

Our Sins Infinite In Number and Enormity

~Other Speakers M-R: Edward Payson:

Is not thy wickedness great? and thine iniquities infinite? JOB XXII 5.

This question was addressed by Eliphaz to Job. He was led to ask it by a suspicion, that Job was a hypocrite. He had imbibed the erroneous opinion, that great temporal calamities are inflicted on none, except the wicked. Hence he inferred from the unprecedented afflictions of Job, that notwithstanding all his professions and fair appearances of piety, he was a wicked man. He therefore endeavored to convince him that this was his character, and that he had been deceived respecting himself? With this view he addressed him in the language of our text: Is not thy wickedness great? and thine iniquities infinite? Had Job really been what Eliphaz erroneously supposed him to be, this would have been a very proper question, and the charge which it implies, would have been strictly just. It is, therefore, still a proper question to be proposed to all who are ignorant of themselves. Indeed, it may without impropriety be addressed to every child of Adam; since there is not an individual among them, who, if he answer it truly, must not answer it in the affirmative. To establish the truth—that the sins of men are infinite in number and enormity—is my present design.

In prosecuting this design it becomes necessary to show, as clearly as possible, what meaning is attached to the terms, sin and wickedness, in the Word of God; I say, in the Word of God; for it is too evident to require proof that by these terms, men usually mean something very different from what is meant by the inspired writers. The word, sin, for instance, is considered by many as synonymous with crime; and by crime they mean the violation of some human law, or of the common rules of morality and honesty. Hence they conclude, that if a man obeys the laws of his country, and lives a sober, moral life, he has few, if any, sins to answer for. A similar meaning they attach to the term, wicked. By a wicked man, they suppose, is intended, a man openly and grossly immoral, impious, or profane; one who treats religion with avowed disrespect, or who denies the divine authority of revelation. But very different is the meaning, which the inspired writers attach to these terms. By wicked men, they mean all who are not righteous; all who do not repent and believe the gospel, however correct their external conduct may be; and by sin, they mean a violation of the divine law, which requires us to love God with all our hearts, and our neighbor as ourselves; for, says the apostle, sin is a transgression of, or a deviation from, the law. This law branches out into various and numerous precepts, prescribing, with great minuteness, our duties towards all the beings, with whom we are connected, and the dispositions, which are to be exercised in every situation and relation of life; and the violation and disregard of any of these precepts is a sin. The gospel, also, has its precepts, as well as the law. It requires repentance, faith and obedience; and neglecting to obey these precepts, is represented as sinful in the highest degree. In a word, when we do not perfectly obey all God's commands, in feeling, thought, word, and action, we sin. When we do not feel, and think, and speak, and act, as he requires, we are guilty of what are denominated sins of omission. When we feel, think, or speak, or act, in such a manner as he forbids, we are guilty of the sin of commission. These general remarks will be sufficient to convince every one who knows any thing of God, of himself, or of the divine law, that his sins are exceedingly numerous. But since most men are unacquainted with all these subjects, and especially, with the nature, strictness and extent of God's law, it will be necessary, in order to produce conviction, to be more particular. And since the heart is represented as the fountain, whence all evil flows; the tree which gives its own character to all the fruit produced by it, let us begin with that, and consider,

1. The sin of our hearts; or in other words, of our dispositions and feelings. The sins of this class alone, of which the best man on earth is guilty, are innumerable. They form by far the heaviest part of the charge, which will be brought against every impenitent sinner at the judgment day. Yet most men think nothing of them. They seem to imagine, that if the outside be clean, the feelings and dispositions of the heart are of little consequence. But God thinks very differently; and a moment's reflection will convince us, that a being, who commits no outward sins, may, notwithstanding, be the chief of sinners. Such, for instance, are the evil spirits. None will deny, that they are sinful in the highest degree. But they have no hands, to act; no tongue, to speak. All their sins are inward sins; sins of the heart. It is obvious then, that persons may be the greatest sinners in the universe, without being guilty of one outward sin. The law of God, and the gospel of Christ, teach the same truth. What they principally require, is right feelings and dispositions. What they chiefly forbid and condemn is, feelings and dispositions that are wrong. For instance, love is an affection; repentance is an affection; faith is a feeling; humility a feeling; hope, patience, resignation, and contentment, are feelings. Yet all these are required of us as indispensable duties. On the other hand, unbelief is a feeling; selfishness, impenitence, pride, love of the world, covetousness, envy, anger, hatred, and revenge are feelings. Yet all these things are forbidden as the

