

Sin

Lesson 1 - Psalm 51: 1- 13

Lesson 2 - Matthew 9: 9-13

Lesson 3 – Apocalypse Explained 803 1-4

Rev. Andrei Vashestov

June 4, 2006

We read in Luke 5:8-10 “When Simon Peter saw it; he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man O Lord!” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken ...and Jesus said to Simon, Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.”

In this brief story we can see, as in a nutshell, Christian doctrine about our sinful nature and Lord’s promises not only to save, but also to regenerate us for His kingdom. When Peter fell in disbelief about the Lord’s power, the Lord showed Peter a miracle, and Peter was ashamed and felt guilty. He immediately recognized this guilt as the sin of disbelief in God and even indicated his own punishment – departure from the Lord. Instead of a punishment the Lord showed him another miracle, the miracle of His unconditional love and the promises of Heaven.

Revelation about our sinful nature comes to us in the Word of God. In His Word God does not stop to remind us about our sins and does not cease His help in fighting them. The Word teaches us that sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but also a state of alienation from the Lord.

“Sinning,” we read in Arcana Coelestia 7696, “is being to do contrary to Divine order, and to avert and separate one’s self from it, thus from good and truth, consequently it also denotes not to obey the Divine and truth, for he who does not obey, averts himself.”

The awareness of sin in our lives has existed in humanity since the beginning of history. Among primitive people it was known as “taboo,” which is closely related to sin. In Biblical Hebrew and Greek the meaning of the word “sin” is similar – it is “to miss the mark”, “to cross the border” and in ethical context – “to do evil.” The English word “sin” is derived from Latin word “sons” – the guilty one, criminal. This is why the English meaning of the word “transgressor” is similar to the word “sinner.” In the Bible, to sin is “to do evil against someone,” especially God. People do evil against Him by transgressing His law and His covenant which finds its most definite expression in idolatry, forbidden by the first commandment of the Decalogue. This is why idolatry sometimes appears as the source of all sins. Sin is above all revolt, offense, irritation, and contempt against God, a violation of His covenant.

The origin of sin as well as the origin of evil is shrouded in mystery. The Word teaches that “the human himself is the origin of evil; not that this origin was implanted in human from creation; but that he or she, by turning from God to himself, implanted it in himself. This origin of evil was not in Adam and his wife; but when serpent said, ‘In the day ye eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ye shall be as God; and then because they turned themselves to self, as to God, they made in themselves the origin of evil. To eat of that tree signified to believe that one knows good and evil, and is wise, from one’s self, not from God” (Conjugal Love 444). All this is true, the evil appears when people find themselves equal to God in love and wisdom, and turn away from Him, but mystery still remains, why did they do that? Why do they turn away from the source of their life? They, who experience the direct presence of the Lord, the Divine Love and Wisdom, why do they choose evil and falsities, eternal death instead of eternal life?

The scriptural witness also affirms that sin is enrooted in human nature and human destiny. “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins” (Eccles.7:20). “Who can say, I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?” (Prov.20:9). In Psalm 58:3 we read: “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.” In Psalms14:3 the Psalmist complains – “They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one.”

The Latin Word is fairly consistent to Biblical proposition that all people are equally sinners in the sight of God. Yet it is quite apparent that this statement presupposes differences between the oppressor and his victim, between the innate liar and the moderately trustful person, between the debauched sensualist and the self-disciplined worker, between the egoist and the moderately “unselfish” devotee of the general well-being. The truth that all people are sinners does not exclude the inequality of guilt among them. Guilt is distinguished from sin in that it represents the objective and historical consequences of sin. It is the actual corruption of the plan of creation and Divine Providence in the historical world.

Obviously, people who are equally sinful in the sight of God may also be equally guilty in a specific situation. Two nations involved in war may be thus equally guilty, even though only one was responsible for the latest act of provocation. A ruthless father may be equally guilty in the disobedience of his son; an abandoned wife may share equal guilt with her faithless husband though the overt act of desertion was his alone. The doctrine of the sinfulness of all people is thus a constant challenge to re-examine our superficial moral judgments, particularly those which self-righteously give the moral advantage to the one who makes the judgment.

Obviously, we should distinguish between Sin with capital “S” or our natural inclination to evil and our evil actions in a process of ordinary life. It is important to remember that our propensity to evil is not yet actual evildoing; it is just a natural result of human contradictory nature, a state of suspension in equilibrium between finiteness and freedom, natural limitations and ability to transcend them. In this sense sin is only our susceptibility, our vulnerability, to the world, because we are free to choose our way and equally open to influences of good and evil, heaven and hell. This Divine gift of freedom ascends us above all creation, it fills us with pride for our unique status in the universe and tempts us to become equal to God. This is how our blessing might become our curse; for our freedom becomes temptation, temptation of human pride and will to power. This is why the core of sin is pride and sensuality. It is both pride in its spiritual dimension and sensuality as sin of irresponsibility, because sensuality is an attempt to avoid and hide our Divine gift, the innate human freedom.

