The Sins that follow us.

“Some men’s sins are manifest, going before to judgment: and some men they follow after.” I Timothy V. 24

The special intention of St. Paul in these and the foregoing words was to guide Timothy in the high and dangerous work of ordaining pastors for the flock of Christ. But we need not dwell on the context in which we read them; for they enunciate a great law in God’s Kingdom, and describe an awful fact in the administration of his perfect justice. Some men are open and proclaimed sinners. They stand in the face of the Church, and in the sight of God, self accused, condemned, and branded. Their sins go before them, as heralds, apparitors, and witnesses carrying the whole history of guilt, with all its circumstance and evidence, before the judgment seat of Christ. The whole life of an open sinner is the judicial procession of a high criminal to the bar. It has the pomp and solemnity of death about it. The Church casts him forth from her altars and from her tribunals. Judgment issues against him by a common instinct. Even before the sentence of formal excommunication, he is visibly cut off from the mystical body of the Lord Jesus. And what is bound on Earth is bound in heaven. It is the forerunner and visible symbol of the last great award. Such were the sins of apostates and of presumptuous sinners in the flesh or spirit, and of the authors of heresies and schisms. The whole history of the church is marked by a line of open and barefaced offenders, who have lifted up their heel against the Lord and crucified Him afresh unto themselves. In the great conflict of good and evil, they seem to bear a special office; so that the manifestation of sin is one of the collateral mysteries of the regeneration and perfection of saints.

Moreover we see it at this day. The visible Church holds still within its outward pale thousands whose lives are their own condemnation; as in Philippi. “For many walk, of whom I have told you often (and now tell you weeping) that they are enemies of the Cross of Christ.” These are they whose “sins are manifest;” they heed us penetrating scrutiny, no process of conviction. Their sins go before to judgment; sent forward to prepare a place on the left hand of the Judge in that great day.

“And some men they follow after.” That is to say, there are men all fair without, but within full of disguised and deadly evil. Though in their life they be never put to shame, yet in the sight of Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire, they are haunted and beset with guilt. Secret lusts long cherished, often indulged, stealthily ventured upon; deep subtle intentions, pursued under a cloak of some high profession, positive and completed thus, so mixed up with the workings of common life as to escape detection. But it does not apply only to these grosser forms of sins. There are men who pass for faithful Christians, who have free access to the sanctities of the Church; to its offices of worship, its sacraments and benedictions. They mix in the fellowship of devout and penitent; they kneel at the altar; they join in acts of highest communion. They seem fair and blameless; there is no brand, not so much as a spot visible upon them. To our eyes
they are not “far from the Kingdom of God.” As they grow old, they grow in reputation. They die in honour; and are in high esteem among the faithful. They go to meet their Judge; but their “sins follow after.” All through life there has followed them unseen a throng of sins, concealed, unrepented, or forgotten. The sins of childhood, boyhood, youth, and manhood, follow on, gathering in number, guilt, intensity; Every age bringing in its measure of characteristic sins; Every year its transgressions; Every day its provocation; - sins of deed and thought, of desire and imagination, of casual self-indulgence and habitual neglect; sins against conscience and light, against pleadings of grace, and stirrings of the Spirit; breaches of resolutions; contradictions of solemn confessions before God; relapses after partial repentance; all these mounting up till from their bulk they spread beyond the field of sight and from their magnitude become invisible. This perhaps, may seem to be an extreme case. Would to God it were so. Will it be believed that this is no uncommon instance; not only in people who live without God in the world, but also in those whose character is in many ways religious? Every one confesses it to be true of hypocrites or clandestine sinners; but we are now speaking of higher and more hopeful cases. What I have described will, on being analysed, be found to be more or less the case of multitudes. For instance, this is really the state of thousands who have never suspected the possibility of their being in such a condition. They have fallen into it, because they never suspected it to be possible. There is nothing we are more apt to take for granted, than the theory of our acceptance before God. It is disagreeable to think ill of ourselves; we are conscious of good intentions, we feel to desire the highest and holiest state; sin is both fearful and painful to us; after sinning we cannot be easy so long as we remember it; our conscience as well as our pride is hurt; and we comfort ourselves as soon as we can, by thoughts of repentance, and by turning to the better side of our character. In this way people get into a habit of consoling themselves. They shrink from sterner and deeper truths; shun all high standards; keep aloof from the light; and never suspect-as indeed how can they? – the existence of the evil of which they are unconscious. They believe themselves to be, what they know they desire. What they are able to discern, they take to be their whole state before God. Although at times particular faults distress them, yet their habitual consciousness is of the favourable interpretation which men put upon their outward life. What they are in God’s sight they have never suspected, because they have no standard to ascertain, no tests to detect it.

