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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 19

The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God

"Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." 1 John 3:9.

1. It has been frequently supposed, that the being born of God was all one with the being justified; that the new birth and justification were only different expressions, denoting the same thing: It being certain, on the one hand, that whoever is justified is also born of God; and, on the other, that whoever is born of God is also justified; yea, that both these gifts of God are given to every believer in one and the same moment. In one point of time his sins are blotted out, and he is born again of God.

2. But though it be allowed, that justification and the new birth are, in point of time, inseparable from each other, yet are they easily distinguished, as being not the same, but things of a widely different nature. Justification implies only a relative, the new birth a real, change. God in justifying us does something for us; in begetting us again, he does the work in us. The former changes our outward relation to God, so that of enemies we become children; by the latter our inmost souls are changed, so that of sinners we become saints. The one restores us to the favour, the other to the image, of God. The one is the taking away the guilt, the other the taking away the power, of sin: So that, although they are joined together in point of time, yet are they of wholly distinct natures.

3. The not discerning this, the not observing the wide difference there is between being justified and being born again, has occasioned exceeding great confusion of thought in many who have treated on this subject; particularly when they have attempted to explain this great privilege of the children of God; to show how "whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin."

4. In order to apprehend this clearly, it may be necessary, First, to consider what is the proper meaning of that expression, "Whosoever is born of God;" and, Secondly, to inquire, in what sense he "doth not commit sin."

I. 1. First, we are to consider, what is the proper meaning of that expression, "Whosoever is born of God." And, in general, from all the passages of holy writ wherein this expression, "the being born of God," occurs, we may learn that it implies not barely the being baptized, or any outward change whatever; but a vast inward change, a change wrought in the soul, by the operation of the Holy Ghost; a change in the whole manner of our existence; for, from the moment we are born of God, we live in quite another manner than we did before; we are, as it were, in another world.

2. The ground and reason of the expression is easy to be understood. When we undergo this great change, we may, with much propriety, be said to be born again, because there is so near a resemblance between the circumstances of the natural and of the spiritual birth; so that to consider the circumstances of the natural birth, is the most easy way to understand the spiritual.

3. The child which is not yet born subsists indeed by the air, as does everything which has life; but feels it not, nor any thing else, unless in a very dull and imperfect manner. It hears little, if at all; the organs of hearing being as yet closed up. It sees nothing; having its eyes fast shut, and being surrounded with utter darkness. There are, it may be, some faint beginnings of life, when the time of its birth draws nigh, and some motion consequent thereon, whereby it is distinguished from a mere mass of matter; but it has no senses; all these avenues of the soul are hitherto quite shut up. Of consequence, it has scarce any intercourse with this visible world; nor any knowledge, conception, or

idea, of the things that occur therein.

4. The reason why he that is not yet born is wholly a stranger to the visible world, is, not because it is afar off; (it is very nigh; it surrounds him on every side;) but, partly, because he has not those senses, they are not yet opened in his soul, whereby alone it is possible to hold commerce with the material world; and partly, because so thick a veil is cast between, through which he can discern nothing.

5. But no sooner is the child born into the world, than he exists in a quite different manner. He now feels the air with which he is surrounded, and which pours into him from every side, as fast as he alternately breathes it back, to sustain the flame of life: And hence springs a continual increase of strength, of motion, and of sensation; all the bodily senses being now awakened, and furnished with their proper objects.

His eyes are now opened to perceive the light, which, silently flowing in upon them, discovers not only itself, but an infinite variety of things, with which before he was wholly unacquainted. His ears are unclosed, and sounds rush in with endless diversity. Every sense is employed upon such objects as are peculiarly suitable to it; and by these inlets the soul, having an open intercourse with the visible world, acquires more and more knowledge of sensible things, of all the things which are under the sun.

