

CHAPTER ONE

SIN, SINS, AND THE SINNER

THE NATURE OF THIS MEETING—

THE TEACHING OF THE GOSPEL

Tonight we begin a series of Bible-study meetings. But before we begin, I would like to first say a few words concerning the nature of these meetings. I do not know if there are some here who are with us for the first time. Some who come for the first time find it very hard to locate our address. Many have complained that the street we are on is difficult to locate. Some have even said that though they were actually sitting here, they did not know how to leave from here after the meeting. They did not know which way to turn to get to that auto shop they saw as they came here, and they did not know how to walk from there to the tram stop or to the bus stop. Even though they were here, they were not sure of and could hardly remember the way they came. This is the case with many Christians in their Christian life. If you ask them if they have believed in the Lord, they will say yes. But if you ask them how they have believed, they will say that they are not sure. They are not clear at all about the way they were saved.

The meetings that we are having now are not revival or gospel meetings. And while the subject of these meetings is the gospel, they are not gospel meetings. We are not preaching the gospel this time; instead, we are teaching the gospel. Why do we need to teach the gospel? Many have been saved and have become Christians, but they still do not know how they have become Christians. What we are doing today is telling people how they have become Christians. In other words, we are telling them that they turned south from Aiwenyi Road and walked straight ahead to that auto shop they saw, that they turned from there to Wen-teh Lane where we are now, took a few steps from there to the window of our meeting hall, turned at the entrance of our hall and walked to a trash can by the door of the meeting hall, and then entered into the meeting hall. This time we are not persuading people to come in; rather, we are telling them how to come in.

If there are some sitting here who have not believed in the Lord, they may be disappointed. What we are doing this time is showing those who have believed how they have believed. Some brothers and sisters may be very clear about the gospel; they may already know what we are speaking about. But I hope that the Lord would bless us and grant us new light. You must be clear that these meetings are Bible-study meetings and are meant for those who have believed but do not know how they have believed. This time I am not trying to encourage you or revive you. I am merely pointing out the direction to you. In other words, in these meetings I am nothing more than a tour guide.

SIN, SINS, AND THE SINNER

I will begin with a very basic foundation concerning the gospel. Yet I hope that in every meeting we will advance a little. In this first meeting, our subject is one which most people do not like to hear about, but one which is unavoidable. Our subject in this meeting is sin, sins, and sinners.

The Bible pays much attention to the matter of sin. Only when we are clear about sin can we understand salvation. If we want to know about the gospel of God and the salvation of God, we must first know what sin is. We must firstly see how sin has affected us and how we have

become sinners. Only then will we be clear about what God's salvation is. We will first consider the ABCs. We need to see what sin is, what sins are, and who is a sinner.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SIN AND SINS

We can easily tell the difference between sin and sins: sin is singular, and sins are plural. However, we need to distinguish between sin and sins. If you cannot differentiate between the two, it will be impossible for you to be clear about your salvation. If someone is not clear about the difference between sin and sins, even if he is saved, his salvation is probably an unclear one. What is sin according to the Bible? What are sins? Let me give a brief definition first. Sin refers to that power within us that motivates us to commit sinful acts. Sins, on the other hand, refer to the particular individual sinful acts that we commit outwardly.

What is sin? I do not like to use terms such as "original sin," "the root of sin," "the source of sin," or the like. These are terms created by theologians and are unnecessary for us now. We will remain simple and consider this matter from our experience. We know that there is something within us that motivates and forces us to have certain spontaneous inclinations; it compels us toward the way of lust and passion. According to the Bible this something is sin (Rom. 7:8, 16-17). But not only is there this sin within us that forces and compels us, there are also the individual sinful acts, the sins, which are committed outwardly. In the Bible sins are related to our conduct, while sin is related to our natural life. Sins are that which are committed by the hands, the feet, the heart, and even the whole body. Paul refers to this when he speaks of the practices of the body (Rom. 8:13). But what is sin? Sin is a law that controls our members (Rom. 7:23). There is something within us that compels us to sin, to commit evil, and this something is sin.

If we want to differentiate clearly between sin and sins, there is one portion of the Scriptures which we must consider. It is the first eight chapters of the book of Romans. These eight chapters show us the full significance of sin. In these eight chapters we find one outstanding feature: from chapter one through 5:11, only the word sins is mentioned; sin is never mentioned. But from 5:12 until the end of chapter eight, what we find is sin, not sins. From chapter one through 5:11, Romans shows us that man has committed sins before God. From 5:12 on, Romans shows us what kind of person man is before God: he is a sinner before God. Sin refers to the life that we have. Prior to Romans 5:12, there is no mention of the dead being made alive, for the problem there is not that one needs to be made alive, but that the individual sins that one has committed need to be forgiven. From 5:12 on, we have the second section. Here we see something strong and powerful within us as a law in our members, which is sin, that compels and drags us to commit sinful acts, that is, sins. For this, there is the need of being freed.

