
The Nature of Sin

Philip Henry

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Philip Henry (1631-1696), father of the famous commentary writer, Matthew Henry, was born at Whitehall, London, and studied at Westminster School and Christ Church in Oxford. In 1653 he went to Flintshire, North Wales to serve as preacher at Worthenbury Chapel and as tutor to the sons of John Puleston at Emral. He was ejected from his living in 1662, then was forced underground in 1665 by the Five Mile Act. He was not able to resume a regular ministry until 1672. In 1681 he was fined for holding conventicles and imprisoned briefly. After James II proclaimed liberty of conscience in 1687, he preached daily at Broad Oak in Flintshire and in neighboring areas.

Philip Henry was not as prolific as his son. His most famous book, *Christ All in All*, was reprinted recently in two paperback volumes. After his death in 1696, several of his manuscripts were published, all of which are now scarce works. These include *Eighteen Sermons* (1816), *Skeletons of Sermons* (1834), *Expositions upon Genesis* (1839), *Remains* (1848), and *Diaries and Letters* (1882).

The Nature of Sin

*“How then can I do this great wickedness,
and sin against God?”*

—Genesis 39:9

This chapter is concerning Joseph, who is here represented to us in the very mouth of a temptation, and yet wonderfully preserved and delivered from it. I say *wonderfully*. It was no less a wonder, all things considered, for Joseph to be tempted and not to yield, than it was for the three children to be in the fiery furnace and not be burned. But the Lord, who was with them in the fire, was with him also in Potiphar's house, and so he escaped.

We may consider the *temptation* itself. It was the sin of uncleanness: that sin, which, of all others, we may suppose most suited to Joseph's present age and condition. To his age, as he was young, in the prime of his youth; to his condition, as he

was single and unmarried. This was the temptation. The devil studies and knows mankind. In fishing for precious souls, he can tell what bait is most likely to succeed, and that he makes use of. Wherefore it concerns us to take heed to ourselves, and to watch in a special manner for those sins which we find most easy to our nature, that Satan may not get an advantage over us, for "we are not ignorant of his devices."

We may consider the *tempter*. It was his master's wife (v. 7). Had it been another, it had not been so much. This added greatly to his danger, if we look upon him in his present relation, as a servant. Thus he might have reasoned with himself: "If I yield to my mistress in her desire, besides the sensual gratification, I shall gain a friend in her. I am a stranger in Egypt; sold hither; and such a friend is worth having. On the other side, if I yield not, I must never look for a quiet hour: she will tell tales of me to my master, and I shall be turned out of doors." What a temptation was here! The devil does not only study what temptation to send, but by whom to

send. He tempts by such as have most power over us and interest in us. He tempted Adam by Eve; Job by his wife; our Lord Jesus by Peter. Therefore in this also we must take heed.

We may consider his *escape*. "He refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; there is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Two things struck him as to why he should not yield—ingratitude against his master, and sin against God. "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Doctrine I. Where there is truth of grace, there is unwillingness to sin against God.

So it was with Joseph here. He was a renewed, sanctified person—one that had the truth of grace. When a temptation was offered, a very plausible, fair temptation,

yet he had that within him that turned another way with dislike and disdain. "How *can* I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"

There are two special acts of the will—to choose, and to refuse. As it is with our hands, there are two uses of them: the one, to take things; the other, to put things away. In like manner it is with the will. The corruption of it stands in this—in our taking the evil, and putting away the good; in choosing sin, and refusing Christ. This is the case of every man until he is effectually called and sanctified. "Let me have sin," is his language, "let whoever will, have Christ, let my lust be satisfied; no matter what the command of God is. Give me Barabbas." As the imagination of the thoughts of the heart is only evil, and that continually; so the bent and inclination of the will is only toward evil, and that continually.

But now when the Spirit of grace is given, and the good work is begun, it is no longer so. There is a great and wonderful change wrought. The stream is turned the

contrary way: that which was *towards* sin before, is now *against* sin. You would think it strange if the brook that runs by the town should quite alter its course, and from henceforward run the other way. Why, a stranger thing than that is brought to pass, when a poor soul, formerly addicted to vanity and wickedness, is quite turned around, and now hates and abhors it. This is conversion. "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

What is it to be converted? To be converted, is to be turned, changed. Not only in the outward conversation—that is not enough to evidence a man's conversion—but in the inward bent and inclination of the heart. The *will* is converted. Is thy will converted from sin? Here lies the main of the work. They that shall be saved are such whose will is converted from sin. This is what I mean by the doctrine, Where there is truth of grace, there is unwillingness to sin against God.