6. So it is with him that is born of God. Before that great change is wrought, although he subsists by Him, in whom all that have life "live, and move, and have their being," yet he is not sensible of God; he does not feel, he has no inward consciousness of His presence. He does not perceive that divine breath of life, without which he cannot subsist a moment: Nor is he sensible of any of the things of God; they make no impression upon his soul. God is continually calling to him from on high, but he heareth not; his ears are shut, so that the "voice of the charmer" is lost to him, "charm he never so wisely," He seeth not the things of the Spirit of God; the eyes of his understanding being closed, and utter darkness covering his whole soul, surrounding him on every side. It is true he may have some faint dawnings of life, some small beginnings of spiritual motion; but as yet he has no spiritual senses capable of discerning spiritual objects; consequently, he "discerneth not the things of the Spirit of God; he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

7. Hence he has scarce any knowledge of the invisible world, as he has scarce any intercourse with it. Not that it is afar off: No: He is in the midst of it; it encompasses him round about. The other world, as we usually term it, is not far from every one of us: It is above, and beneath, and on every side. Only the natural man discerneth it not; partly, because he has no spiritual senses, whereby alone we can discern the things of God; partly, because so thick a veil is interposed as he knows not how to penetrate.

8. But when he is born of God, born of the Spirit, how is the manner of his existence changed! His whole soul is now sensible of God, and he can say, by sure experience, "Thou art about my bed, and about my path;" I feel thee in all my ways: "Thou besettest me behind and before, and layest thy hand upon me." The Spirit or breath of God is immediately inspired, breathed into the new-born soul; and the same breath which comes from, returns to, God: As it is continually received by faith, so it is continually rendered back by love, by prayer, and praise, and thanksgiving; love and praise, and prayer being the breath of every soul which is truly born of God. And by this new kind of spiritual respiration, spiritual life is not only sustained, but increased day by day, together with spiritual strength, and motion, and sensation; all the senses of the soul being now awake, and capable of discerning spiritual good and evil.

9. "The eyes of his understanding" are now "open," and he "seeth Him that is invisible." He sees what is "the exceeding greatness of his power" and of his love toward them that believe. He sees that God is merciful to him a sinner, that he is reconciled through the Son of his love. He clearly perceives both the pardoning love of God, and all his "exceeding great and precious promises." "God, who commanded the light to shine out of the darkness, hath shined," and doth shine, "in his heart," to enlighten him with "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." All the darkness is now passed away, and he abides in the light of God's countenance.

10. His ears are now opened, and the voice of God no longer calls in vain. He hears and obeys the heavenly calling: He knows the voice of his Shepherd. All his spiritual senses being now awakened, he has a clear intercourse with the invisible world; and hence he knows more and more of the things which before it could not "enter into his heart to conceive." He now knows what the peace of God is; what is joy in the Holy Ghost; what the love of God which is shed abroad in the heart of them that believe in him through Christ Jesus. Thus the veil being removed which before interrupted the light and voice, the knowledge and love of God, he who is born of the Spirit, dwelling in love, "dwelleth in God, and God in him."

II. 1. Having considered the meaning of that expression, "whosoever is born of God," it remains, in the Second place, to inquire, in what sense he "doth not commit sin."

Now one who is so born of God, as hath been above described, who continually receives into his soul the breath of life from God, the gracious influence of his Spirit, and continually renders it back; one who thus believes and loves, who by faith perceives the continual actings of God upon his spirit, and by a kind of spiritual re-action returns the grace he receives, in unceasing love, and praise, and prayer; not only doth not commit sin, while he thus keepeth himself, but so long as this "seed remaineth in him, he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

2. By sin, I here understand outward sin, according to the plain, common acceptation of the word; an actual, voluntary transgression of the law; of the revealed, written law of God; of any commandment of God, acknowledged to be such at the time that it is transgressed. But "whosoever is born of God," while he abideth in faith and love, and in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving, not only doth not, but cannot, thus commit sin. So long as he thus believeth in God through Christ, and loves him, and is pouring out his heart before him, he cannot voluntarily transgress any command of God, either by speaking or acting what he knows God hath forbidden: So long that seed which remaineth in him, that loving, praying, thankful faith, compels him to refrain from whatsoever he knows to be an abomination in the sight of God.

3. But here a difficulty will immediately occur, and one that to many has appeared insuperable, and induced them to deny the plain assertion of the Apostle, and give up the privilege of the children of God.

It is plain, in fact, that those whom we cannot deny to have been truly born of God, (the Spirit of God having given us in his word this infallible testimony concerning them,) nevertheless, not only could, but did, commit sin, even gross, outward sin. They did transgress the plain, known laws of God, speaking or acting what they knew he had forbidden.