Sins have to do with our conduct. Hence, the Bible shows us that for our sins we need forgiveness (Matt. 26:28; Acts 2:38; 10:43). But sin is that which entices and compels us to commit sinful acts. Hence, the Bible shows us that we need to be freed from sin (Rom. 6:18, 22). Once I met a missionary who talked about "the forgiveness of sin." Right away I stood up and grasped his hand and asked, "Where in the Bible does it say 'the forgiveness of sin'?" He contended that there are many such cases. When I asked if he could find one for me, he said, "What do you mean? Can you not find even one place that says this?" I told him that nowhere in

the entire Bible are the words the forgiveness of sin mentioned; instead, the Bible always speaks of "the forgiveness of sins." It is the sins that are forgiven, not sin. He did not believe my words, so he went to look this up in his Bible. Eventually he told me, "Mr. Nee, it is so strange. Every time this phrase is used, a little s is added in." I believe that you can see that it is the sins that are forgiven, not sin.

Sins are outside of us. That is why they need to be forgiven. But something else is inside of us, something strong and powerful that compels us to commit sins. For this we do not need forgiveness; for this our one need is to be freed. As soon as we are no longer under its power and have nothing to do with it, we will be at peace. The solution to sins comes from forgiveness. The solution to sin, however, comes when we are no longer under its power and have nothing to do with it. Sins are a matter of our actions and are committed one by one. That is why they need to be forgiven. But sin is within us, and we need to be freed from it.

Therefore, the Bible never says "forgiveness of sin" but "forgiveness of sins." Neither does the Bible speak about being "freed from sins." I can assure you that the Bible never says this. Instead the Bible says that we are "freed from sin," rather than from sins. The only thing that we need to escape and be freed from is that which entices us and compels us to commit sins. This distinction is clearly made in the Bible.

I can compare the two in this way:

Sin, according to the Scriptures, is said to be in the flesh; whereas sins are in our conduct.

Sin is a principle in us; it is a principle of the life we have. Sins are acts committed by us; they are acts in our living.

Sin is a law in the members. Sins are transgressions that we commit; they are activities and real acts.

Sin is related to our being; sins are related to our doing.

Sin is what we are; sins are what we do.

Sin is in the realm of our life; sins are in the realm of the conscience.

Sin is related to the power of the life we possess; sins are related to the power of the conscience. A person is governed by the sin in his natural life, but he is condemned in his conscience by the sins committed outwardly.

Sin is something considered as a whole; sins are something considered case by case.

Sin is inside man; sins are before God.

Sin requires our being made free; sins require our being forgiven.

Sin is related to sanctification; sins are related to justification.

Sin is a matter of overcoming; sins are a matter of having peace in one's heart.

Sin is in man's nature; sins are in man's ways.

Figuratively speaking, sin is like a tree, and sins are like the fruit of the tree.

We can make this matter clear with a simple illustration. In preaching the gospel, we often compare the sinner to a debtor. We all realize that to be a debtor is not a pleasant matter. But we must remember that it is one thing for a man to have debts; it is another thing for a man to have a disposition for incurring debts. A person who borrows again and again is not that concerned about using others' money. The Bible says that Christians should not be debtors (Rom. 13:8); they should not borrow from others. A person with a borrowing disposition may borrow two or three hundred dollars from someone today, then two or three thousand dollars from someone else tomorrow. Even if he is unable to pay back his debts, and his relatives or friends have to pay back the money for him, after a few days he will begin to consider borrowing again. This shows that to borrow is one thing, but to have a borrowing disposition is another. The sins that the Bible describes are like the outward debts, while sin is like the inward habit and disposition; it is like the mind that is inclined to borrow easily. A person with such a mind will not stop borrowing just because someone else has paid his debts. On the contrary, he may borrow even more because others are now paying his debts.

This is why God is dealing not just with the record of sins, but also with the inclination toward sin. We can see that it is important to deal with the sins, but it is equally important to deal with sin. Only when we see both of these aspects can our understanding of our salvation be complete.

WHO IS A SINNER?

Now we need to ask the question: Who is a sinner? I know that some of the brothers and sisters here have been believers for over twenty years. Some have even worked for the Lord for over fifteen years. My question can be considered as one of the ABCs of the Bible. Who is a sinner? I believe that many would answer that a sinner is someone who sins. If you check Webster's dictionary, I am afraid that you would get the answer that a sinner is one who sins. But once you read the Bible, you will have to reject this definition, because it is not that the ones who sin are sinners, but that the sinners are the ones who commit sins. What does this mean? Many among us have read the book of Romans. I have heard many say that Paul, in proving that everyone in the world is a sinner, mentioned in chapter three that all have sinned and have come short of the glory of God (v. 23). God seeks the righteous and finds none; He seeks those who understand and who seek after Him and finds none; all have lied and have turned aside (vv. 10-13). Hence, it seems that Paul is saying that everyone in the world is a sinner. But be careful. Do not be too quick to say this. Does Romans 3 mention the sinner at all? If anyone can find the word sinner in Romans 3, I will thank him for it. Where is the sinner mentioned in this chapter? Please note that the sinner is never mentioned here. Some have said that because Romans 3 talks about man sinning, it proves that man is a sinner. But

Romans 3 does not mention the sinner. It is Romans 5 that talks about the sinner. Therefore, we must make the distinction: Romans 3 is on the problem of sins, and Romans 5 is on the problem of the sinner. All that Romans 3 tells us is that all have sinned. It is only in Romans 5 that we are told who the sinners are.