I. I shall speak something by way of caution and explication, for the right understanding of this doctrine, in four particulars.

1. Notwithstanding that the will of a child of God is converted from sin, yet he may and doth sin.

No mere man, since the Fall, is able, in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God; but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed. "There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not." This Paul acknowledges concerning himself: "The evil which I would not, that I do." It was through grace that his will was against sin; it was through corruption, that, notwithstanding that, yet he did sin. This our Lord Jesus pleads for His disciples: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Though they slept, yet it was against their bent and inclination.

2. Though he cannot properly be said to sin wilfully, yet he may and doth sin willingly, notwithstanding the work of sanctification upon his will.

There is a great difference between sinning wilfully and sinning willingly. That sin is committed wilfully which is committed with the free and full consent of the will—deliberately, knowingly, purposely. This is a main ingredient in the sin against the Holy Ghost, according as some understand that of the Apostle: “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.” Though I rather take the meaning to be, If ye will yet continue the ceremonies and sacrifices of the law, after the publishing and entertaining of this truth of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, you must never look for another to die and suffer, but must necessarily perish in your unbelief.

That sin is committed *willingly* which hath consent; but it is only a weak, imperfect, half-consent, as it were, with a kind of unwilling willingness. Temptation prevails; the new creature is overpowered; lust is too hard for him. As a mariner in a storm casts his goods into the sea to lighten the ship, he doth it willingly, but

he doth it not wilfully. Or as a traveller upon the road, when assaulted by a thief: he gives him his purse, but it is with a kind of unwilling willingness; he is not able to make opposition. So a child of God. Temptation sets upon him as he is going on in his way to heaven; and sometimes he is aware of it, and fights as long as he can, and after all, it may be, foiled at last. At other times again it surprises him, as David surprised Saul when he took away the spear and the cruse (1 Sam. 26). But yet, for all this, the drift and bent of his soul is against sin; and the foil he receives now makes him fight with the more courage the next time.

With him that is not renewed, it is not so. It is said of Ahab, he sold himself to work wickedness (1 Kings 21:25). Paul was *sold*: "I am carnal, sold under sin" (Rom. 7:14). But Ahab sold *himself*; it was his own voluntary act.

3. This unwillingness to sin hath not the same growth and strength in all the Lord's people.

Some are weak in the faith, and they

resist weakly; yet they *do* resist. Others are strong men, experienced soldiers in this warfare. It is with this as with every other grace—there are degrees.

4. The same believer is not always in the same frame in this respect.

There is a twofold unwillingness. 1. Habitual. This is always in him, whether he sleep or awake, or whatever he doth: he hath that in his will which is contrary to sin. 2. Actual. This may be interrupted. Though it may be in him to oppose sin, yet at present little of that opposition may appear. The ground hereof may be sometimes in the temptation; according as it is more or less suitable, or more or less violent. Sometimes it may be in himself, according as the temper of his spirit is. Now,

1. After the enjoyment of God in an ordinance, a Christian's unwillingness to sin is heightened exceedingly. As after eating honey the mouth is out of taste to other things; and as looking much upon the sun dazzles the eye to all sublunary objects for a time: so when the believer has

feasted on heavenly dainties, when he has had a view by faith of the Sun of Righteousness, he has a distaste for earthly things, especially for those which are sinful and vile. How well Peter was resolved after the sacrament—though it is true, indeed, before morning the impression was worn away: “Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended” (Matt. 26:33).

2. While under the hand of God in an affliction, this unwillingness to sin is in general greatly increased. Where there is no grace, in a time of affliction men will be more unwilling to sin than at another time—even the worst of men. Come to them when they are sick, or in pain, and tempt them, though it be to a sin wherein formerly they have delighted, and they will scarce have patience to hear you. “When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and inquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer” (Ps. 78:34-35). In like man-

ner is it with God's people. As a child, while the rod is over him, is peculiarly careful not to offend, so it is with them. Not that this is all the cause of their unwillingness to sin, but it proves an occasion to increase it, embittering sin to them the more.

II. I shall prove the truth of the doctrine, that where there is truth of grace there is unwillingness to sin against God.

It appears, 1. From the prayers of God's people.