Sin might be interpreted as unbelief, as we see in Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve trust the word of the serpent over the Word of the Lord; in the Gospels where Jesus Christ is rejected by the leaders of the Jews, in the Gospel of John chapter 20 where Thomas arrogantly dismisses the resurrection of the Lord.

Another metaphor ‘hardness of heart’ is closely related to unbelief as we see in Gospel of Mark 16:14 – the Lord “rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.” Hardness of heart here means refusing to repent and to believe in the promises of God. It connotes both stubborn unwillingness to open ourselves to the love of God, and consequent insensitivity to the needs of our neighbor. For it is written in Deuteronomy 15:7 “If there is among

you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother.”

Whereas the essence of sin is unbelief or hardness of heart, as we have already mentioned, the chief manifestations of sin are pride, sensuality, fear, and despair. Other significant aspects of sin are self-pity, selfishness, jealousy, and greed. In the early Christian church several lists of principal or deadly sins have been made. John Cassian described eight of them: gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, dejection (*tristitia*), sloth (*acedia*), vainglory, and pride. Gregory the Great’s list of seven is in a different order: Pride (the source of the other sins), envy, anger, dejection, avarice, gluttony and lust. In medieval time Roman Catholicism introduced a distinction between mortal, unforgivable; and venial, forgivable sins. Mortal sins, by commission of which a person exposes himself to excommunication from the Christian community for having offended the majesty of God were idolatry, murder, and adultery. Venial sins are violations of God’s law which do not alienate the sinner from God, but require submission to penitential discipline. The Reformers however rejected the Roman Catholic teaching. They defined sin as any act or attitude by which a person estranges himself from God. The core sin is pride. There are three forms of pride: pride of power or lust of dominion, pride of knowledge or intellectual pride, and pride of virtue or a moral pride of self- righteousness. The effects of sin are moral and spiritual bondage, guilt, death, and hell.

In psychological terms we might sense sin when we experience anxiety, yet anxiety is not sin. It must be distinguished from sin partly because it is its precondition and not its actuality. The human being is both strong and weak, both free and bound, blind and far-seeing, and involved

both in freedom and necessity. This condition between oppositions generates in him temptation to transgress natural limitations and become like God. In other words, a person is transgressing because he can, because he or she is able to do evil and move away from God.

Understanding of sin as pride is known not only to Christians. Greeks also taught about pride or ‘hubris’ as a core of human iniquity. Hubris however, is not so much idolatrous pride that proceeds from a corrupted heart, as it is the unwise self-elevation that proceeds from our vitalities of nature. Whereas hubris signifies the attempt to transcend the limitations appointed by fate, sin refers to an unwillingness to break out of our narrow limitations in obedience to the vision of faith. While hubris connotes immoderation, sin consists in our misplaced allegiance. The tragic Greek hero is punished for authentic greatness, not for unwarranted exaltation, he is a victim of fate. The sinner, on the other hand knows the good but does not do it, he is a willing accomplice in evil. In other words, he is not a pawn of ignorance but of corrupted will known as hardness of heart because, as it was nicely expressed in Emmanuel Swedenborg’s *Spiritual Diary*, “what comes into thought, but not into will is not sin” (*Spiritual Diary* 3178) .

The Latin Word teaches that “sins are not forgiven through repentance of the mouth but through repentance of the life. Sins are continually being forgiven by the Lord, for He is mercy itself; but sins adhere to the person, however much he may suppose that they have been forgiven, nor are they removed from him except through a life according to the commands of faith. So far as he lives according to these commands, so far his sins are removed; and so far as they are removed, so far they are forgiven. For by the Lord a person is withheld from evil, and is held in good; and he is so far able to be withheld from evil in the other life, as in the life of the body he has resisted

evil; and he is so far able to be held in good then, as in the life of the body he has done what is good from affection” (Arcana Coelestia 8393).

The New Church doctrine of sin is important not only to New Church people, not only to Christians, and even not only to believers of other religions in general. Unbelievers and secular people as well with the recognition of our falling state might better understand tragic events of our time as well as multiple nervosas and depressions of individuals. To open their eyes we need only to translate this doctrine from language of theology into language of psychology. Obviously, this secularized version will be just an approximation, because doctrine of sin is Divine revelation about human nature. This revelation teaches us that a person might sense, but cannot recognize and distinguish sins in himself because, unfortunately, humans used their reason not so much for recognition of their falling status as for self-defense and self-gratification. In order to see what we really look like, we have to look at the Word of the Lord as in a mirror and there we will find not an image of superman and the crown of creation, but an image of the sinner. The Word teaches us that we cannot remit our sins without the Lord, and we pray the Lord to be merciful to us and forgive us our sins, for we know that He “did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

Amen