Or, to take another example. This is also the state of those who have never, since they came to the full power of reflection, made a real examination of their past life. The sins of our early years are but imperfectly perceived at the time. It is only by retrospect, and in the fuller light of a matured conscience, that their true character is duly estimated. The sinfulness of sin consists not only in the specific evil of each particular act, but in the whole of our case before God, in our relation to Him His holiness, compassion and long-suffering; in His dealings with us, and our ingratitude, coldness, insensibility in return. Truly to know what we are before God, we must take our whole life, with its context, and read it in the light of God’s love and providential care. Guilt is a complex thing; a
balance of many particulars on God’s part and on ours. It is our sins multiplied by His mercies; our transgressions by His gifts of light and grace.

As another example, we may take those who live without daily self examination. It is impossible for such persons to escape self-deception. They become simply and sincerely ignorant of themselves. It is perfectly impossible to carry in mind the long unbalanced, unexamined account of many years, or even of one year alone. It is true in every thing, that neglect in detail is confusion in the whole. Sins that are not noted at the time slip out of sight; they pass behind each other. Sins rise one upon another, and become foreshortened, so as to hide all but the last of the whole chain. A lesser sin which is nearer will hide ten greater if they be farther off; a thousand will be hid behind one. The whole retrospect of a life becomes narrowed and shut up into the reflection of a few months or days. All that is past goes for nothing; it is as if it did not exist. Good were it if it were really so before God; if our forgetfulness could blot the book of his remembrance; if what we cease to remember were forgotten before the Judge of quick and dead.

Now, of all such as these St. Paul says that their sins “follow after.” Let us see what this means.

1. It means that all sins have their proper chastisement, which however long delayed and seemingly averted, will, as a general law, sooner or later, overtake the sinner. I say all sins because chastisement follows often even upon sins that are repented of, as in the case of David; and I say also as a general law, because it seems sometimes that God in His tender compassion to individual cases, does hold back the chastisement of His rod and by ways of peculiar lovingkindness make perfect the humiliation of particular penitents. It is certain that there are such exceptions. No doubt they have their portion of the cross in other and inscrutable ways, which make the scales weigh even. In them the cross does the work of the rod.

Nevertheless these exceptions no more break the general rule, than the translation of Enoch and Elijah repeals the sentence of death on sin. Our sins follow us by the rod of chastisement. As the sins of the fathers upon the children, so the sins of childhood on youth, and youth on after years. How little did we know what we were laying up for ourselves. How little did we think at that day, in the hour of our transgressions. This will find me out when I am in middle life, or in my old age; though it tarry never so long, it will come at last. And how few, when they are visited lay it to heart and say: This sorrow or this sickness is the just chastisement following upon the sins of my life past. These are the scourges of God, which have followed me afar off, and now have overtaken me. “Thou writest bitter things against me, and will consume me for the sins of my youth.” (Job XIII. 26)

2. Again past sins follow after sinners in the active power by which they still keep a hold on their present state of heart. It is one of the worst effects of sins, that after
commission, it clings to the soul. Every sin leaves some deposit in the spiritual nature. It quickens the original root of evil; it multiplies and unfolds its manifold corruption. And worst of all, it brings on a deadness, and an insensibility of the spiritual nature. The most dangerous part of sin is its deceitfulness. Sin can hide itself from the conscience. It is most concealed at its highest pitch of strength. When at the worst, it is least perceived. Deadly sins like mortifying wounds have little sensible pain. The cause of most besetting sins, and of most sinful inclinations in after life is the indulgence of particular sins in youth or childhood. Pride, vanity, selfishness, contempt, wrath, envy, scornfulness, and other baser sins, are the consequences, or the following of early transgressions. They follow us in their moral deterioration. It is so also with the coldness, insensibility, indolence, of which people complain. Some sin unrepented or forgotten, and because forgotten, therefore unrepented, lies festering in the dark and the whole character suffers in all its parts and powers. It is this that obstructs the whole spiritual life; thrusts itself between the soul and the presence of God; bars up the avenues of grace; turns the bread of life into a stone; makes the true vine seem to be a dead branch and the Communion of Christ’s saints to be cold and desolate. It is cold to us and we think it cold in itself. Fire has no heat to the dead. Christ did no mighty works among the unbelieving. Our early sins of willfulness, irreverence, self-worship, have followed us. As shadows they fall upon our path, and darken our hearts, though the light about us “be sevenfold as the light of seven days.” Temptations cast us down, because within us they have somewhat that is in secret league with them. The world overawes us, because, in times past we have wandered after it and worshipped it. Our present falls, infirmities, spiritual struggles, afflictions, and dangerous inclinations, are for the most part the sins of our past life, following us in chastisement, and cleaving as diseases and temptations.