Prayer is the pulse of the soul. As prayer beats, so we may judge the soul to be sick or well. One "said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee" (Matt. 26:73). So it may be said of Christians, their prayer bewrayeth them.

There are two things ordinarily in the prayers of God's people, which discover their wills are against sin. The one is—those petitions which they put up for strength against sin. When a town expects a siege, and sends up and down before-

hand to their neighbors for provision, corn, ammunition, etc. it is a sign they intend to stand it out. So the Christian seeks divine help for the combat. David prays for himself, "Strengthen, O God, that which thou hast wrought for us" (Ps. 68:28). "Let not any iniquity have dominion over me" (Ps. 119:133). Thus Paul prayed for the Ephesians: "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man."

The other is, those petitions which they put up for deliverance from sin: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). What is the meaning of those many hearty sighs and groans after the appearance of Jesus Christ, whom they love and long for, unless it be this—they are weary of sin; loath to continue longer grieving the good Spirit of grace? O "make haste, my beloved."

2. From their practices it is also apparent. They are such as practice a continual

war with sin; and thence it appears they are unwilling to sin. While a man struggles, and strives, and fights with an enemy, it is a sign how loath he is to come under his power. As before conversion there was struggling, and striving, and fighting against Christ, which did evidence the enmity of our hearts against Him, and made it manifest we were not willing that He should reign over us (Ps. 2:1-2); so after conversion, when the soul struggles, and strives, and fights with sin, it is clear we account it as an enemy, and are unwilling to be servants and slaves to it any longer.

Now it is thus with *all* the people of God; yea, indeed, and with them only. It is so with them all. Every gracious heart is a scene of struggling—of struggling between grace and corruption, between the new man and the old. And, indeed, it cannot but be so, if we consider their opposition to each other. They cannot choose but fight. It is as impossible to reconcile grace and corruption, as to reconcile fire and water. “The flesh lusteth

against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Gal. 5:17). "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). The seed of the woman—that is, grace—and the seed of the serpent—that is, sin—can never be made to agree, for God hath put enmity between them. See Luke 11:21-22. I might here appeal to the experience of all that fear God, whether they have not found it so. Paul testified it concerning himself, time and again (Rom. 7). And therefore, by the way, be not discouraged, so as to think thy condition the worse for those conflicts which thou findest in thyself against sin: there is nothing befallen thee but what is common to all believers—rather rejoice. Many are troubled, as Rebecca, "If it be so, why am I thus?" Go on fighting; thou shalt overcome at last.

It is thus with the people of God *only*. It is the privilege of believers, such as are

made partakers of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Others are strangers to this combat. Wicked men know not what it means. In the state of innocency, Adam was not molested with it, because he had no sin; in the state of unregeneracy, unsanctified persons are not blessed with it, because they have no grace.

It may be objected, "Have not wicked men oftentimes conflicts within themselves, when a temptation is before them, whether they shall yield to it or no? Not only checks after, but strivings before?" Yes, doubtless they have. See an instance in Balaam, "And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more" (Num. 22:18). What could Joseph, or David, or Paul himself, have said more? How unwilling was Pilate to pass the sentence upon Christ! See John 18:29-38; 19:4. And yet there is a vast difference, in various respects, between the conflicts that are in

a regenerate man against sin, and those that are in another. I shall mention a few.

(1) They differ in the parties that fight. In the godly man the conflict is between the Spirit and the flesh. In the other it is not so: only flesh fights against flesh; there is no grace to make opposition. One faculty fights against another. Conscience, somewhat awakened, dictates like this, "You ought not to follow these courses: it is not well done of you to neglect prayer, profane the Sabbath, abuse the good creatures of God, lavish away your time, your estate, your health." The will is full of stubbornness, and replies, "I care not; I will do it. Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die." Here the conflict is not between grace and corruption, but between the will and the conscience. Set meat before a hungry animal, and let one stand by with a cudgel. The appetite is wholly for the meat, but the animal is afraid of being beaten, and so does not eat. So it is with the unregenerate man, when tempted to sin: his will is wholly to sin, but conscience frightens him. Whereas the regenerate

man is exactly the opposite. Set meat before a sick man: his will, led by his *senses*, moves him to eat; but led by *reason*, he forbears—it will hurt him.

