A portrait of an elderly man with a serious expression, wearing a black clerical robe over a dark suit and tie. He is seated at a wooden desk with several books. The background is plain white.

THAT ONE SIN

Y D. MARTYN
B LLOYD-JONES

*Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that
in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all
longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should
hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.
(1 Timothy 1:16)*

In the last chapter we were considering those people who are unhappy and who never really enjoy their Christian life because of a failure to maintain a balance between mind and heart and will. That lack of balance is one of the great causes not only of unhappiness, but of failure and of stumbling in the Christian life.

In this chapter, we are going to consider one very common way in which the devil attacks along this line. It is the one suggested not only by this particular verse before us but by the entire chapter in this biographical section. The problem here is the case of those who are miserable Christians or who are suffering from spiritual depression because of their past—either because of some particular sin in their past, or because of the particular form which sin happened to take in their case. I would say that in my experience in the ministry, extending now over many years, there is no more common difficulty. It is constantly recurring and I think that I have had to deal with more people over this particular thing than over anything else.

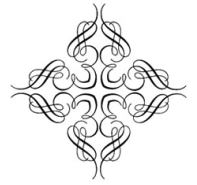
Now at first sight some of you may wonder whether such people are Christian at all. But you are quite wrong. They are Christians. They are not relying upon their own lives or activities or anything they can ever do. They are fully aware of their complete helplessness and their entire dependence upon the grace of God in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, you ask, what is the matter with them? Their condition is that they are nevertheless unhappy, and they are unhappy because of something in their past life. They come to you looking unhappy, indeed miserable, and they always talk about this thing, they invariably bring it up. As a rule it is some action, some deed—which may or may not have involved other people—some wrong committed by themselves. They are always analyzing it and scrutinizing and condemning themselves because of it. And the result is that they are unhappy.

Let me give you what is the most graphic illustration of this that I have ever come across in my own experience. I remember an old man who was converted and became a Christian at the age of 77, one of the most striking conversions I have ever known. That man had lived a very evil life; there was scarcely anything he had not done at some time or another. But he came under the sound of the gospel and was converted in his old age. The great day came when he was received into the membership of the Church, and when he came to his first communion service on the Sunday evening it was to him the biggest thing that had ever happened. His joy was indescribable and we were all so happy about him. But next morning, even before I was up, that poor old man had arrived at my house, and there he stood looking the picture of misery and dejection, and weeping uncontrollably.

I eventually succeeded in controlling him in a physical sense, and then asked him what was the matter. His trouble was this. After going home from that communion service he had suddenly remembered something that had happened thirty years ago. He was with a group of men drinking in a public house and arguing about religion. On that occasion he had said in contempt and derision that “Jesus Christ was a bastard.” And it had all come back to him suddenly and there was, he felt sure, no forgiveness for that. This one thing! The drinking and the gambling and the immorality were forgiven. He understood that clearly. But this thing that he had said about the Son of God, he could not be consoled, he could not be comforted. This one thing had cast him down to utter hopelessness. (I thank God that by the application of the Scriptures I was able to restore his joy to him.) But that is the kind of thing I am referring to, something a man has once said, or done, that haunts him and comes back to him, and makes him miserable and wretched, though he still subscribes to the full Christian faith.



...Satan who, though he cannot rob us of our salvation, can definitely rob us of our joy.



That then is the kind of condition to which I am now calling attention. These are people who seem to be quite clear about the doctrine of salvation, except that they feel that in their case there is something—their sin, this particular sin or the form that sin has taken in their case—which somehow puts them in a different category. They say, “Yes, I know—but . . .” They are held down, they are miserable Christians, they are suffering from this state of spiritual depression.

What is the real trouble here? Well, there are two main explanations of the condition. First and foremost, of course, it is the work of the devil; it is just Satan who, though he cannot rob us of our salvation, can definitely rob us of our joy. His great concern is to prevent anyone becoming a Christian, but when that fails, his one object then is to make them miserable Christians so that he can point men who are under a conviction of sin to them and say: “That is Christianity; look at him or her. There is a picture of Christianity! Look at that miserable creature. Do you want to be like that?”