Everyone who was born in Adam is a sinner. This is what Romans 5:19 tells us. If you open up J.N. Darby's New Translation, you will find that he used the words have been constituted sinners. We are all sinners by constitution. When you write a resume, there are two things that you must put in. One is your birthplace, and the other is your profession. According to God, we are sinners by birth, and we are those who sin by profession. Because we are sinners by birth, we are always sinners, whether we sin or not.

Once I was conducting a Bible study with the brothers in Canton. I told them that there are two kinds of sinners in the world—the sinning sinners and the moral sinners. But whether you are a sinning sinner or a moral sinner, you are still a sinner. God says that all who are born in Adam are sinners. It does not matter what kind of person you are; as long as you are born in Adam, you are a sinner. If you sin, you are a sinning sinner. And if you have not sinned, or to be more accurate, if you have sinned less, you are a moral sinner, or a sinner who sins little. If you are a noble person, you are a noble sinner. If you consider yourself holy, you are a holy sinner. In any case, you are still a sinner. Today the biggest mistake among men is to consider a man a sinner only because he has sinned; if he has not sinned, he is not considered a sinner. But there is no such thing. Whether you sin or not, as long as you are a man, you are a sinner. As long as you are born in Adam, you are a sinner. A man does not become a sinner because he sins; rather, he sins because he is a sinner.

Therefore, my friends, remember God's Word. We are sinners; we do not become sinners. We do not need to become sinners. Once I was talking to a brother. There was a thermal flask in front of him, and he said, "Here is a thermal flask. If it prays, 'I want to be a thermal flask,' what will happen?" I said, "It already is one. It does not have to be one." Likewise with us, once we are something, we do not have to become it.

Though our sins are forgiven, we remain sinners. We can call ourselves the forgiven sinners. But many believe that they are no longer sinners. They think that if we talk about being sinners, it means that we do not know the gospel that well. But this may not be all that true. Paul did not say that his sins were not forgiven. But he did say that he was a sinner (1 Tim. 1:15). Have you seen the difference here? If you were to ask Paul if his sins were forgiven, he could not be so humble as to say no. But Paul could humbly say that he is a sinner. He could not deny the work of God in him. But neither could he deny his position in Adam. Although we have received fresh grace in Christ, God has not fully removed the problem of sin; we are still sinners. The problem of sin will not be fully solved until the new heaven and new earth appear. However, this does not mean that we have not received a complete salvation. Please do not misunderstand me. In a few days we will come to this point.

The thing that we must see clearly and accurately is that everyone in the world is a sinner. Whether you have sinned or not, as long as you are a man, you are a sinner. When some listen to the gospel, they spend the whole time reasoning about how many or how few sins they have committed. But before God there is only one issue: Are you in Christ or in Adam? All who are in Adam are sinners, and as long as you are a sinner, nothing more needs to be said.

Why then did Paul have to tell us in Romans 1—3 about all the sins that man commits? These few chapters show us that sinners sin. The first three chapters of Romans prove that a sinner is known by the sins that he commits. But Romans 5 tells us what kind of person a sinner actually is. Once I went to Jian in Kiangsi and one evening met a brother who is a security guard. He did not believe that I was a preacher and a worker for the Lord. Here was a problem. I am a worker for the Lord and a servant of Christ, but he would not believe it. Therefore, I had to prove to him that I was one. I gave him many proofs. In the end he did believe. In the same way, we are sinners already. But this has not been proven to us. The first three chapters of Romans prove that we are sinners. They give us the evidence. By showing us that we have sinned in such ways, these chapters prove to us that we are sinners. Chapter five says that we are sinners, but the first three chapters prove that we are sinners.

Let me relate another story. In Fukien, there were some robbers and kidnappers who had previously been nominal Christians. Though they were robbers and kidnappers, their consciences were still somewhat exercised; therefore, if they realized that they had kidnapped a pastor or a preacher they would release him without ransom. By and by, when some were kidnapped, they said that they were pastors or preachers of such and such a denomination. What could the robbers do? After some time, they came up with a way. Every time someone said that he was a pastor, the robbers would ask him to recite the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Beatitudes. Those who could recite them had to be pastors, and so they were let go. I heard this story recently and thought that it was very interesting. If you were a pastor, you had to prove it. The robbers required that these people prove to them that they were pastors. In the same way, God wants to prove to us that we are sinners. Without proving this to us, we may forget about our true self. This is why Romans 1—3 enumerate all those sins. It is to show us that we are sinners. After so many facts are presented there, we are proven to be sinners.

Therefore, one should never think that it is the many sins that makes us sinners. We have been sinners for a long time already. We do not become sinners after these sins are committed. We must lay this foundation clearly. Today you can walk out to the street and meet anyone, and take him by the hand and tell him that he is a sinner. If he says that he could not be a sinner because he has not murdered anyone or set fire to anyone's house, you can tell him that he is a sinner who has never murdered anyone or set fire to anyone's house. If someone tells you that he never robs or commits fornication, you can tell him that he is a sinner who never robs or commits fornication. But no matter whom you meet, you can say that he is a sinner.