(2) They differ in the matter of the quarrel, or the thing which they fight about. In a carnal, unregenerate man, the combat is mostly, if not always, about some public, gross sin: whether he shall yield to forswear himself for advantage, commit murder, or the like. But in a believer, the quarrel being taken up against sin *as sin*, therefore he fights with *every* sin. With *spiritual* sins: unbelief, pride, hardness of heart, vain thoughts. "Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart" (2 Chron. 32:26). "I hate vain thoughts" (Ps. 119:113). With *secret* sin, such as the world sees not—so Joseph here. With *lesser*, smaller sins, such as the world sees, but makes no account of: idle, vain, unprofitable discourse, petty oaths. These a gracious heart fights against.

(3) They differ in the motives that move them to fight. A carnal, unregenerate man may oppose sin; but it is either out of slav-

ish fear, out of love to himself, out of care for his credit, or because conscience will not let him alone, or the like. Here is no love to God, no eye to Christ, nothing of the new nature. And yet it were well if there were more of this in the world. Did men apprehend and believe the ill consequences of sin, what will come of it in the end, there would be no small reformation among us. But, "Lord, who hath believed our report?" Oh let us learn to look beyond sin!

Where grace is, the ground of opposition is hatred of sin as a dishonor to God. So Joseph: "How shall I!"—it is a grief to my spirit; a wound, a stain to my own soul. "Shall *I* do this?" I, who am under so many mercies?—"How shall *I* do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

(4) They differ in the event and issue of the quarrel. Notwithstanding all the conflicts that arise in the heart of an unregenerate man about sin, yet he still lives in the ordinary practice of it. Balaam had a combat within himself, whether he should curse Israel or not; and yet had

done it, if God had not over-ruled him. Pilate was loath to condemn Christ, yet he did it. See the case of Saul: "Therefore, said I, the Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the LORD: I forced myself, therefore, and offered a burnt offering" (1 Sam. 13:12).

It may be asked: "When there is actual resistance made against a sin, and yet, after all, we commit it, does this lessen the sin, or make it greater?" In a word, without question it makes it exceedingly greater. There is much presumption in such a sin, and presumptuous sins are great sins. Many deal with sin as Samson dealt with Delilah. How often did he leave her, as if he were angry with her, and return again, and they were as good friends as ever, until she proved his undoing! Just so it is with a sinner and his sins, in numberless instances. Whereas, though sometimes a child of God may be accosted, and temptation may be too hard for him, yet for the most part he comes off a conqueror, like Joseph here: "He refused."

(5) There is this difference likewise: An unregenerate man hath some conflicts within himself concerning sin; but they are a burden to him. He had rather a great deal be without them than be thus troubled. With the godly man it is not so. He rejoices in it as a mercy, and can bless God from his very soul that there is such a principle within him to fight against sin.

Use 1. This informs us what kind of life the life of a Christian is—a warfare, a continual warfare, against many and mighty enemies, and those, too, in our own bosom.

2. For trial. Let me ask you, what experience have you had of these conflicts? Is all at peace within? “No, I have many strivings!” But examine who are the parties; examine the matter of the quarrel and the motives that actuate to the fight; observe the event, and search whether you are thankful, or otherwise.

3. For exhortation. “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” We have a good cause: for the life of our souls we

struggle. We have good seconds—God, and Christ, and angels. We shall have good pay; see Revelation 2 and 3: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.”

I proceed now to observe that from the opposition, or no opposition, that is made by the will against sin, a sin comes to be either a wilful sin or a sin of infirmity.

When *no* opposition is made, but the will is wholly upon it, it is a wilful sin. Where there *is* opposition made, the will is against it, only for lack of strength grace is overpowered; it is to be reckoned an infirmity. This in general, but more particularly to shew you when a sin is to be accounted an infirmity, I premise:

1. In some sense, all sins, by whomsoever and howsoever committed, are infirmities; that is, sicknesses and diseases upon the soul. “Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases” (Ps. 103:3). “And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell

therein shall be forgiven their iniquity” (Isa. 33:24).

As diseases disfigure, weaken, and, if not cured, destroy the body, so does sin the soul. If the soul were in perfect health, as Adam’s was in innocency, and as the glorified saints’ are in heaven, there would be no sin. If it had not been for sin, Adam had still been in that state of health. Sickness and death, both of body and soul, came into the world with sin.

2. A sin of infirmity cannot be so well judged of by one particular act, as by the whole stream and course of a man’s conversation. The same sin, though often committed by one, may still be reckoned his infirmity; whereas another may but once commit it, and yet in him it may be a wilful sin.

