

Infirmities and Sins

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In "Christian Witness"

In many minds, evangelical perfection or perfect love is eclipsed by confounding infirmities and sins. What God has, in His Word and in man's conscience, put asunder, some people are perpetually joining together. Then they assert that sanctification is too high a state for men while dwelling in earthly tabernacles. Many times has this distinction between infirmities and sins been pointed out by theologians, but so infirm or so wilfully obstinate are multitudes that they fail to set the dividing line. We sit down to disentangle these confused ideas, hoping that we may help someone to a solution of a difficulty in the way of his full salvation.

1. Infirmities are failures to keep the law of perfect obedience given to Adam in Eden. This law no man on earth can keep, since sin has impaired the powers of universal humanity.

Sins are offences against the law of love, the law of Christ, which is thus epitomized by John, "And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another," (I John 3:22). Hence the Spirit convinces the world of sin "because they believe not on me." The sum total of God's commandments to men with the New Testament in their hands is, faith in Christ, and its proper fruit — good works. However dwarfed and shattered by sin that poor drunkard is, so long as he is this side the gates of hell, he is under the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, who imparts to him the gracious ability to trust, love and obey the Lord Jesus. His refusal is sin. So long as he has any capacity for love however small that is called his "whole heart". The law of love says to him in tones of authority, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." Hence, every one is under obligation to be evangelically perfect. Refusal to love with the whole heart is the ground of condemnation, and not inevitable failures in keeping the law of Adamic perfection.

2. Infirmities are an involuntary outflow from our imperfect moral organization. Sin is always voluntary. "Ye will not come unto me that ye may have life," "Men love darkness rather than light."

3. Infirmities have their ground in our physical nature, and they are aggravated by intellectual deficiencies. But sin roots itself in our moral nature, "springing either from the habitual corruption of our hearts, or from the undesisting perversion of our tempers."

4. Infirmities entail regret and humiliation. Sin always produces guilt.

5. Infirmities in well instructed people do not interrupt communion with God. Sin cuts the telegraphic communication with heaven. The infirmities of unenlightened believers, being regarded as sins, may produce condemnation and sunder communion, by destroying confidence in God. Thousands are in this sad condition.

6. Infirmities are covered by the blood of Christ without a definite act of faith, in the case of the soul vitally united with Him. Sins demand a special resort to the blood of sprinkling, and an act of reliance on Christ.

7. Infirmities are without remedy so long as we are in the body. Sins, by the keeping of Christ, are avoidable through every hour of our regenerate life. Both of these truths are in Jude's ascription, "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling [into sin, or as the Vulgate reads, sine peccato (without sin)], and to present you faultless [without infirmity, not here, but] in the presence of his glory with exceeding joy." Jude understood the distinction between faults or infirmities, and sins. In his scheme of Christian perfection, faults are to

disappear in the life to come, but we are to be saved from sins now.

8. A thousand infirmities are consistent with perfect love, but not one sin. "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret [unconscious] faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous [wilful or high-handed] sins; let them not have dominion over me; then shall I be upright [Hebrew, perfect], and I shall be innocent from the great transgression," (Psalm 19:12, 13). Here the Psalmist expects to fall into errors and unconscious faults, and he prays to be kept from known and voluntary sins.

Hence it is evident that sins are incompatible with David's idea of perfection, and that unnoticed and involuntary errors or faults are not. This distinction is strongly confirmed by an inquiry into the facts of David's life, and God's verdict respecting his character. In I Kings 15:5, we are assured that he "did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him, all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite." From all "presumptuous sins," save one, David was kept. Notwithstanding his infirmities, he did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, with one sad and solitary exception.

But when God sums up the life and character of King Asa, he makes no exception to his perfectness, declaring that "the heart of Asa was perfect all his days," (II Chron. 16:17). Yet we find that he failed to perfect his reform by taking away all of the high places of idolatrous worship; that he was angry with Hanani, who rebuked him for his lack of trust in God against Baasha, King of Israel; and that he put him in prison, and oppressed some of the people who, probably, regarded as factious or disloyal in their sympathies with the imprisoned prophet, whose rectitude of purpose Asa had entirely misapprehended. In addition, the sacred historian has recorded another infirmity, common with some of the holiest men now on earth, who employ physicians for bodily ailments and doubt that the gift of healing is still available: "In his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians," (II Chron. 16:10-12). Doubtless, many of his contemporaries saw great imperfections in these outward acts, these mistaken judgments and severities in administration; but the Lord, who looks at the heart, chisels on Asa's tombstone this enviable epitaph: "Perfect in all his days." We aspire to no better. Is it impossible for us to achieve under the Gospel what it was possible to accomplish under Judaism? If so, then what has Christ procured, and what has the Holy Spirit bestowed which should make His dispensation more glorious?

When we look into the Gospel, we find Jesus making this very distinction which we have made in this article. Of the traitor who wilfully betrayed Him, He said, "It had been good for that man if he had not been born," but to the sleeping disciples in Gethsemane, He hinted no destiny of remediless woe in the tender words: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Judas had sinned; Peter, James and John had been overcome by an infirmity. Paul makes the same distinction in these two precepts, "Them that sin, rebuke before all, that others may fear," (I Tim. 5:20). "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak," (Romans 15:1).

The moral sense of mankind makes a distinction, not in degree, but in kind, between forging a note and falling asleep in prayer meeting, or forgetting to keep a promise, or disproportioning food to exercise, or indulging too long in sleep, in having an impure dream, or a wandering

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