

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH VI: 5-6

(Reading: Romans 7:7-25)

What Sin Brings Us To

Henk Hanegraaf tells the story of a Christian lady who had been born blind. After coming to faith in Christ, she joined a church that had been infiltrated by a new teaching. It wasn't long before they were telling her to confess perfect sight and commanding God to honour His Word. When nothing happened, they began to denounce this woman for her lack of faith. They told her that there was something in her life that hindered God's will. God, they said, was held up because of some point of sin or disobedience that He just couldn't get around until she straightened up. That lady wrote, "I spent hours, sleepless nights, agonising over the issue. I became depressed and began to lose my joy. I even quit praying. Some Sundays I simply couldn't stand church because I felt like an outsider in God's family, watching His pet children get "blessed" because of their 'Faith.' If I was doing or not doing something that hindered God, I was at a loss trying to discern what it was. 'God!' I said in utter despair, 'What do you want me to do?'" In time she realised that God had never forsaken her. Her blindness was not as a result of her sin, and the real problem was not her lack of faith. Actually the real problem was that church's lack of understanding.

They do not see the scriptural truth we confess in the fifth Article of this sixth chapter of the Westminster Confession. As we read there about sin: "This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned and mortified, yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin."

The Effect Of Sin Stays With Us

That's why in considering Article 5 we note, THE EFFECT OF SIN STAYS WITH US. You see, regeneration doesn't bring freedom from indwelling sin in this life. That believers are pardoned for Christ's sake doesn't relieve sin of its sinfulness. Even though we become somewhat subdued of the power of sin - which is what being 'mortified' means - it's present nature hasn't changed. It's still as evil as ever!

So, why do so many churches get it wrong? How is it that there are believers, like this blind woman, being condemned for suffering as a result of some unknown sin? It is because of an error called 'perfectionism'.

Now, they believe with us that we are new creatures in Christ. 2nd Corinthians 5 verse 17 expresses this when it says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" This was what we heard in Romans 7 verse 22 when Paul said, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law."

But 'perfectionism', like so many errors, takes it further than God's Word says. It teaches that a believer is not only a new creature in Christ, but a new creature from which all sin is gone. Naturally, like so many heresies, they use Scripture to support their views. But they always end up using Scripture in a way that devalues it. Job becomes a loser - someone who didn't become wealthy and healthy again until he stood on his faith. The apostle Paul is said to be responsible for his own sickness. In his case, the sin is said to be a tendency to boast. And yet 2nd Corinthians 12 tells us plainly that the thorn in Paul's flesh was given to Paul to keep him from boasting - not because he boasted.

The apostle John is quite definitive in chapter 1 of his first letter about this. In verse 8 there he says, in response to some early church perfectionists, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” And in verse 10 there he’s even stronger: “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”

Scripture’s testimony is unequivocal – it’s clear-cut. Even those known as the greatest of saints – Paul and David – acknowledged that their sin was always with them. They show that being pardoned through Christ actually involves you in a real life-long struggle with sin. We don’t get away from it until we are called from this life.

Then there is another error that comes up here. This is commonly known as ‘antinomianism’.

Here is a believer who won’t claim to be perfect. He could even openly admit to the most scandalous things. But it’s not his fault. He blames it all on the “old nature”.

Now, he will also refer you to the apostle Paul here. Actually that passage we read out – Romans 7 again. He’ll point out to you verse 17 there. There it says “As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.” He’ll claim that shows this. And he’ll say verse 23 is the same.

There Paul says, “but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.” And so the antinomian will say that this shows we can’t help it. It’s the old man in us.

But this completely ignores how Paul takes the blame for this situation. In verse 14 there he says “I am unspiritual”. And in verse 18 he says, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.” So Paul doesn’t try to shrug off the blame on his old nature. While he acknowledges that these sins do come from the old man he knows he has to fight against them with the new man. That’s what you’ll find the apostle also teaching in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3.

In someone who isn’t saved sin rules. But in the Christian the Spirit of God and the law of God are in charge. So while sin is still around it’s not in control.

We can think here of someone who has become so sick that he is about to die. At the last possible moment, though, he gets help. He receives the medical treatment he needs. He gets that life-saving surgery or the special medicine. Now he is going to live.

But to look at him straight after surgery or when he first gets the medicine he still looks quite frail. His healing has a long way to go. But he’s going to live. He will get better.

There could be times his health will have relapses. It could be that he will need to keep going back to the doctor every six months for the rest of his life.

That’s like the effect of sin on the believer. Paul at the end of Romans 7 acknowledges this. He knows he’s still far from that perfect health. “What a wretched man I am,” he cries out in verse 24.