3. No gross, scandalous sin is to be reckoned a sin of infirmity, strictly and properly. If Joseph had yielded, after all, to this temptation, though at first he refused and opposed it, it had not been an infirmity in him, because adultery is a great wickedness. That is no sin of infirmity which is a

great wickedness. Therefore they are mistaken that comfort themselves with this—though they are common drunkards and swearers, yet God passeth it by, because it is their infirmity. If a man be sick of the plague, you will not call it his infirmity. These sins are plagues upon the soul.

4. No presumptuous sin is to be accounted a sin of infirmity. These two are distinctly contrary to each other. A presumptuous sin, properly, is that sin which a man commits hoping to escape unpunished. He knows what his sin deserves—the wrath and curse of God. If he be a child of God, he knows it will break his peace, wound his conscience, and expose him, however, to temporal chastisements, though from eternal torments he may be freed; and yet, notwithstanding, he ventures. The present profit or pleasure of the sin wins him over; yea, although thoughts of what may come of it be at that very instant cast into his mind, yet he doth it. This is no infirmity: it is a presumptuous sin; a sin with a high hand. “The soul that doeth ought presumptuously, whether he

be born in the land or a stranger, the same reproacheth the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the word of the LORD, and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him" (Num. 15:30-31). He sins presumptuously that sins because he will sin. Many think it a brave spirit to say, I will do it; I will, and I care not. See 1 Samuel 8:19; Exodus 15:19; Isaiah 14:13-14. God will be as wilful as you: "With the froward thou wilt shew thyself froward" (Ps. 18:26).

5. No reigning sin is to be accounted a sin of infirmity. The Apostle counsels us, "Let not sin *reign* in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof."

There is a twofold reign of sin. In some, sin reigns as a *king*, with free consent and full subjection of the soul. So in wicked men; they make provision for the flesh. In others, sin reigns as a *tyrant*: power it hath, but it is a usurped power. As when a people live under a government towards which they are disaffected, they could wish

with all their hearts they were from under the yoke, and are therefore ready upon the least occasion to make insurrections; but their king is too hard for them. Thus it is with a child of God. He is weary of his corruptions; they are his burden, which he would fain be rid of, but cannot get free; he struggles, and strives, and fights. Sin will not let him be at peace, nor will he let sin be at peace; his *will* is toward God.

It may be inquired, "What are the signs of a *reigning* sin?"

1. That is a reigning sin which all our other sins are made to serve. When sin is gotten upon the throne it will not only exercise a commanding power over the man, soul and body (Rom. 6:13), but over all its fellows too. No lust shall be further owned and countenanced than it pays tribute to that.

The great reigning sin among the Pharisees was revenge. They knew not what to do to be revenged upon Christ, and therefore it took up their thoughts. They met often in consultation. It commanded their purse; they bargained with Judas for

thirty pieces of silver to betray Him. For the sake of this they nourished their hypocrisy. If a man's reigning sin be love of the world, swearing, lying, cheating, sabbath-breaking—all are for the sake of it, which ever it be. Though it is true there may be many reigning sins in one heart, yet commonly all are subordinate to one. It is the sinner's misery to serve many masters. See Titus 3:3.

2. That sin which doth most frequently tempt, and tempting does most easily take, is a reigning sin. Some sins the devil is obliged to cook with a great deal of art to please the sinner; but a reigning sin needs it not. It carries its own bait with it; it finds the soul like tinder, ready to catch at every spark. The sin that reigned in Balaam was desire of promotion. See Numbers 22:17-19. The sin that reigned in Judas was covetousness.

3. When a sin hath engaged a man in inconveniences, and yet notwithstanding is courteously entertained, it is a reigning sin. Love to Delilah reigned in Samson, and therefore, though she had

betrayed him three times, yet he could not choose but tell her at last where his strength lay (Judg. 16:6, etc.). Though the ass spoke to Balaam, though the angel met him, yet he goes on. When a man hath smarted for his drunkenness, and brought a disease upon him, and yet continues the sinful practice, that is his reigning sin. "They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again" (Prov. 23:35).

Use—Exhortation: Let not sin reign in thy soul. It must needs have a *place* there while thou art in the world, but let it not have a *throne* there.