In the whole New Testament, only Romans 5:19 tells us who a sinner is. All the other places in the New Testament tell us what the sinner does. Only this one place tells us

who the sinner is. A sinner can do a million things, but these do not constitute him a sinner. As long as he is born in Adam, he is a sinner.

THE GREATEST SIN

We have seen the matters of sin, sins, and the sinner. By birth, we are sinners, and our walk matches our birth. Because we are sinners, our conduct matches our title sinner. There are many "gentlemen" in this world who cover up their sins and will not admit that they are sinners. But this does not mean that they are not sinners. It only means that they have disguised themselves as ones without sins. We are sinners by birth, and our profession and walk is to commit sins. Let me repeat that it is not because we have sinned that we have become sinners; rather, it is because we are sinners that we have sinned. The fact that we are sinners causes us to sin. Those who can sin prove that they are sinners.

Tonight we have a few Western friends here with us. Perhaps they all speak the Shanghai dialect. The Shanghainese can of course speak the Shanghai dialect. But we cannot say that everyone who can speak the Shanghai dialect is Shanghainese. Many have put a lot of effort into learning the Shanghai dialect, but they are not Shanghainese. There also may be some Shanghainese who do not speak the Shanghai dialect. We cannot say that because they do not speak the Shanghai dialect, they are not Shanghainese. They are still Shanghainese, but they are Shanghainese who cannot speak the Shanghai dialect. However, there are very few Shanghainese who do not speak the Shanghai dialect. Generally speaking, all Shanghainese speak the Shanghai dialect. It is a natural thing for them to speak the Shanghai dialect. In the same way, it is all but unavoidable for those with a sinner's life to live a sinner's living.

Concerning the sins that sinners commit, I prefer not to list them in detail, as many have done. I would just like to briefly prove man's sin. Both in the New Testament, as well as in the Old, there are a few sins that are especially prominent. In the Old Testament, one sin which is particularly striking is the failure to love God. In the New Testament, there is also one sin that is particularly striking, the refusal to believe in the Lord. When the Bible says that man is condemned and has become a sinner in the eyes of God, it does not mean that he has committed a multitude of sins that incur God's wrath, such as murder, arson, fornication, pride, debauchery, prostitution, gambling, or other kinds of filthy and secret sins. This is not what the Bible emphasizes. What the Bible considers serious is the problem that has arisen between man and God. The end of the law is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (Matt. 22:36-37; Mark 12:30). Hence, at issue is not whether one has stolen from others, or whether one has murdered or plotted arson. At issue are not personal lusts or thoughts or words. Rather, at issue is the problem of one's relationship with God.

Among all the sins, there is one which tops the list. This one sin brings in all sins. By this one sin, all other sins follow. The Bible says that sin entered into the world through one man (Rom. 5:12). I want to ask you, What sin did that one man commit? Was it fornication, theft, murder, arson? There were no such things in Eden. All the evil, filthy, and terrible things that happen in the

world today come from one incident involving Adam. But what did Adam do? Adam did not murder; he did not commit fornication; he did not commit any of the evil and filthy sins in the world today. The sin that Adam committed was simple and pure. Adam thought that God was holding one thing back from him. He thought that if he were to eat of the fruit of that tree, he would be like God. The sin that Adam committed was actually a problem that developed between him and God. God expected Adam to be standing on his proper ground. But Adam did not believe that what God had given him was profitable for him. He began to doubt the love of God. A problem developed concerning the love of God.

Adam did not commit that many sins in this incident. He did not gamble; he did not set his eyes on evil things in the streets; he did not read evil books. Adam's sin was a problem that arose between him and God. Following that, many sins came. Once Adam sinned in this way, all kinds of sins followed. Sins are after their kind, and they all come one after another. However, the first sin was not the sin that we would have thought. The first sin was the unique sin in the Old Testament, the sin of not loving God. After a problem developed between man and God, problems among men began to develop. In the garden of Eden, a problem developed in man; then, outside the garden of Eden, the older brother murdered the younger, and all kinds of sins followed. Hence, we see that sins did not begin in a serious and filthy way, as we might imagine. The Bible shows us that sins began with something very simple. But actually the first sin was the most serious one—a problem between man and God.

When we look into the New Testament, we see the Lord Jesus saying many times that he who believes has eternal life (John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25). There are probably fifty or more times that the Lord indicates that he who believes has eternal life. Who then are those who will perish? Is it the murderers who will go to hell? Is it the fornicators who will perish? Is it those who have filthy thoughts and improper behavior who will go into perdition? Not necessarily. The Gospel of John tells us again and again that it is those who do not believe who are condemned (John 3:16, 18). Those who do not believe have the wrath of God upon them always (John 3:36). The Lord Jesus said that the Holy Spirit came that the world would be convicted concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Why concerning sin? Is it because you have gone to the movies lately? Is it because you have gambled lately? Is it because you have murdered someone or have committed arson? No. "Concerning sin, because they do not believe into Me" (John 16:9).