worst of sins; sins, for which those, who indulge them, will be condemned. It is evident then, that if we wish to know the number of our sins, we must look first, and chiefly, at the feelings and dispositions of our hearts. And if we do thus look at them, we shall be convinced, in a moment, that our sins are numberless. Every moment of our waking existence, in which we do not love God with all our hearts, we sin; for this constant and perfect love to God his law requires. Every moment in which we do not love our neighbor as ourselves, we sin; for this also we are commanded to do. Every moment, in which we do not exercise repentance, we sin; for repentance is one of the first duties required of us. Every moment, in which we do not exercise faith in Christ, we sin; for the constant exercise of faith the gospel every where requires. When we do not set our affections on things above, we sin; for on these we are required to place them. When we are not constantly influenced by the fear of God, we sin; for we are commanded to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long. When we do not rejoice in God, we sin; for the precept is, Rejoice in the Lord always. When we are not properly affected by the contents of God's word, we sin; for this want of feeling indicates hardness of heart, one of the worst of sins. When we do not forgive and love our enemies, we sin; for this Christ requires of us. In a word, whenever our hearts are not in a perfectly holy frame, we are sinning; for God's language is, Be ye holy, for I am holy; be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect. And if we thus sin, when we do not exercise right feelings, much more do we sin, when we exercise those that are wrong. When we are dissatisfied with any part of God's word, or with any of his providential dispensations; when we feel a disposition to murmur at our situation, at our disappointments and afflictions, at the weather, or the seasons, we sin; for these are heart-risings of rebellion against God, and they render it impossible for us to say, sincerely, Thy will be done. When we hate any one, we sin; for he that hateth his brother, is a murderer. When we feel a revengeful, or unforgiving temper, we sin; for if we forgive not our enemies, God will not forgive us. When we secretly rejoice in the calamities of others, we sin; for he that is glad at calamities, shall not go unpunished; and God is said to be displeased with those, who rejoice when their enemy falls. When we envy such as are above us, we sin; for envyings are mentioned among the sinful works of the flesh. When we covet any thing, that is our neighbor's, we sin; for this is expressly forbidden by the tenth commandment. When we love the world, we sin; for if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. But I forbear to enlarge; for who, that knows any thing of himself, will deny, that the wickedness of his heart is great, and its iniquities numberless?

2. Let us, in the next place, consider the sinfulness of our thoughts. The thoughts are the offspring of the mind, as the feelings are of the heart; and that they may be sinful, the scriptures plainly teach. The wise man declares foolish thoughts to be sinful. Our Savior classes evil thoughts with thefts, murders, and adulteries. O Jerusalem, says Jehovah, wash thy heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved. How long shall vain thoughts lodge within thee? Let the unrighteous man forsake his thoughts. The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination. Hear, O earth, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts. Even men's characters are determined by their thoughts and purposes; for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. These passages are more than sufficient to prove that there may be much sin committed in thought. And if vain, foolish thoughts are sinful, who, who, my hearers, can enumerate his sins? Who can even number the sins of this kind of which he is guilty in a single day? And many of these thoughts are rendered peculiarly sinful by being indulged in the house of God, during the hours set apart for devotion, when, if ever, the mind ought to be solemn and collected. But it is here impossible to descend to particulars. We must leave every one to reflect, as he pleases, on the atheistical thoughts, the impious and profane thoughts, the impure, covetous, vain, foolish, and absurd thoughts, which have passed through his mind, and been entertained there. And while you reflect on this, remember, that thoughts are the language of disembodied spirits; that thoughts are words in the ear of God; and that our guilt in his sight, is no less great than if we had actually given utterance to every thought, which has lodged in our minds. Agreeably, we find our Savior answering the thoughts of those around him, just as he would if they had expressed them in words; and in many passages, God charges sinners with saying, what, it appears, they only thought. In the ear of Jehovah then, our thoughts have a tongue; and what he hears them say, we may learn from the inspired declaration. Every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart is evil continually. And surely no man who believes this declaration, none who believes that thoughts are words in the ear of Jehovah, can doubt that his wickedness is great, and his iniquities numberless.