Consider 1. What a dishonor it is to a man to serve sin. The baser and more ignoble he is whom we serve, the baser and more ignoble is the service. It was Ham's curse to be a servant of servants. Now what is so base as a base lust, be it what it will—uncleanness, drunkenness; to be at the beck and command of it—

where that says “go,” we go; “come,” we come. It is below a man.

2. In serving sin thou servest the devil too. Where sin hath dominion the devil hath dominion (Eph. 2:2). O how should this affect us! Shall I engage myself in the devil’s service? To have the *body* possessed by legions of unclean spirits was sad, but much more sad is it to have the *soul* possessed by sin.

3. Consider what wages sin and Satan will give their servants. If a service be hard and tedious, yet if the pay be good it is some encouragement. Thus Jacob served for Rachel. But know, sinner, “the wages of sin is death.” O how canst thou choose but fly from such a master as will give thee no other reward in the end but everlasting chains of darkness!

4. Consider, in serving sin thou refuseth all that liberty, and sweetness, and peace which are to be had in serving the living God. Two masters thou canst not serve: if thou cleave to the one, thou must renounce the other; and in so doing you forsake your own mercies. O therefore call

to Him who hath an ear open for the oppressed!

A word to those that are made free by Christ. *Rejoice* in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free. Bless God. It was a happy day of jubilee. *Stand fast* in it (Gal. 5:1).

I shall now give some positive marks of a sin of infirmity.

1. That is a sin of infirmity which is against the constant stream of a man's resolutions, prayers, and endeavors. Against his *resolutions*, and not his purposes only. 'It is one thing to purpose; it is another thing to resolve. A purpose is a weak resolution; a resolution is a firm purpose. Now when the heart is bent and resolved against a sin, and that not by fits only, and in some good mood, but constantly and habitually, and yet notwithstanding the sin be committed, it is a sin of infirmity.

Against his *prayers*. When a man calls for help from heaven, and in every prayer still this is one request—"Lord, pull down my pride, or subdue my passion: 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver

me from the body of this death?" when, if Christ should come in person and say, "What shall I do for you?" "Lord, that this lust may be mortified." In such case, when sin is committed, it must be a sin of infirmity.

No doubt, a man that hath no grace may have some kind of desires that he could leave his sin, but they come to nothing but faint, feigned desires. Cold wishings are desires in his heart, but they are not the desires of his heart. As Augustine said, he is afraid lest his prayer should be heard—not yet, Lord, not yet.

Against his *endeavors*. Resolutions and prayers not seconded with endeavors, signify nothing; but when, besides these, a man sets himself in the use of means to subdue his lust—such as fasting and watchfulness—yet, after all, he fall into the sin, it is a sin of infirmity. Endeavorless prayers are like to be as unsuccessful as prayerless endeavors. It was folly in him, who, when he had said his prayers in the morning, would then conclude himself safe—now, Satan, do thy worst. But when both go together—Moses in the mount praying,

and Joshua in the field fighting—and yet Amalek prevails, that is, the sin still be committed, it must be a sin of infirmity.

2. That is a sin of infirmity, which, after it is committed, is a man's constant grief, and shame, and burden.

His grief. When a man reflects upon what he hath done, and hath no remorse in his conscience, no sense of the dishonor done to God, that was no weakness. But when his heart melts at the thought of it—as Peter when Jesus looked back upon him—it is a sign such was a sin of infirmity.

His shame. There is a two-fold shame. There is the shame of a thief when taken. Such may be where there is no grace (Jer. 2:26). There is the shame which seizes upon a man that is fallen in the dirt; he is ashamed to come where clean people are until he hath washed himself. So it is with a child of God. It is one thing to be made ashamed; it is another thing to take shame.

His burden. An infirmity is such a sin as keeps a man low and humble, and that constantly. And this is one end why the Lord hath left these Canaanites to be

thorns in our eyes, and goads in our sides, to abase and humble us; otherwise we should be puffed up. And when it hath this effect, a blessed end is answered. As in bodily infirmities—suppose stammering, the party is not so forward to speak as others—so the Christian is kept diffident and humble by his infirmities.

3. Infirmities are such sins as are incident to all the saints. Some such there are, as vain thoughts, distractions in duty; there is not a child of God in the world that is wholly free from them. Now supposing them, as before stated, against the stream and current of thy daily serious resolutions, prayers, and endeavors, and matter of grief, shame, and burden to thee—be not discouraged. But if otherwise, they will prove wilful sins.

