledge of God and His righteousness under the favorable conditions of the Kingdom,

restitution will take out of them all imperfections and give them all the good qualities that God originally gave to the perfect man, when God said that he was "very good."

WHO MAY ENTER THE KINGDOM

But do not the Scriptures say that no murderer shall enter the Kingdom of God? Yes. The Scriptures state that murderers will not be in the Kingdom, that they will be outside – have no part in it – "without are murderers," etc. (Rev. 22:14,15.) This statement does not signify that a man who has once been a murderer might not reform and become a saint and an heir of the Kingdom. We have already referred to one murderer mentioned in the Scriptures, guilty of the murder of St. Stephen, Saul of Tarsus, who afterward became one of the most notable Apostles. He was a murderer, the responsibility of Stephen's death lay at his feet. He was a member of the Sanhedrin and approved of the stoning of Stephen, without which approval the latter could not have been stoned.

So when we read that no drunkard or murderer or robber shall enter the Kingdom, the New Jerusalem, how shall we understand it? In this way: that when during the Millennial Kingdom all mankind shall have the opportunity of coming into harmony with God, those who maintain a sympathy or love for unrighteousness of any kind will not have Divine approval. They will not be **[R4992 : page 96]** permitted to enter within the gate of the City, which symbolically represents the Kingdom and the Divine favor. Originally, Jerusalem represented the Church. "I will show thee the Bride, the Lamb's Wife"; and "the wall of the City had twelve foundations [foundation stones], and in them the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb." (Rev. 21:9-14.) But into that City there would be brought the good only.

So all the world of mankind who will come into harmony with God will come into that City, into the New Jerusalem and Kingdom of God, and outside of that City will be found all impure characters. We have them pictured in this statement, that liars and murderers, etc.,

shall have their portion in the "lake which burneth with fire and brimstone." This "lake of fire and brimstone" is as symbolical as is the City. As the City is not a literal city of gold, neither is the lake a literal lake of fire and brimstone. That City was pictured by Jerusalem, and the "fire" by *Gehenna*. As the offal of the literal city of Jerusalem was put into the Valley of Hinnom for *destruction* and for the purification of the city, so all the offal of the Millennial Kingdom will be destroyed and be kept outside of the Golden Jerusalem. That will be a *glorious Kingdom*, free from anything that would be a blight or blemish or sin; and all who love unrighteousness, in any sense of the word, will be destroyed in "the lake of fire," which is, we are told by the Revelator, the Second Death. – Rev. 21:8.

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