3. And further, whether or no sins follow in chastisement now, they will surely overtake us in the judgment. “And know ye, that your sin shall overtake you.” (Numbers XXXII.23) This is the inflexible destiny of sinners. Secret as they may be in this life, all shall be laid open before men and angels in the great account. Hidden things shall come forth to confound the hypocrite, despised sins to condemn the impenitent. The long quest of sin pursuing the guilty shall be ended before the great white throne. All masks shall be torn off from all faces there; and we shall be seen not as we show ourselves, but as we are. It will be a fearful meeting between a sinner and his very self; when his true self shall confront his false; and the multitude of his sins shall clamour on every side. Such must our day be the doom of the most successful hypocrite of the fairest and least suspected sinner.

So likewise with the self-ignorant, neglectful, self-deceiving. Sins they have so forgotten as never truly to repent of, shall be then gathered in array. This is the chief danger of spiritual sloth. Slothful Christians never really grapple with their sins. They take refuge in the generalities of confession, and in set forms of prayer. All their faults may be softened, but no one temper is really mortified. The moral deterioration of past sin they acquiesce in as inevitable and believe to be beyond all cure in this life, trusting that God
will somehow cleanse them. Their whole inward being is entangled and clouded; no convictions are fully formed, no truths fully recognized; they are neither cold nor hot, neither holy nor unholy, penitent nor impenitent; but in that fearful middle state for which judgment and eternity have no middle doom.

Who can say what is the burden of sin which rests upon the forgetful, negligent, complacent, unexamined, unsifted soul? What a crowd of forgotten sins shall follow the unconscious Christian to the judgment! The great mass of Christians are neither saintly, nor deliberately sinful, and in that mass how much insensibility, how much false confidence, how much self-deceit! “Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knew it not; yea, gray hairs also are spread about upon him, and he is ignorant of it.” (Osee VII.9) “Wo to you that are wealthy in Zion.” (Auros VI.1) “Some men’s sins are manifest, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after.” Some men go down unawakened to the grace, and “His bones shall be filled with the vices of his youth, and they shall sleep with him in the dust.” (Job XX.11) What sign, then, have we to show that our sins are not following close upon us until now? There are only two conditions on which we can be set free from this fearful pursuit of sin.

Either that we have never fallen from our filial obedience, since God, in holy Baptism, made us to be his children; or that having fallen, we have, by a conscious and sincere repentance, arisen and cast ourselves at the foot of the Cross. Who is there that will say, that since baptism he has not fallen? If there be any, blessed and holy are they – souls of the first resurrection, on them the second death hath no power, neither if they persevere, ever shall have.

But where are they? Then, if we cannot bear this witness, can we say that we have by a deliberate course of self examination, and confession, entered upon a life of repentance? It was in mercy, for the sake of those who after baptism fell into deadly sin, that our Lord Jesus Christ left in His Church the power of absolution.

1. The first great end of this power was, openly to restore to peace both with God and the Church, those who had fallen from the peace openly and publicly given to them in their regeneration. And this the Church of England every year declares in the commemoration service. Nor do we declare it only, but openly testify our desire that it may, for the health of souls, be restored.

This power of spiritual discipline entrusted to the Church by our Lord Jesus Christ, is inalienable. However bound down by worldly bonds, and entangled by the course of our secular state, so as to be for a time suspended from activity, there must ever exist an imperishable power of judging and chastening sinners now in this life, that their souls “may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” It is indeed much to be desired that this godly discipline of repentance were restored. Thousands who, in days or ruder, but more living faith would have been chastened into penitents, now hide the corruptions which fester inwardly, and die in their sins. It is the flock that perishes when the
shepherd’s staff is broken. In this luxurious and unchastened land, it is to be feared that multitudes “be in the hell like sheep,” and “death gnaweth upon them,” for lack of the loving severity and the stern tenderness of discipline.

2. But though the first end of this power of absolution be the public reconciliation of penitents yet there is another equally important, equally, nay, even, if possible, more blessed, and full of divine compassion upon fallen Christians, and that is the private absolution to which the Church, in the name of Christ, invites all who cannot quiet their own conscience before God.

The unbelief and impenitence of the world may suspend outward discipline, but the inward consolations of repenting Christians are beyond its reach. It cannot thrust itself between penitent souls and the pastor who bears the heavenly keys.