The greatest difficulty we have today is that we consider filthiness sin, but we do not pay much attention to the Lord's word to see what God considers sin. The Lord said that he who does not believe has been condemned. The reason man commits all his sins is that he does not have a proper relationship with the Lord Jesus. In the Old Testament, it was when man lost his proper relationship with God that all kinds of sins were committed. In the New Testament, it is when man loses the proper relationship with the Lord Jesus that all kinds of sins are committed. Here lie all the problems. While you are sitting here tonight, you may think that even though I have proven that you are a sinner, you really have not committed very many sins. But no one in the whole world can say that he has not committed the sin of not loving God. Neither is there anyone in the whole world who can say that he has not committed the sin of not believing in the Lord. For this reason, no one can say that he is not a sinner.

Do you remember Luke 15? There you have a prodigal son and his father. The prodigal son left his father and squandered his estate. But when did the prodigal son become prodigal? Was he a prodigal son when he had a lot of money in his pocket and was living lavishly in a distant country? Or did he become a prodigal only after he had spent all that he had and was hungry while he fed the hogs? Actually, he was a prodigal the day he left his father's house. Before he even spent a dime, he was already a prodigal. He did not become a prodigal only after he had spent all that he had and was feeding the hogs and eating the carob pods and while his garments were torn and his stomach was empty. He became a prodigal when he left his father's house. Let me ask you a question. Suppose the younger son had not spent any money when he was in the distant country. Suppose instead that he had earned a lot of money, that he had gone into business, made a fortune, and became even richer than his father. Would he still have been a prodigal? Indeed he would have. In the eyes of his father, he would have still been a prodigal.

Today there is a very wrong concept that must be rooted out of our mind. We think that because a man has failed to do good, he becomes a sinner. This is absolutely wrong. As long as a man has departed from God, he is a sinner. Even if he is ten times more moral than others, as long as he is away from God, he is a sinner. You must remember therefore that as Christians, we may perform all the outward services that there are to perform, and we may fulfill all the outward duties that there are to fulfill; we may pray as we always have, and we may read the Bible and attend church meetings as we always have; we may do everything as we always have, and may even do them more. Yet if there is a problem between us and God, we have sinned. When the first love is gone, there is a problem. Who is a prodigal? It is not simply one who has squandered his father's estate, but rather one who has just left his father's house. The moment that a person leaves his father's house he becomes a prodigal. Even if he makes a fortune while he is away, he is still a prodigal. Of course, there will never be a prodigal who makes a fortune in the world. A prodigal will never prosper. A prodigal will always squander away all the money he has. God allows the "money" to be squandered, so that man will know that it is not a good thing to depart from God and will realize that he is a sinner after all.

We now see how we have received the qualification of a sinner and how we have become sinners. We become sinners by developing a relationship with sin, and we commit sins by developing a relationship with sins. There is a difference between the two. Since I was born in Adam and am under sin's dominion, sin has become the principle of my life and my living, and I have become a sinner. In the same way, the many individual sins outside of me have made me one who commits sins. Committing sins has to do with sins, and being a sinner has to do with sin.

THE OTHER SINS

This does not mean that the other sins are unimportant. All sins carry punishment with them. In the Old Testament, those who did not love God committed many other sins spontaneously. In the New Testament, those who do not believe in the Lord also commit many sins spontaneously. The failure to love God and the refusal to believe in the Lord are the two main sins. From these many other sins are produced, such as unrighteous acts, evil deeds, expressions of greed, wickedness, jealousy, murder, strife, deceit, displays of hatred, slander, backbiting, blasphemy, insolence, pride, arrogance, false accusations, disobedience to parents, unfaithfulness, a lack of natural affection and mercy, self-love, the love of money, ingratitude, unholiness, ferociousness, the despising

of good, betraying others, recklessness, loving pleasure rather than God, giving the appearance of godliness without having its reality, and so on. But none of these are the most serious sin that man has ever committed, even though they are sins before God. Unfortunately, man does not realize that these sins are produced through one main sin. Both the sinners in the world and the believers in the church try to deal only with these sins. It seems as if the removal of all these sins would rid us of the problem of sin altogether. But man has not realized that these sins occupy only a secondary place in the Bible.

Though impossible, what if someone had received enough grace to deal with all the other sins? If he had been a person in the Old Testament age, he would have realized that there was still the sin of not loving God. Although he would no longer have the other sins, his conscience would still bother him. If he were a person in the New Testament age, he would realize that there is still the sin of not believing in the Lord. Although he would no longer be condemned by the other sins, he would not feel satisfied in the deepest part of his heart, because the Spirit of God would convict him of his sin of unbelief.

Man perishes because of his unbelief. Unbelief causes the punishment for all the other sins to fall upon an unbelieving one. The immediate reason for man's perdition is his many sins. The ultimate reason is man's sin of unbelief. Because of this, we have to be concerned with the sin of unbelief. Of course, we cannot overlook the other sins either.