3. From sins of thought let us next proceed to those of the tongue. From what has been said of our feelings and thoughts, it is evident that this class of sins also must be exceedingly numerous; for it is out of the abundance of the heart, that the mouth speaketh. If then, sin prevails in the heart, it will flow out through the lips. That it does so, is but too obvious. Not to insist on the falsehoods, the slanders, the profane, impious, and indecent expressions, which are daily uttered by many persons, it may be sufficient to remind you, that of every idle word which men speak, they shall give account in the day of judgment. Every idle word then is a sin. But what are idle words? I answer, all that are not necessary, and which do not tend to produce good effects. God's precepts are, Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth; but that which is good to the use of edifying. Let your speech be always with grace, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. Let not foolish talking or jesting, which are not becoming, be once named among you; but rather giving of thanks. These rules,

perhaps, will be considered by some as too strict; but, my friends, they are the rules, which God prescribes in his word; they are the rules, by which we must be tried hereafter. And every word, which does not comport with them is an idle word; and consequently, sinful. How innumerable then, are the sins of the tongue! How large a portion of all the words, which we utter, are at best, but idle words, to say nothing of those which are obviously sinful! Well might the wise man say, that in the multitude of words there wanteth not sin. I shall only add, that whenever we speak of others as we should not wish them to speak of us, we sin against the law of love, and violate our Savior's golden rule, Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even the same to them. Happy is the man, who can truly say, that in this respect alone, his transgressions are not numberless.

4. Let us now consider our sinful actions. And here, my friends, we shall not speak of what the world call sins. We shall say nothing of thefts, frauds, injuries, intemperance, and debauchery. If there are any among my hearers, who are not free from these gross enormities, I must leave the task of reproving them to their own consciences. Our concern is principally with those sinful actions, which are by most men thought innocent; and for which therefore, conscience seldom, if ever, reproves them. To begin with what have been called sins of omission: Withhold not good from him to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it. For to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin. From these Passages it appears, that whenever men have an opportunity to do good, either to the bodies or souls of men, or of doing any good work for the glory of God, and neglect to improve it, they sin. Of how many sins, then, are we guilty! How many thousands of opportunities for doing good have we suffered to pass unimproved! How much good has been done by many of our fellow creatures, with no greater means, than we have enjoyed! Is not the charge, which was brought against the proud king of Babylon, applicable to many of us? We have failed to glorify the God, in whose hand our breath is. Prayer and praise glorify God. But these duties we have all neglected during a considerable part of our lives; and many of us are still neglecting them. We are commanded, whether we eat, or drink, or whatever we do, to do all to the glory of God. These precepts apply to our words as well as to our actions; and they prove, that every word which we have not spoken, every action which we have not performed, with a view to promote the glory of God, and, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, is a sin. Hence it follows, that all the words and actions of unrenewed men are sinful; for they never do any thing, either to the glory of God, or in the name of Christ. Agreeably, we are told, that the ploughing of the wicked is sin; that the prayer, and the sacrifice of the wicked, are an abomination; and that they who are in the flesh, that is, in an impenitent, unconverted state, cannot please God; for without faith it is impossible to please him. We do not mean, that all the words and actions of unrenewed men are outwardly wrong, or sinful; but they all proceed from wrong motives, and are not accompanied by right feelings; they are not performed with that temper and disposition, which God requires, and are therefore, sinful by defect. They are like a body without a soul; the heart, at which God principally looks, and which he requires, is unholy; and therefore, the actions are the same. This is the import of our Savior's comparison; the tree is corrupt, and therefore, the fruit is not good; for a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit. To bring all that need be said on this subject to a point;—every feeling, thought, word, and action, which is not, in all respects, as it ought to be, or as God requires it to be, is sinful: but no feeling, thought, word, or action of an impenitent sinner, is in all respects, what God requires it to be; therefore, every feeling, thought, word, and action of a sinner is sinful. If then men's feelings, thoughts, words, actions, are numberless, so are their sins.

I am aware, my hearers, that this conclusion will startle, and perhaps, offend some of you; but if we follow the scriptures, I see not that we can come to a different conclusion. I only ask to be judged, or rather ask you to judge yourselves, by this rule. If you can prove, by fair appeal to scripture, that any part of your temper and conduct has been perfectly right, perfectly agreeable to God's law, I will acknowledge, that my conclusion is wrong. I will only add, that the scriptures assert, in plain terms, that the thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord, that the way of the wicked is an abomination to him; that every work of their hands, and all they offer, is unclean. If we believe these assertions, we must acknowledge that our wickedness is great, and our iniquities infinite, —absolutely numberless.

II. It is further necessary to show, that our sins are infinite, not only in number, but in criminality; that every sin is, in fact, infinitely evil, and deserving of infinite punishment. It is so,

1. Because it is committed against an infinite being, against God, a being infinitely powerful, wise, holy, just and good. The criminality of any offence is in proportion to the excellence and greatness of the person, against whom it is committed. For instance, it is wrong for a child to strike his brother. Should the same child strike his father, it would be incomparably more so. Were his father a king, possessed of every good quality, the act would be still more criminal. But God is our heavenly Father, the universal King, infinitely exalted above every human parent, above every earthly monarch; possessed, in an infinite degree, of every perfection, which can entitle him to the perfect love, confidence, and obedience of his creatures. He is also the author and preserver of the very powers and faculties, which we employ in sinning against him, and he has conferred on us

innumerable favors. Of course we are under infinite obligations to love and obey him; and therefore, to violate these obligations, and sin against such a being, must be an infinite evil.