In days when there was more power in faith, more fire in love, more abasement in repentance, many of us who pass to and fro unchastened would have earnestly prayed to receive the yoke of a salutary penance. How do you know but that your sins may be following you now? Many are hemmed in by them and know it not. Guilt hangs upon them and they are not aware. Forgotten sins, though slow, are sure of foot. How have you assured yourselves that the sins of childhood, youth, or of your more self-possessed and daring manhood, are put away? They do not trouble you. But security is no sign of safety. Your conscience is not burdened. But that does not shew that they are taken away. Forgotten sins cannot burden us. Sins dimly seen in the twilight of a dull heart give little trouble. Insensibility is proof against disquiet; insconsciousness leaves no room for compunction. To be free from alarm is no sign of true repentance. There must be surer signs than these. It may be you will desire upon a deathbed, or in the foresight of death approaching, something more than your own self-absolution, to assure you there is no train of sin still following you to judgment. Are you so sure that you can make no mistake in this? And what if you be mistaken? What if at your passing hour, you wake up under the flood of eternal light, and see yourself all soiled and spotted with forgotten unrepented sins? We can make this mistake but once! A better ten thousandfold is all humiliation, all bitterness, all shame, a whole life of penance, a whole age of sorrow in this present time. Than to run into so much as a shadow of peril, lest death should first reveal to us this one eternal mistake. How far wiser in their generation are the children of this world! Who dresses his own wounds, or plays the physician to his own fevered pulses? Who is his own pleader in a charge of life or death? Who counsels himself even in the vilest matters? And yet for the healing of the soul, and for the judgment after death, we are all supremely skilled. Alas for us! If a mistake can be our ruin, here is one upon the threshold; a mistake fraught with eternal perils; the forerunner it may be of that mistake which is everlasting. It is in pity and tenderness to our infirmities of ignorance and fear that our Lord Jesus Christ has committed to his pastors the keys of His heavenly kingdom. He has by the Spirit given His pastors (Eph. IV.11) to the Church that they may be the guides of sinners, and safeguards against self-deceit. It is a benign and loving appointment of the Good Shepherd, for after He has marked us for His own,
we may still perish by our own self-guidance. Happy are they who from early childhood have been under a pastor’s care; who have been thereby restrained from the blind and deadly wanderings of sin. What makes men so unwilling to accuse themselves before God, in the hearing of his servants, but that long years of self-guidance or rather of self-deceit have heaped up a multitude of sins before which their hearts dies away for fear and shame? The longer they keep silence, the harder it will be to speak at last. Happy they whom early guidance has kept from the shame by keeping them from sin. But happy only in the next degree are they to whom God in His love gives grace to break the proud or trembling silence of their hearts by a full confession. Now what are the pleas that people make for keeping aloof from this office of mercy? They are only two. One is to say, “My conscience is not burdened.” But how do you know your conscience ought not to be burdened? Are you the best, the most discerning, the most impartial judge? May not this very feeling by your one eternal mistake.

The other plea is, “I repent, and all sins are forgiven to a penitent.” Yes, but this touches the very quick. Are you so sure you do repent? Is it so easy to be a penitent, that you can forego the office of grace especially ordained for penitents? Are you so sure that your repentance is not the repentance of fear, that it is perfect in its extent, that it is fervent in its spirit, that it is the sorrow of pure love; that you have made restitution in kind and in measure; that your confessions are without extenuations, and your self-examination without self-deceit? Are you sure of all this. Then you have one great reason to mistrust yourself; I mean, because you are so sure. If you were less satisfied you might be surer; because you are so sure you have most reason for misgiving. Why leave any room for danger in a risk so great? Make all doubly sure. Ask of God grace to know yourself, and to lay yourself open with a full and true confession. Make the revelation of your sin, which, after all must come upon the unwilling at the last day, to be now your free and penitential choice. Anticipate a shadow of the confusion which must cover all faces when all hidden things shall be brought to light before men and angels. Let us not deceive ourselves because we are not open sinners, let us not be too secure. “Some mens sins are manifest, going before to judgment and some men they follow after,” stealthily and surely, like shadows, cleaving to the whole man – turning as we turn- dwelling where we abide-mysterious and unseperable.

Let us never believe ourselves to be secure till we have washed the feet that were wounded for us with the tears of a living, purifying sorrow. Let us make haste to accuse ourselves at the foot of the Cross. Thither our sins cannot follow us. There only can we be safe from their pursuit. But let us not cheat ourselves by an imaginary conversion or by a mock repentance. If you touch the Cross it will leave its mark upon you. If you bear no fruit of the Cross, be sure that you have never touched it yet. Sorrow, humility, self-denial, a tender conscience, a spirit of love, these are the marks of the Lord Jesus, the print of the nails, and the pledges of our pardon. Slack not your repentance, till you have made these your own.

[Transcription developed by Heather Ligler]