Believer, don’t underestimate the power of sin. The devil may be a dying creature but isn’t an animal at its most dangerous when it is close to its end? You have to watch out then! He’s got nothing to lose!

The Judgment On Sin Is Death For Us

Satan knows very well that THE JUDGMENT ON SIN IS DEATH FOR US. This is our second part. For here we move to consider Article 6.

Isn’t it this which the world loudly tells us? For all its pretence at looking good and living long, the very day you’re born is the beginning of your death!

In the late 18th century there was a well-known Christian who was doing his O.E. – his ‘overseas experience’ - through Europe at the age so many people do that, when they’re young adults. In Paris, though, he was suddenly infected by a terrible illness. One of the specialists there was quickly called. He saw straight away this would need special treatment – a care that would have to be done by a well-qualified nurse.

They didn’t know anyone there so they asked him for one. The doctor gave a recommendation but added that she was in much demand. That friend went straight away to the nurse’s home.

Fortunately she was home. He told her the situation and asked her to help.

“Before I come with you,” she said, “let me ask one question. Is your friend a Christian?” “Yes,” he replied, “indeed he is - a Christian in the best and highest sense of the term, a man who lives in the fear of God. But why did you ask that?” “Sir,” she answered, “I was the nurse who attended Voltaire in his last illness, and, for all the wealth of Europe, I would never see another infidel die.” Voltaire was a famous philosopher who didn’t believe in a saving God. He thought he could do it all himself. But at the end of all that he’d done here he knew it was all in vain. The judgment of death freaked him out!

As it should do. “Every sin,” says Article 6, “both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all its miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.”

You see, if sin can be forgiven and washed away only through grace, it’s obvious that in itself sin deserves punishment. Scripture proves this with the punishment threatened upon sin even before sin came into the world, in Genesis 2 verse 17. And right throughout its pages, it constantly declares the judgment of God against sin - whether that judgment happens in this life or in the next life, after the Lord comes on the great day of judgment.

It’s noticeable, though, that through-out human history, man has always tried to separate what we do from the end result of it. So there’s been this attempted separation of work and reward and sin and punishment. As indeed evolutionary thought has brought, because under this view none of us is a free rational-moral being. You’re not responsible for your actions - it was all determined by your background. And being descended from an animal, what did you honestly expect?

So no one can be blamed for anything. It was the way they were brought up. It was the influence of alcohol - or the drug ‘P’.

And so it’s not sin. They’re said to be sick. They need counselling. But they’re all going to die. And even before they get to that end there are all those other things they suffer on the way - the pain in child-bearing, the work we have to do, the sicknesses, the injuries, the losses, and so many other disappointments.

As Herman Bavinck writes, “Instead of becoming spirit, man became flesh through sin. Now his life is a shadow, a dream, a watch in the night, a span, a step, a wave of the ocean which comes up, breaks, and disappears, a ray of light that shines and is gone, a flower which blooms and wilts away. It really is not worth the full and glorious name of life. It is constant death in sin, a death in sin and trespasses.”

And all around us we see the same. Despite what the greenies might say, there is harmony between man and his environment. For the earth on which we live is broken, too. That’s what Romans 8 verse 20 tells us. As does Lamech in Genesis 5 when he calls his son “Noah”. In verse

29 there he says he named him this because, "He will comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed."

We are far from heaven - but it's not hell either. And yet it's hell where this world's heading! The believer knows that because he has been saved from that. And the unbeliever shows that because he doesn't see his own sin. As Paul describes them in Ephesians 4 verse 18, "they are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardening of their hearts."

An artisan once made a goblet in the bottom of which was fixed the model of a serpent. It was a serpent pictured as coiled for the cruel spring, a pair of burning eyes in its head, its fangs ready to strike. The cup consisted of the best gold. It was made with the best possible quality of workmanship. But never did the thirsty man who raised that cup to quench his thirst suspect what lay below. That is, until when he reached the dregs that dreadful head confronted him.

You see, it's not when you look on the brimming cup of temptation and sin that you see its power to hurt you. It's when the cup is empty that the serpent of remorse, guilt, despair, and punishment rises with its ghastly menace upon the astounded soul. Then the wages of sin are paid out in full! Hebrews 9 verse 27 says, "man is destined to die once, and after that to receive judgment." That's for us all - saved and unsaved - unless the Lord returns first!

For the unbeliever it will confirm what they have lived all along, because they have lived apart from God. And then they will be eternally apart from God.

But don't think that because of what you are in Christ that you'll get away. You'll see then how far you fell short of God's glory. You'll know it was only His grace in Christ that saved you. And then you'll really fall on your face! There before His throne you'll see it all. You were really that bad! A sinner - no less!