But there is also a subsidiary cause, and this is the thing I want to emphasize here. I would say this condition is almost entirely due to an ignorance of doctrine—a failure to understand the New Testament doctrine of salvation clearly. Let me put this plainly and bluntly in order that I may emphasize it even at the risk of being misunderstood. There is a sense in which the one thing that these people who are in this condition must not do is to pray to be delivered from it! That is what they always do, and that is what they have invariably been doing when they come seeking help—indeed, it is what they are generally told they must do. Now the Christian must always “pray without ceasing,” but this is one of those points at which the Christian must stop praying for a moment and begin to think! for there are particular problems in the Christian life concerning which I say that if you do nothing but pray about them you will never solve them. You must stop praying at times because your prayer may just be reminding you of the problem and

keeping your mind fixed upon it. So you must stop praying and think, and work out your doctrine.

What are you to think of? The first thing I would suggest is that you think of this case of the Apostle Paul and of what he says here: “I thank Jesus Christ our Lord who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; who was before a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious, but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.” Now this is wonderful. What he claims here is that in a sense the Lord Jesus Christ saved him in order to set him up as a model for those people who feel that their particular sin somehow or another passes the limit of grace and the mercy of God. In other words, here are people who believe that sins can be graded and they draw distinctions between particular sins. They classify them saying that some are forgivable and some apparently are not. To these the Apostle says that his own case is more than sufficient to deal with the argument. “Whatever you may think,” he says, “whatever you may have done, think of me, think of what I was, a blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious.” Could anything be worse? That is the first argument. You think of his case and say to yourself: “If he obtained mercy, if he could be forgiven, I must think again of this sin in my life.” That is where you start.

But the Apostle does not stop at that, because in a sense we must not differentiate between sin and sin. On the surface the Apostle seems to be doing that. He says: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief,” as if to say there are big sinners and lesser sinners. He did not mean that, however: he cannot possibly mean that, for that would be to contradict his

essential doctrine. What he does mean is that the nearer a man gets to God the greater he sees his sin. When a man sees the blackness of his own soul, he says: "I am the chief of sinners;" and it is only a Christian who can say that. The man of the world will never make such a statement. He is always proving what a good man he is. But Paul seems to be saying more than that, as I have just been saying. He makes his meaning plain when he puts it like this, "I did it ignorantly, in unbelief." In putting it like that he demolishes these grades of sin. Looking at it from one angle his sin was the worst sin conceivable, but from another angle it is the sum of all sins because finally there is only one sin and that is the sin of unbelief.

That is the great New Testament doctrine on this matter; it is the thing that these people have to grasp above everything else, that we must not think in terms of particular sins but always in terms of our relationship to God. We all tend to go astray at that point. That is why we tend to think that some conversions are more remarkable than others. But they are not. It takes the same grace of God to save the most respectable person in the world as the most lawless person in the world. Nothing but the grace of God can save anybody, and it takes the same grace to save all. But we do not think like that. We think some conversions are more remarkable than others. Because we are wrong in our doctrine, we differentiate between sin, and think some sins are worse than others. It all comes back to our relationship to God; it is all a matter of belief or unbelief.

James has put this point once and for ever in his Epistle in the second chapter and the tenth verse: "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." So you see we are all on the same level; and if the Evil One tries to make you think that your sin is different, tell him in reply that it does not matter what particular point a man breaks with respect to the law, that if he breaks it in one point he is guilty of all. It is not the one point in particular that really matters; it is the law that matters. That is God's way of looking at

sin. So do not allow the devil to mislead you. It is not any particular sin, but our relationship to the Person of God Himself that matters.

That brings us to the third point. The trouble with this type of unhappy Christian is that he does not really believe the Scriptures. Have you thought of that? You say: "My trouble is that terrible sin which I have committed." Let me tell you in the Name of God that that is not your trouble. Your trouble is unbelief. You do not believe the Word of God. I am referring to the First Epistle of John and the first chapter where we read this: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That is a categorical statement made by God the Holy Spirit through His servant. There is no differentiation between sin. Whatever your sin—it does not matter what it is, "if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So if you do not believe that word, and if you go on dwelling on your sin, I say that you are not accepting the Word of God, you are not taking God at His word, you do not believe what He tells you and that is your real sin. "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin and all unrighteousness." Believe the Word of God, my friend. Do not go on praying frantically to be forgiven that sin. Believe God's Word. Do not ask Him for a message of forgiveness. He has given it to you. Your prayer may well be an expression of unbelief at that point. Believe Him and His Word.