Again—**that every sin is infinitely evil and criminal, is evident from the fact, that it is a violation of an infinitely perfect law.** It will readily be allowed, that to violate a good law, is a greater evil than to violate a law, the goodness of which is doubtful. It will also be allowed, that if there were any law made by human governments, on obedience to which the honor, the welfare, and even the existence of a nation depended, **to violate that law, would be the greatest crime, which a subject could commit.** Now the law of God is perfectly holy, just, and good. If it were universally obeyed, universal and endless happiness would be the consequence. But, disobedience to this law tends to produce universal and endless misery. Take away the law and the authority of God; there would be no right, but that of the strongest; violence, discord, and confusion would fill the universe; sin and misery would overspread the earth, would ascend to heaven, subvert the throne of Jehovah, and compel him to live in the midst of a mad, infuriated mob, the members of which were continually insulting him, and injuring each other. Now every violation of God's law tends to produce this effect.

Farther—**every sin is an infinite evil, because it tends to produce infinite mischief.** Let us trace this tendency. Suppose all the universe to be holy and happy. A thought or feeling tending to produce sin, rises in the breast of some one creature. This thought or feeling is indulged. It gains strength by indulgence; gradually it extends its influence over the faculties of the mind, enslaves the whole man, and prompts him to disobey God. Now did it proceed no further, it would still be an infinite evil, for it has depraved and ruined an immortal being, a being, who, but for sin, would have been eternally happy; but, who must, in consequence of sin, be forever miserable. But it will not stop there. The being thus ruined by sin, will become a tempter, and seduce his fellow beings, and they, in turn, will tempt others; and unless God prevent, the infection will spread through the created universe, transforming holy beings into devils, and all worlds into hell! Such, my hearers, is the tendency of sin. Do any deny it? We appeal to facts. The whole universe was once holy and happy. A thought or feeling tending to produce sin, rose in the breast of Satan. He indulged it, and it ruined him. It transformed him from an archangel into a devil. He tempted other angels, and they became devils. He tempted our first parents; they complied, sinned, and became the parents of a sinful race. Thus all the sin and all the misery in the universe, all on earth and all in hell, may be traced back to one sinful thought or feeling entertained, at first, in a single breast; and this sin and misery would be far greater than they are, were it not for the restraining power and grace of God. Such then, is the tendency of sin, of every sin; and such effects it would produce, did not God prevent. A sinful thought, or feeling, is like a spark of fire. It seems but a little thing, and is easily extinguished; but it has a tendency to consume and destroy; and let it have room and opportunity to exert itself; let it be fed by combustible materials, and fanned by the winds, and it would destroy every thing destructible in the universe. Similar is the tendency of sin; and who then, will say, that it is not an infinite evil?

Sins derive an infinite malignity from being committed in defiance of motives and obligations infinitely strong. It is evident, that the criminality of any sin is in proportion to the motives and obligations, which opposed its commission. To sin against many and powerful motives, indicates greater depravity, and is, of course, more criminal than to sin against few and feeble motives. Suppose a person is informed that if he commits a certain crime, he shall be imprisoned. If, notwithstanding the threatening, he perpetrates the crime, he shows that he loves the crime more than he loves liberty. Again, suppose him to be assured that if he commits the crime, he shall be put to death. Should he, after that, commit the crime, it would indicate greater depravity than before. It would show that he loved the crime more than life. But the word of God threatens sinners with everlasting misery, if they persist in sin; and promises them everlasting happiness, if they will renounce it. I need not tell you that what is everlasting, is in one respect infinite, viz, in duration. Here then, are two infinitely powerful motives presented to the sinner, to deter him from sin—**infinite happiness, and infinite misery.** Every one then, who persists in sin, notwithstanding these motives, shows that he loves sin more than everlasting happiness; that he hates holiness more than he dreads everlasting misery. His attachment to sin, and of course, his depravity and criminality, are therefore boundless, or infinite. From all that has been said, it appears that our sins are numberless, and that every one of our sins is infinitely evil or criminal. Every one then, who answers the question in our text with truth, must answer it in the affirmative.