4. Thus David was unquestionably born of God or ever he was anointed king over Israel. He knew in whom he had believed; "he was strong in faith, giving glory to God." "The Lord," saith he, "is my

Shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing. He shall feed me in green pastures, and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." (Psalm 23: 1 &c.) He was filled with love; such as often constrained him to cry out, "I will love thee, O Lord, my strength: The Lord is my stony rock, and my defence; the horn also of my salvation, and my refuge." (Psalm 28:1.) He was a man of prayer; pouring out his soul before God in all circumstances of life; and abundant in praises and thanksgiving. "Thy praise," saith he, "shall be ever in my mouth:" (Psalm 34:1:) "Thou art my God, and I will thank thee; thou art my God, and I will praise thee." (Psalm 118:28.) And yet such a child of God could and did commit sin; yea, the horrid sins of adultery and murder.

5. And even after the Holy Ghost was more largely given, after "life and immortality were brought to light by the gospel" we want not instances of the same melancholy kind, which were also doubtless written for our instruction. Thus he who (probably from his selling all that he had, and bringing the price for the relief of his poor brethren) was by the apostles themselves surnamed Barnabas, that is, the son of consolation; (Acts 4:36, 37;) who was so honoured at Antioch, as to be selected with Saul out of all the disciples, to carry their relief unto the brethren in Judea; (Acts 11:29, 30;) this Barnabas, who, at his return from Judea, was, by the peculiar direction of the Holy Ghost, solemnly "separated from the other Prophets and Teachers, for the work whereunto God had called him," (Acts 13:1-4,) even to accompany the great Apostle among the Gentiles, and to be his fellow-labourer in every place; -- nevertheless, was afterward so sharp, (Acts 15:35, 39,) in his contention with St. Paul, (because he "thought it not good to take with them John," in his visiting the brethren a second time, "who had departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work,") that he himself also departed from the work; that he "took John, and sailed unto Cyprus;" (Acts 15:39;) forsaking him to whom he had been in so immediate a manner joined by the Holy Ghost.

6. An instance more astonishing than both these is given by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians. When Peter, the aged, the zealous, the first of the apostles, one of the three most highly favoured by his Lord, "was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles" -- the Heathens converted to the Christian faith, as having been peculiarly taught of God, that he "should not call any man common or unclean." (Acts 10:28.) "But, when they were come, he separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly, according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter, before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of the Gentiles," -- not regarding the ceremonial law of Moses, -- "why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews" (Gal. 2:11, &c.) Here is also plain, undeniable sin committed by one who was undoubtedly born of God. But how can this be reconciled with the assertion of St. John, if taken in the obvious literal meaning, that "whosoever is born of God, doth not commit sin"

7. I answer, what has been long observed is this: so long as "he that is born of God keepeth himself," (which he is able to do, by the grace of God,) "the wicked one toucheth him not:" But if he keepeth not himself, if he abide not in the faith, he may commit sin even as another man.

It is easy therefore to understand, how any of these children of God might be moved from his own steadfastness, and yet the great truth of God, declared by the Apostle, remain steadfast and unshaken. He did not "keep himself," by that grace of God which was sufficient for him. He fell, step by step, First, into negative, inward sin, not "stirring up the gift of God which was in him," not "watching unto

prayer," not "pressing on to the mark of the prize of his high calling:" Then, into positive inward sin, inclining to wickedness with his heart, giving way to some evil desire or temper: Next, he lost his faith, his sight of a pardoning God, and consequently his love of God; and, being then weak and like another man, he was capable of committing even outward sin.

8. To explain this by a particular instance: David was born of God, and saw God by faith. He loved God in sincerity. He could truly say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee and there is none upon earth," neither person nor thing, "that I desire in comparison of thee." But still there remained in his heart that corruption of nature, which is the seed of all evil.

"He was walking upon the roof of his house," (2 Sam. 11:2,) probably praising the God whom his soul loved, when he looked down, and saw Bathsheba. He felt a temptation; a thought which tended to evil. The Spirit of God did not fail to convince him of this. He doubtless heard and knew the warning voice; but he yielded in some measure to the thought, and the temptation began to prevail over him. Hereby his spirit was sullied; he saw God still; but it was more dimly than before. He loved God still; but not in the same degree; not with the same strength and ardour of affection. Yet God checked him again, though his spirit was grieved; and his voice, though fainter and fainter, still whispered, "Sin lieth at the door; look unto me, and be thou saved." But he would not hear: He looked again, not unto God, but unto the forbidden object, till nature was superior to grace, and kindled lust in his soul.