THE RESULT OF SIN AND SINS

Once a man succumbs to the power of sin, he commits a variety of sins. Once a man commits these many sins, he brings upon himself the guilt or condemnation for sins, the verdict or judgment for sins. As soon as we have sinned, there is the problem of guiltiness. Being guilty is not used merely to imply one's act of transgression. It is like a verdict in court that pronounces one either guilty or not guilty. It is a description of whether or not one is legally sinful. According to the Bible, it is not our sin that we are responsible for, but our sins. Our sin does not bring in the problem of guiltiness before God. Rather, the sins we have committed bring in this problem. The Bible says that if we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8). Yet at the same time, it does not require us to bear the guilt for our sin. If we confess our sins, God will forgive us of our sins (1 John 1:9). This shows us that we do have to bear the responsibility for our sins.

Because there are the sins, there is guilt. Once a person is guilty, there is the problem of punishment. Because there is punishment, there is unrest in the conscience and the consciousness of being apart from God. Sins make us condemned persons before God. They leave us waiting for God's wrath to appear. Only after one is forgiven is his conscience at peace; only then will he have the boldness to come to God. But even if the many sins are forgiven, as long as the problem of sin remains, the many sins will continue to come, and the problem of guilt will recur. This is why after God has forgiven our sins, He must go on to free us from sin.

MAN'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN AND SINS

Before we were saved, we did not feel the evil of sin. Before we became Christians, all that we felt was the evil of the many sins. Even after we became Christians, what saddened us were our many sins, not sin itself. The many sins made us feel terrible, not sin itself. Even though we are saved now, we may still lie or lose our temper, and we may be jealous and proud, or be inadvertently loose with others' possessions. Hence, these individual sins bother us. What do we do? We go before God and ask for forgiveness for each of these items. We may say, "O God, I have been bad today. I have sinned again. Please forgive me." If you did twelve wrong things yesterday, you felt sorry inside. But if you have done only two wrong things today, you feel happy within. You feel that you have committed far fewer sins today, that there are fewer sins in you now. But let me remind you that this is only the initial stage of a Christian life. During this period of time, we feel sorry only for the many sins that we commit.

After we have been Christians for many years, we realize that what saddens and bothers us are not the many sins, but sin itself. In the end, we find out that it is not the things that we do that are wrong, but our person that is wrong. It is not the things that we do that are evil; it is our person itself that is evil. One comes to realize that all the things that he has done are but outward matters and that the real evil thing is his person. There is a natural principle inside us that causes us to sin. The outward things can be of many categories. We can call them pride, jealousy, filthiness, or any other names. There can be all kinds of sins outside of us. But within us there is only one principle, and it is something that craves sins. There is an inclination within us toward sins. There is something in our being that craves these outward things. This is why the Bible makes these outward sins plural in number; they are realized item by item. Pride is one, lying is another, and fornication is yet another. Pride is different from murder, and lying is different from fornication. But there is only one thing which inclines us to sin, which controls and entices us. The reason that we sin is that there is a law within us. It constantly directs us toward the outward sins. This sin is singular in the Bible. It does not denote our conduct; rather, it denotes our nature. This sin is in our nature, and we need to be freed from it.

Since God's salvation for man is complete, He must deliver us from the many sins and He must also deliver us from sin itself. If God only delivers us from the many sins, without delivering us from sin, then God's salvation cannot be said to be complete. Since there are two things with us, the sins and the sin, we need a twofold salvation. On the one hand, we need to be delivered from the many sins. On the other hand, we need to be delivered from sin. In the following pages we will see how in accomplishing His complete salvation through the redemption of Christ, God delivers us both from sins and from sin.

I can clarify my point with an illustration. The many sins are like the fruit of a tree. They exist individually, and a tree can bear one or two hundred of them. This is how sins are. Sin, on the other hand, is like the tree itself. What we the sinners see with our eyes is the fruit. We realize that the fruits are bad, but we do not see that the tree is just as bad. The fruits are bad because the tree is bad. This is how God teaches us to understand the

problem of sin. At the beginning He shows us the individual sins. In the end, He shows us ourselves. At the beginning we need forgiveness because we have committed sins. But after a while we realize that we need to be freed because we are sinners.

THE THREE ASPECTS OF SIN

The Bible shows us that there are three aspects of sin. To put it another way, sin is in three places. First, sin is before God. Second, sin is in the conscience. Third, sin is in the flesh. The Bible always shows us sin according to these three lines. It is like one river that is fed by three tributaries. If we want to know sin in a thorough way, we must be clear about these three lines. We must know that our sin is before God, in the conscience, and in the flesh. If we are not clear about these three lines and are not able to distinguish between them, we will not be clear concerning the problem of sin. If we confuse the three lines, we will not realize God's view concerning sin, and we will not comprehend the thoroughness of God's work in dealing with sin. Only when we understand the need will we acknowledge the treatment. If we do not know the need, we will assume that the treatment is unnecessary. Hence, we must know sin first, and then we can know the thoroughness of God's salvation.