4. Infirmities are such sins as a man cannot avoid. Those first risings of corruption in the heart, antecedent to all approbation from the judgment or consent from the will; those inordinate motions, a thousand thousands of which pass us in a day—like the cup in Benjamin's sack, which he

knew not of—are forbidden in the Tenth Commandment. These are put by God upon the score of our infirmities, supposing them against the stream and current of our resolutions, prayers, and endeavors, and our grief, shame, and burden. For pardon of these David prays: “Cleanse thou me from secret faults” (Ps. 19:12). See Paul’s complaint (Rom. 7:21-23).

5. He that sins through infirmity, will not only bear with a reproof, but will love the reprover. It is a good sign when the stream and bent of a man’s heart is against sin, so that he can heartily say, “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head” (Ps. 141:5). Suppose two men wounded: the one by thieves; the other, as is said some beggars will do to move pity, by their own hands. Offer salves and plaisters to them: the former will count it a kindness; the latter had as soon be without them. Here is the reason: the wounds of the former are their infirmities; those of the latter their choice. So here; if sin be thy choice, it is not thy

infirmity but otherwise, if it is not thy choice.

6. Where a man's sin is his infirmity, he is full of fears lest it be worse. "Oh," saith the poor soul, "if I were but sure my sins were my infirmities, I could believe the pardon of them, and could lift up my head, and walk cheerfully, notwithstanding them; but I am afraid they are presumptuous, wilful sins; and for such there is no sacrifice!" Know for thy comfort, this day, this very fear of thine is a good evidence they are but thy infirmities. "Oh, but I often fall into them." Though thou dost, yet, notwithstanding, they may be but thy infirmities. It is true, indeed, relapses are dangerous to the soul, and a great grief and provocation to God. When a man is no sooner up, but down again, it is, in some sense, to repent of repentance; and yet such, especially where the sin is not gross and scandalous, may consist with truth of grace. The disciples, after warning, slept once and again. It was their infirmity; and Christ pitied them for it (see

Matthew 26). This is a truth—abuse it at your peril!

Whereas, on the contrary, when men will cloke and excuse even great wickedness with this: “I cannot help it, it is my infirmity; I swear and drink, to be sure!”—these are not infirmities. “Why,” such will say, “they *are* my infirmities; for I find I strive against them.” There may be strivings in the commission of even a wilful sin. Pilate strove; and yet will you say it was his infirmity that he condemned Christ? It rather greatens the sin. “But surely it is my infirmity, for I am sorry for it afterwards.” So was Esau, when he had sold his birthright; so was Judas, when he had sold Christ.

Every qualm of conscience for sin is not godly sorrow for sin. Look, therefore, what is the constant frame of the soul. A man may have a variety of clothes, some worse, some better; and yet every day he wears those which he cares not who sees him in. So it is with a Christian: though his heart may be in a better frame at some time than at others, yet he is always right in this, he hath an inward hatred against sin.

“Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” The evil which he doth he would not do.

Use. Comfort to God’s people in reference to their infirmities. Though there be much evil in them, Jesus Christ will not cast thee off because of them. “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him” (Ps. 103:13). What father is so unnatural as to cast off his child because of some infirmity? When he sends him on an errand: being weak, he stumbles and falls, and gets up again, and goes on about his business. Will he not pity? It is Luther’s comparison: suppose a man have a wart on his hand, will he therefore cut off his hand? Believers are members in the body of Christ, and their infirmities are their warts. Abraham, Isaac, David, all had their warts; and yet they were not cast off—they were accepted. “We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Then,

1. If Jesus Christ bears with us under our infirmities, so should we likewise with our brethren (Rom. 15:1; Gal. 6:1-2).

2. Learn to bear with infirmities in *the things of Christ*, seeing He bears with us. As in the administration of ordinances—suppose preaching the Word—let the sermon be never so good, if the preacher have any infirmity in his speech, or otherwise, it is not regarded. O consider: doth Christ receive duties from me, though compassed with infirmities, and shall I refuse a message from Him, because it be not delivered exactly as I like? He eats the honey-comb with the honey (Song of Sol. 5:1), and shall we be nice and dainty?

3. So likewise in reference to afflictions; how contented and patient should it make us! God bears with much in our services, and can we bear with nothing in His—not so much as a threat or a jeer? “Despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither be weary of his correction: for whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.”

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