

S I N

BY

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IN dealing with our conscience we try to remind ourselves of the fact that it is almost impossible to be sure to what extent we are answerable for the evil of our lives. We never know with what bias or handicap we start life. God only knows. He knows what is beyond our personal control. We can't really tell—we may be worse than we think ourselves, we may be better. We can only make a shrewd guess with no certainty. We don't even know whether we are in a state of grace or not; we can't go by feeling—self-complacency—there are no internal or external signs. We can be pretty sure we are trying, but we don't know for certain.

It is best to leave it to our Blessed Lord. When he was asked whether a large proportion of people would be saved he said, 'Strive *thou* to enter by the narrow gate'. All we have got to do is to strive to redouble our efforts, the rest leave to his support, and his mercy. We are unable then to gauge the amount of evil in us, but what do we mean by evil? What is sin? What is it that destroys our work? 'Sin', St Augustine tells us, 'is any thought, or deed or word or omission contrary to the law of God'. 'If you love me, keep my commandments'. That is the only way in which we can show our love. His commandments given in the Old Law and amplified in the New. 'Thou shalt not kill, but I say unto thee whosoever is angry with his brother is a murderer'. Our Lord explains the commandment: before, murder was forbidden, now uncharitable speech is forbidden—not destroying, filling out the Old Law. Any violation of those laws constitutes sin. There is a distinction between grave and venial sin. To constitute grievous sin three things are necessary. Grave matter, full knowledge, full consent. If either condition is missing the sin is not grave but venial.

Sin is contrary to the commandments, a violation of them, but this is still far from its real meaning. There is a certain degree of coldness associated in our mind with a law, but not only is sin contrary to law, it is contrary to love. It is so much easier to obey the command of someone we love. If we don't love them we may have a struggle to obey, to give up our own independence; if we love them their slightest suggestion is sufficient, we are anxious to be of service. Our whole view of obedience is considerably altered according to our personal

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relationship to that authority—not quite right, perhaps, but that's how we are. In the commandments we have got to consider not merely what is the law, but who is giving the commandment. 'You are my friends'. 'Greater love than this no man has, that he lay down his life for his friend'. We are addressed by our Lord in terms of friendship. The Old Law was given in great majesty and awe, God wanted to terrify them. On the Mount of the Sermon our Blessed Lord reveals to us *his* law. It is still severe. 'I say to thee'. He speaks with authority, but he asks from us obedience in love—*love* not terror. The commandments already given to us are filled out in greater detail, in *love*, spoken by the lips of him who later hung upon the cross. God tried first fear, and then drew men to himself by the cords of Adam. We are to obey that law out of love, the first and only commandment.

We must obey out of love. To go to Mass on Sunday because we must is law, not religion. There must be in my heart a general attitude of love and gratitude, desire to serve him. 'If you love me, keep my commandments'. 'The only way I want my commandments kept'. Now when we sin we do something contrary to his love. He takes a mean advantage of us—goes and dies for us and then turns round and says 'Now, will you obey?' 'He has first loved us'. Now he says to us, 'What are you going to do?' Sin is the meanest of actions. Suppose they who lie in the fields of France on the other side of the Channel asked something of us, could we refuse when they died to save us? Don't look upon it as law, but as the request of a friend. We are affected by the request of those we love. He ventures to make his appeal and we should not be hurt, but moved by gratitude. So sin is unutterably mean and petty. He has gone to the outer edge of affection. 'Having saved you I now ask you—' law coming to us from the lips of love. Never let go the fact that sin is really a desperate act of selfishness. If I examine I shall find that what I have done is selfishness—not done against God deliberately but because we don't care. 'It is asking too much', we say. Remember first of all what he has done before he asks obedience from the Cross. Our only safeguard is to insist upon this with ourselves. We have our tale of daily usual sins, realise what acts of meanness and selfishness they are. *Self* I am thinking of—not the God who has died for me.

The thought of sin is undoubtedly a depressing thought. In retreat we are struck by our own failing to live up to grace. So much that is wrong in our lives could have been staved off without much effort. Our inspiration must spring from our love of the law Giver. Yet though sin is a depressing and discouraging subject we believe in the existence of God—powerful—merciful. So we must believe in the final triumph of God. God is love, and love is stronger than death or

jealousy. Over this world is Goodness Absolute—synonymous with power. The existence of this omnipotent Goodness is a pledge to us that God must triumph, and so, however hard pushed, we have no grounds for laying aside our persistent efforts, for giving up hope. I have failed—done a great deal of mischief, but that is no motive for losing courage or hope. God is in his world and *should* be able, *must* be able, to draw good out of evil. Were he not able he never could have allowed sin to come into the world. He would not be God at all. Whatever evils are in the world God must let them be and in some way or another he means good to come of it. He let evil come because he saw good to come. It is a mystery. In some way evil ministers to his plan. Evil in some fashion or another does not wholly destroy his plan—not only physical evil—death, pain—but moral evil, sin. There is hell, but even that must minister in some way to his glory.

God lets us fail in this and that—perhaps only so we shall learn mercy to others—otherwise that fatal complacency of the Pharisees. We are unprofitable servants at the best, conscious of our own desperate weakness, however much our vanity is hurt. God is of infinite goodness and will never deny me any grace necessary to my salvation. He is always holding out to me mercy, always asking me to return. No one is lost but through his own fault. We have no business to lose courage in life. God is by our side. God is in his world—in our heart—folding us in his wings. So we must go on, not presuming on his goodness—relying on it, clambering out of evil by the steps God has placed there. God has denied us nothing necessary and so we turn to him all through life. However sunk in evil the world was, it always shrank from evil—twin basis of hope—something in man which revolts from evil, longs for a still better way and is moved by goodness in others, respects it.

God is over all; however much we may see the shadow darkening it, over all is God's power. So sin should never discourage or depress. Sin is a human weakness and God is over all sin and weakness of man. Mercy and Strength—God.

Our personal sin when it seems to spoil our life must not be left at this. Sin is worse than that, worse than we can ever know; nevertheless we must *never* lose hope or courage. Sin is our act—mercy God's. Our reliance is not on ourself, but on God, and out of darkness breaks—must break surely—the dawn of hope. 'To err is human, to forgive divine'. To sin, to outrage the love of God. Mercy is God—it is only love, isn't it? sitting with tears in its eyes.

And so we look back on the past, forward to the future with eyes of hope, and out of the future comes the life that still remains.