Another trouble with these people is that they do not seem to realize fully what our Lord did on the cross on Calvary's Hill. They do believe in His sacrificial, atoning death, but they do not work out its implications. They have not fully grasped the doctrine. They know enough to be saved—I am speaking of Christians—but they are in a state of depression because they do not realize fully what this means. They forget that the angel announced to Joseph at the very beginning that He should "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1: 21). The angel did

not say that He shall save from all sins except this one sin that you have committed. No! “He shall save His people from their sins.” There is no qualification there, no limit. All the sins of His people are there, every one of them. Indeed, He said it Himself, did He not, on the cross? He said: “It is finished,” absolutely finished. In what sense? It is finished in the sense that not only all the sins committed in the past were dealt with there, but all the sins that could ever be committed were also dealt with there. It is one sacrifice, once and forever. All the sins were dealt with there finally and completely, everything. Nothing was left undone—“It is finished.”

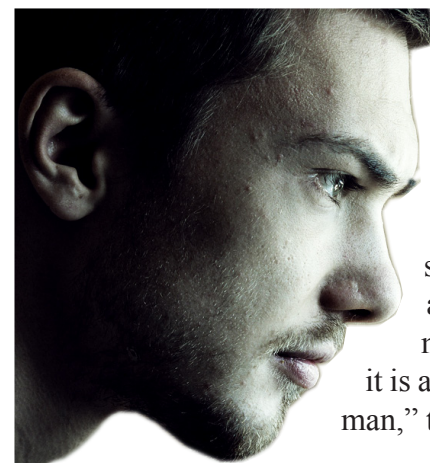
The next step, therefore, is that we must be clear about justification. Let us remember that our justification means not only that our sins are forgiven and that we have been declared to be righteous by God Himself, not merely that we were righteous at that moment when we believed, but permanently righteous. For justification means this also, that we are given by God the positive righteousness of His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what justification means. It does not only mean that your sins are forgiven, but much more. It means that He clothes us also with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He says in effect: “You are righteous; I see, not a sinner, but a righteous child of My own; I see you in Christ covered by His holiness and righteousness.” And when God does that to us, He does it once and for ever. You are hidden, you yourself and your whole personality and life stand in the righteousness of Christ before God. I say, therefore, with reverence and on the authority of the Word of God that God sees your sins no more; He sees the righteousness of Christ upon you. Lay hold of that.

Ultimately it all comes to this, that the real cause of the trouble is failure to realize our union with Christ. Many seem to think that Christianity just means that we are delivered in the sense that our sins are forgiven. But that is only the beginning, but one aspect of it. Essentially salvation means union with Christ, being one with Christ. As we were one with Adam we are


now one with Christ. The teaching is that we have died with Christ, have been buried with Christ, have risen with Christ, are seated in the heavenly places in Christ and with Christ.

Let me sum it up in this way, therefore. You and I—and to me this is one of the great discoveries of the Christian life; I shall never forget the release which realizing this for the first time brought to me—you and I must never look at our past lives; we must never look at any sin in our past life in any way except that which leads us to praise God and to magnify His grace in Christ Jesus. I challenge you to do that. If you look at your past and are depressed by it, if as a result you are feeling miserable as a Christian, you must do what Paul did. “I was a blasphemer,” he said, but he did not stop at that. Does he then say: “I am unworthy to be a preacher of the gospel”? In fact he says the exact opposite: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful putting me into the ministry, etc.” When Paul looks at the past and sees his sin he does not stay in a corner and say: “I am not fit to be a Christian, I have done such terrible things.” Not at all. What it does to him is to make him praise God. He glories in grace and says: “And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.”

That is the way to look at your past. So, if you look at your past and are depressed, it means that you are listening to the devil. But if you look at the past and



say: “Unfortunately it is true I was blinded by the god of this world, but thank God His grace was more abundant, He was more than sufficient and His love and mercy came upon me in such a way that it is all forgiven, I am a new man,” then all is well. That is

the way to look at the past, and if we do not do that, I am almost tempted to say that we deserve to be miserable. Why believe the devil instead of believing God? Rise up and realize the truth about yourself, that all the past has gone, and you are one with Christ, and all your sins have been blotted out once and forever. O let us remember that it is sin to doubt God's word, it is sin to allow the past, which God has dealt with, to rob us of our joy and our usefulness in the present and in the future. Rejoice in this wondrous grace and mercy that has blotted out your sins and made you a child of God. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." 

This is an adaptation from the book Spiritual Depression. Printed with permission from Eerdmans Publishing.

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by Martyn Lloyd-Jones

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