INFERENCES. 1. If our sins are thus infinite in number and criminality, then of course, they deserve an infinite, or everlasting punishment; such a punishment, as God threatens in his word. There is scarcely any truth, which men are more disposed to deny, than this. They contend, that it cannot be just for God to punish sins committed during the short period of our residence on earth, with everlasting misery. But let us examine this objection. Do you not all acknowledge that a murderer may justly be put to death? Yet he might not have been employed more than a single moment in committing that murder. The fact is, in other cases we never think of inquiring how much time was spent in the commission of any crime. We consider only the nature and magnitude of the crime, and its effects upon society. If the crime is great, and its effects highly pernicious, we

conclude at once, that it deserves a severe punishment. Now we have shown, that sin is an infinite evil; that the effects, which it tends to produce, are infinitely mischievous. Of course, it deserves an infinite punishment. And permit me to add, that complaints of the severity of this punishment come with a very ill grace from impenitent sinners; for they will persist in sin, notwithstanding this punishment. It seems then, that instead of being too severe, it is not sufficiently severe to deter them from sin. If men will now violate God's laws, what would they do, had he annexed to their violation only a temporary punishment?

2. If sin deserves an infinite punishment, then it is perfectly right, that God should inflict such a punishment upon sinners. It is no impeachment of his character, no reflection upon his goodness, to say that he will inflict it. This evidently follows as a necessary consequence from what has been said; for justice consists in treating every one as he deserves to be treated; and if sinners deserve an endless punishment, then it is perfectly just and right for God to inflict such a punishment upon them.

3. If it is just that God should inflict such a punishment upon impenitent sinners, then he must inflict it; he is bound by the strongest obligation to inflict it, for he must do what is just and right. And if it is just and right thus to punish impenitent sinners, then it cannot be just and right not to do it. To spare them, would not be treating them as they deserve, and justice consists in treating them according to their deserts. In a word, it is as much an act of injustice to spare the guilty, as it would be to condemn the innocent. This God himself teaches us in his word. He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are an abomination to the Lord. And will the just God do that, which he declares to be an abomination in his sight? The Judge of all the earth must do right.

4. Hence we see why the atonement made by Christ was necessary. Men had all sinned. Their wickedness was great, and their transgressions infinite. Hence they deserved an infinite punishment; and God was obliged, in justice, to inflict on them such a punishment, unless some sufficient atonement could be made. As sin, and the punishment due to sin, were infinite; no atonement, which was not infinite in value, could suffice. And where could such an atonement be found? Men could not make it; for they were already under sentence of death, and forfeited every thing which they possessed. Yet the atonement must be made by a man; because it was for the benefit of men. The language of the law was, man has sinned, and man must die. In this exigency, the Eternal Word, the Son of God, interposed. He consented to become man, to bear the sins of men, or, in other words, the punishment, which their sins deserved; to stand as the representative of sinners, and suffer the curse of the law in their stead. This he has done. He has thus magnified the law and made it honorable. He deserves some reward for this wonderful act of benevolence and obedience. A just God is as much bound to reward him, as he is to punish the wicked. But what reward shall he give him? He needs nothing for himself. But there is a reward infinitely valuable in his estimation, infinitely dear to his benevolent heart. It is the pardon and salvation of his people, of every sinner, who confides in his merits and intercession, and submits to be reconciled, through him, to God. This reward was promised him. This reward is given him. God can now be just, and yet the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. None, however, will believe in Jesus, none will apply to him for salvation, but those who see and feel, that their wickedness is great, and their iniquities infinite. You may see therefore, my friends, why it is, that I have led your attention to this subject. It is not because I love to dwell upon it. It is not because I, a miserable sinner, take pleasure in accusing and condemning my fellow sinners. But it is because I, a pardoned sinner, a sinner washed from numberless and infinite offences in the atoning blood of Jesus, wish to bring my fellow sinners to that precious fountain, of which I know the efficacy. It is because, as a messenger of the Lord of hosts, I am commanded to cry aloud, and show to the people their transgressions and their sins: and because I am also directed to preach to you the unsearchable riches of Christ. You may easily conceive how precious the Savior would appear to you, did you feel burdened with the weight of all the sins, with which you are here charged. My friends—penitent sinners, true Christians, do feel thus burdened; they feel that their wickedness is great, and their iniquities numberless. This it is, which leads them to adopt such expressions, as you hear them use in prayer; expressions, which have been used by all the pious before. It is this which leads them to complain, that they are the chief of sinners, and to cry out with the apostle, O, wretched man, that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? Could you feel thus, how would you rejoice to hear of a Savior! How eagerly fly to his atoning blood! And are there none, who feel thus? none, whose sins God has set in order before their eyes? none, who are ready to cry out, My sins have gone over me as a heavy burden; mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more in number than the hairs of my head; therefore my heart faileth me! Fly, then, to the cross of Christ, in whom we have redemption, through his blood, even the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of his grace.