God is a righteous God. In the administration of the universe He is the highest authority. He is the Ruler of the universe. He has definite laws and ordinances concerning sins. He rewards man according to what man has done, and He recompenses according to how man has acted. God deals with the world in His position as the sovereign Ruler. At the time of Adam, though there was no such term for it, there was the Adamic law. After Noah, again though there was no such term for it, there was the Noachian law. At the time of Moses, the term law specifically began to be used. It was not until then that the law was specifically placed before man. Whether we are talking about the explicit law after the time of Moses or about the implicit law before the time of Moses, God's verdict is that those who sin must die. He demands that those who transgress against the law will be punished with eternal death. While man is alive, though his flesh is living, his spirit is dying. In the end, his flesh will also die. In eternity, his spirit, soul, and body will all die. If man does not sin, God will not execute the punishment. But if man does sin, God will surely execute the punishment. God has enacted ordinances and laws concerning man's sins.

When sins occur in our life, there is first the record of sins before God. Let me illustrate with an example. Recently people were forbidden to park their cars anywhere they pleased. Two months ago you could park your car anywhere. You could even park your car on the wrong side of the street, and you were free to park your car in any direction. But two months ago the traffic department ruled out this practice. Now as you drive, you see all the cars parked in the same direction. There is a new law that says that all cars should be parked in the same direction as the flow of traffic. If you do not do this, you violate the law. If a brother comes to the meeting today by car and parks in the wrong direction, an officer from the police department may see this and record a violation against him at the police department. The violation is recorded not in the street where he parked, but in the police department, even though the brother may not be aware of

the fact. The violation may have happened on Ha-tung Road, but the place where the violation is recorded is the Tsin-an-tsu district police department.

The incidents of sin occur in man. But as soon as man sins, there is the record of it before God. God is the sovereign Ruler of the world. He is in control of everything. If in the course of our lives we have transgressed the law, there is a record of our sin before God. This is why the Old Testament frequently speaks of sinning against Jehovah. The reason an act of sin is evil and terrifying is that once a sin is committed, there is the record of sin before God. Since God says that he who sins must die, He has to execute His judgment on sins. There is no way for us to escape, for the record of sin is there already.

Second, there is the knowledge of the sin in our conscience. Though there is a record of the sin before God, until you know about it, you may still be able to smile and rejoice in your seat, and you may be able to act as if nothing has happened. But once you have the knowledge of a sin, the sin that is before God has come into your conscience. Originally, this sin was only before God; now it is identified in your conscience. What is the conscience? It is a "window." God's light shines into you through the window of your conscience. Whenever God's light shines into you, you feel uncomfortable and you know that you have done something wrong.

There may be someone here tonight who has parked his car in the wrong direction. Perhaps he was not aware of his mistake and may have been quite unconcerned. But since I have mentioned it, he will now feel uneasy within. My words have moved the record of his sin from the police department into him. Hence, the conscience is turned by knowledge. Without knowledge, you are ignorant of your sins; and since your conscience does not bother you, you will feel peaceful. But as soon as you have the knowledge and begin to realize God's view and the view of the law concerning you, your conscience will not let you go.

Is it true that everyone has a conscience? Surely everyone has a conscience. But some consciences are closed up and light cannot get in. Some consciences are like a kitchen window that has a thick layer of grime on it. Through it you may be able to see the shadow of a man moving, but you cannot see the man clearly. If a person's conscience cannot take in God's light, he will be unconcerned and happy. But the moment he hears the gospel and sees his own sins, his place before God, and the record of his sins before God, his conscience has a problem. It will be bothered. It will not be at peace, but will condemn him. He will ask what he should do to be able to stand before the righteous God, and how he can become justified before such a righteous God.

The amazing thing about the conscience is that it may at worst go to sleep, but it will never die. Never think that the conscience has died. It will never die, but it will go to sleep. However, when the consciences of many wake up, they find that it is too late, that they do not have the opportunity anymore to believe or to be saved. Do not think that our conscience will let us go. One day it will catch up with us. One day it will speak. I have seen many who thought this way, who did much evil and thought that they would get by. But when their conscience finally woke up, they were caught by it.

What do people do when their conscience wakes up and they realize that they have sinned? As soon as their conscience catches up with them, they try to do good by performing good works.

What is the purpose of man's trying to do good works? The purpose is to bribe the conscience. The conscience shows man that he has sinned. So now he performs more charitable acts and does more good deeds to tell his conscience that although he has done so much wrong, he has also done all these good things. What does it mean to do good works? To do good works means to bribe the conscience when it starts accusing, in order to quell its condemnation. This is a way of salvation invented by man.

But please remember that this is basically the wrong way. Where is the basic error? The error lies in our assumption that sin exists only in our conscience. We forget that sin also exists before God. If sin were only in our conscience, then we would need to perform at most ten good works to more than compensate for our one mistake. But the problem now is not with our conscience. The problem now is what is before God. I cannot be absolved from judgment for one violation of illegal parking just because I park the car legally a hundred times. Sin is something before God. It is not merely something in our conscience. Not only do we have to deal with the sin in our conscience; we also have to deal with our sin before God. Only when we have dealt with the record of sin before God can the sin in our conscience be dealt with. We cannot deal with the problem in the conscience first, for the conscience can be pacified by self-deception. But remember that the conscience will never die.