The eye of his mind was now closed again, and God vanished out of his sight. Faith, the divine, supernatural intercourse with God, and the love of God, ceased together: He then rushed on as a horse into the battle, and knowingly committed the outward sin.

9. You see the unquestionable progress from grace to sin: Thus it goes on, from step to step. (1.) The divine seed of loving, conquering faith, remains in him that is born of God. "He keepeth himself," by the grace of God, and "cannot commit sin." (2.) A temptation arises; whether from the world, the flesh, or the devil, it matters not. (3.) The Spirit of God gives him warning that sin is near, and bids him more abundantly watch unto prayer. (4.) He gives way, in some degree, to the temptation, which now begins to grow pleasing to him. (5.) The Holy Spirit is grieved; his faith is weakened; and his love of God grows cold. (6.) The Spirit reproves him more sharply, and saith, "This is the way; walk thou in it." (7.) He turns away from the painful voice of God, and listens to the pleasing voice of the tempter. (8.) Evil desire begins and spreads in his soul, till faith and love vanish away: He is then capable of committing outward sin, the power of the Lord being departed from him.

10. To explain this by another instance: The Apostle Peter was full of faith and of the Holy Ghost; and hereby keeping himself, he had a conscience void of offence toward God and toward man.

Walking thus in simplicity and godly sincerity, "before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles," knowing that what God had cleansed was not common or unclean.

But "when they were come," a temptation arose in his heart, "to fear those of the circumcision," (the Jewish converts, who were zealous for circumcision and the other rites of the Mosaic law,) and regard the favour and praise of these men, more than the praise of God.

He was warned by the Spirit that sin was near: Nevertheless, he yielded to it in some degree, even to sinful fear of man, and his faith and love were proportionably weakened.

God reproved him again for giving place to the devil. Yet he would not hearken to the voice of his Shepherd; but gave himself up to that slavish fear, and thereby quenched the Spirit.

Then God disappeared, and, faith and love being extinct, he committed the outward sin. Walking not uprightly, not "according to the truth of the gospel," he "separated himself" from his Christian brethren, and by his evil example, if not advice also, "compelled even the Gentiles to live after the manner of the Jews;" to entangle themselves again with that "yoke of bondage," from which "Christ had set them free."

Thus it is unquestionably true, that he who is born of God, keeping himself, doth not, cannot commit sin; and yet, if he keepeth not himself, he may commit all manner of sin with greediness.

III. 1. From the preceding considerations we may learn, first, To give a clear and incontestable answer to a question which has frequently perplexed many who were sincere of heart. "Does sin precede or follow the loss of faith" Does a child of God first commit sin, and thereby lose his faith Or does he lose his faith first, before he can commit sin"

I answer, Some sin of omission, at least, must necessarily precede the loss of faith; some inward sin: But the loss of faith must precede the committing outward sin.

The more any believer examines his own heart, the more will he be convinced of this: That faith working by love excludes both inward and outward sin from a soul watching unto prayer; that nevertheless we are even then liable to temptation, particularly to the sin that did easily beset us; that if the loving eye of the soul be steadily fixed on God, the temptation soon vanishes away: But if not, if we are exelkomenoi, (as the Apostle James speaks, James 1:14,) drawn out of God by our own desire, and deleazomenoi, caught by the bait of present or promised pleasure; then that desire, conceived in us, brings forth sin; and, having by that inward sin destroyed our faith, it casts us headlong into the snare of the devil, so that we may commit any outward sin whatever.

2. From what has been said, we may learn, Secondly, what the life of God in the soul of a believer is; wherein it properly consists; and what is immediately and necessarily implied therein. It immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit; God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon the soul, and a re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith; and an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be a holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus.

3. And hence we may, Thirdly, infer the absolute necessity of this re-action of the soul, (whatsoever it be called,) in order to the continuance of the divine life therein. For it plainly appears, God does not continue to act upon the soul, unless the soul re-acts upon God. He prevents us indeed with the blessings of his goodness. He first loves us, and manifests himself unto us. While we are yet afar off, he calls us to himself, and shines upon our hearts. But if we do not then love him who first loved us; if we will not hearken to his voice; if we turn our eye away from him, and will not attend to the light which he pours upon us; his Spirit will not always strive: He will gradually withdraw, and leave us to the darkness of our own hearts. He will not continue to breathe into our soul, unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him, a sacrifice wherewith he is well pleased.

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