Perhaps you have not seen the conscience at work yet. I have often seen people who are troubled in their conscience. When the light of God comes, the conscience is ill at ease. A person in such a condition would crawl into a hole in the floor if there were one. He would do anything to pacify his conscience. He would even forsake his life to redeem himself from sin. Why did Judas hang himself? It was because his conscience would not let him go. He had betrayed Jesus, and his conscience would not let him go.

Why is there no need for God to send many angels to throw men into the lake of fire as though they were throwing stones? Why is there no need for God to have many angels guarding the lake of fire? Is not God afraid of a revolt in hell? I am sure that for a man who has sinned hell is a blessing rather than a curse. When the conscience rises up to condemn a man, it demands that the man be punished. Punishment is not just a demand of God, it is also a demand of man. Before you see what sin is, you are afraid of punishment. But after you see what sin is, you will take punishment as a blessing. Have you ever seen murderers or assassins at the time of their execution? Before a man sees his sin, he may rejoice in murder. But after he sees his sin, he will rejoice in his own execution. Hence, hell is not only a place of punishment. It is also a place of escape. It is the ultimate place of escape. Sin in the conscience causes pain today and cries out for punishment in the coming age. Hence, for God to save us, He must deal with our sins before Him, and He must also deal with our sins in our conscience.

There is a third aspect to sin. Sin is not only before God and in man's conscience; sin is also in man's flesh. This is what Romans 7 and 8 tell us. What is the sin in the flesh? We have seen that, on the one hand, there is the record of sins before God and that, on the other hand, there is the condemnation of sins in man's conscience. Now we see the third aspect: the power of sin and the

activities of sin in man's flesh. Sin has its place. Sin is presiding. Sin is in man's flesh as the chairman. Please remember that sin is the chairman presiding in the flesh.

What do I mean by this? Sins before God and in man's own conscience are objective. For me the record of sins before God and the condemnation of sins in my conscience are matters of my feeling with respect to sin. But sin in the flesh is subjective. This means that the sin that is dwelling in me has the power to force me to sin; it has the power to incite and arouse me to sin. This is what the Bible calls the sin in the flesh.

For example, there may be a brother who earns a hundred dollars a month, but spends a hundred and fifty dollars a month. He likes to borrow money. It is his disposition. If he does not borrow, his hands will itch; even his head and his body will itch. After using up all of his salary, he must borrow some and spend it before he can feel comfortable. In him we can see the three aspects. First, he has many creditors, who have the records of his debts. Second, unless he has no knowledge of the consequences of borrowing, in which case he may still go on borrowing peacefully, he realizes that he is in danger and thus is burdened not only with the record of debt before his creditors, but also with the exposing by his conscience. Yet in addition, there is the sin in his flesh. He knows that it is wrong to borrow, yet he feels restless unless he continues to borrow. Something is prompting him and arousing him, telling him that he has not borrowed for months and that he should do it one more time. What is this? This is the sin in his flesh. On the one hand, sin is a fact with him; it results in a record of sin before God and sin in his conscience. On the other hand, sin is a power in his flesh; it incites and compels him, even drags and pulls him, to sin.

If you have never resisted sin, you have not felt its power. But if you try to resist sin, you will sense its power. When water is flowing, you do not feel its power if you flow along with it. But if you try to go against the flow, you will feel its power. Most rivers in China flow from the west to the east; so if you try to travel from the east to the west, you will feel how powerful China's rivers are. Those who know the power of sin the most are those who are the holiest, for they are the ones who try to oppose and to stand against sin. If you are joined to sin and are going along with it, surely you will not know its power. The sin in your flesh is all the time arousing and compelling you to sin, but only when you wake up to deal with sin will you realize that you are a lost and perishing sinner. Only then will you know that you are helpless and that you have no way to solve the problem of sin in your flesh, not to mention the presence of sins in your conscience and the record of sins before God.

Therefore, we have to see that when God saves us, He deals with all three aspects. The inward sin is dealt with by the cross and the crucifixion of the old man. We have mentioned this many times before, so we will not repeat it now. Our Bible study this time covers God's way of dealing with our sins before Him and the condemnation of sins in our conscience. Earlier I mentioned the problem of sin and sins. Sins refer to the sinful acts before God and in our conscience. Every time the Bible mentions sins, it is referring to the sinful acts before God and in our conscience. But every time the Bible mentions the sin in the flesh, it uses the word sin, not sins. If you remember this, you will have no trouble later on.

We thank God that His salvation is complete. He has dealt with our sins before Him. He has also judged our sins in the person of the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit has applied Christ's work to us, so that we could receive the Lord Jesus and have peace in our conscience. Once the conscience is cleansed, there is no more consciousness of sin. Many times I have heard Christians say that the blood of the Lord Jesus washes away their sins. When I ask if they feel peaceful and happy, they say that at times they still feel the presence of their sins. This is inconceivable. I am happy because when the conscience is cleansed, there is no more consciousness of sins. Our conscience has the consciousness of sins because there is the record of sins before God. But if the sins are gone before God, how can we still have the consciousness of them? Since the sins before God have been dealt with, the sins in our conscience should be dealt with as well. Hence, we should not have the consciousness of our sins any longer.