

Sunday Dinner

Sunday dinner with the family gathered 'round the table:
 guilty children with their angry spouses every weekend
 answering the summons as if issued by the sheriff.
Staying in the shelter of the kitchen with her cooking,
 she compels her brood to swarm around her sanctuary
 while she talks and tends to things that don't need tending.
After a sufficient wait she lets them all be seated,
 though she cannot take a seat until the boys have finished
 lest they want the very thing she left behind in the kitchen.
When the compliments begin to wane she sadly sighs,
 "I'm sorry that the biscuits didn't turn out like you like 'em.
 I tried so hard, but I can't seem to cook good anymore."
Her sorrow generates a reassurance from her boys
 who swear their wives can't cook a lick as good as their old
 Maw,
 and wish that they were only half as good to them as she.
She hates to hear them talk about their wives in such a way
 (even if she told them so a thousand times before),
 but wonders if they wouldn't all be better off divorced,
 like her.

—Harry Lee Poe

WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE DO BAD THINGS (to Good People)?

What does it mean to be human? People around the world have their own perspective on what it means to be human. Some consider the question in terms of the relationship between humanity and God. In the United States, though, the worldview of any particular religion, including Christianity, is probably not the dominant worldview. In the United States about 20 percent of the population worships each week. This statistic suggests that about 80 percent of the population is driven by some other primary allegiance than faith in God. Maybe they have been influenced by different religious ideas through popular music or the mass media, but probably the dominant worldview in the United States in recent years has been dominated by naturalism (all of reality can be explained in terms of scientifically observable natural causes) and materialism (the physical world is all that exists). There may be a God up there somewhere, but the culture looks to naturalism to explain everything and materialism for explanations and values.

Though materialism has been a dominant force in recent years, a shift has begun to take place in the popular culture. A younger generation has grown interested in spirituality. This interest does not mean they are interested in Christianity, primarily because they do not know anything about Christianity. They have never been exposed to it. Christianity is an idea that

would be fresh to them if they knew anything about it. Those interested in spirituality seem open to almost any approach to spirituality. They mingle different approaches—a little bit of Buddhism, a little bit of Islam, a little bit of Hinduism, with a dash of nature religion thrown in. They may wear a cross, not because they necessarily understand it to mean that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but because it is a nice symbol. On another day they may wear a crystal, and on another day they may wear a Star of David. They have an interest in spirituality because of a growing sense that materialism and naturalism do not answer all the questions. This new approach to spirituality, however, tends to be a spirituality without coherent content.

The Image of God

The Bible teaches that people are made in the image of God. We are creatures. We are separate from God. We are made by God to have fellowship with God. We were so made that he would have persons with whom to have fellowship, not just objects with which he could play. Instead of animals that could be pets, God made humans as persons that he could love and hopefully who would love him. Anyone with more than passing experience on Earth knows that you cannot make somebody love you. You can, however, love somebody who does not love you back. Everyone who went through the teenage years with the crushes and the heartache of falling in love with somebody who did not love you in return knows this aspect of human nature. Imagine the experience of God over thousands of years, multiplied by billions of people who did not love back.

If all people are made in the image of God, does that mean that people are all good? If God is good, and we are made in the image of God, would that not mean that we are also good? Some religions teach that people are a part of God, or that people contain the divine spark of God. If that were so, then all people should be good and human evil should not occur. To be made in the image of God, however, is quite another thing altogether. The statues of the great heroes in the public square are images, but what frail replicas of the original they are. They cannot move or act. They merely give a faint impression of the appearance of people. The biblical teaching of the relationship of God to people is the relationship of the real thing to its image. If people are merely the image of God, then it is not difficult to see why people would be a mere reflection, a one-dimensional, static expression that

hints at what goodness must be. We have enough of a flavor from the experience of people to know that goodness really exists, but it is not found in fullest flower among people. From time to time we rise to the occasion and do something wonderful, but we notice it because it is an extraordinary thing above the commonplace.

We have a number of aphorisms to talk about people. On a sunshiny day with flowers blooming, a calm breeze blowing, and birds singing in the trees, we might be tempted to say, "All people are basically good." It is an attractive and charitable sentiment. It is a statement of solidarity with the human race. Another thing we may be tempted to say, if we cannot go along with the first one, is that all people have a little good in them. Robert Louis Stevenson's classic story, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, explores the extent to which even the best of people (compared to other people) have an amazing capacity for being bad. People are capable of doing good things, but does that make them good?

What do we mean when we say that all people are basically good, or all people have a little good in them? Good compared to what? We have raised the whole issue of relativism again. What are we actually saying? If we are basically good, why do we do bad things to ourselves, and why do we do bad things to other good people? This is the tragic history of the human race. Again we have to ask, What do we mean by good, and what do we mean by bad? Bad things compared to what? What are we talking about?

Another phrase we frequently use relates to situation ethics. Situation ethics will often express the view, "I never knowingly hurt anyone." I can do what feels comfortable to me because I never knowingly hurt anyone. We use this phrase, and it serves to excuse what has come to be called the law of unintended consequences. I may have gone into a relationship not intending to do great damage to someone's life when I end it. I do not know why that person got all upset; I did not intend for that to happen, so it is not my fault. I am innocent. It is the other person's problem. Get over it. This callousness grows over the human heart and decides ahead of time, "I will not feel. I will not care. It is not my responsibility. It is your problem if the fallout from knowing me creates pain for you." This illustrates the amazing capacity of people to rationalize, or justify, any behavior.

This being the case, average persons are rarely in touch with when they are doing evil to someone else, or when they are sinning against someone else. Because of this habit we have of rationalizing our behavior, we can

view ourselves as innocent and say, "It's not my fault." So how can we have an understanding of sin and evil, if we do not acknowledge when we do it? In recent years schoolteachers have noted an increase in aggressive behavior in very young children. More children begin school who do not know how to control their behavior. Violence involves the knowledge that harm is being done to someone else. The intention to hurt someone else is the reason for the violence. Under the guidance of pragmatism (a philosophy only concerned with whether or not something works), the question of right or wrong never arises for the child. As one of the villainous servants of Lord Voldemort told Harry Potter: "There is no good or evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it."¹

The recognition of a difference between right and wrong is a fundamental aspect of society. The general population expressed anger and outrage at the shooting spree of John Allen Mohammed and John Lee Malvo in northern Virginia and Maryland several years ago. A full-blown postmodernist of the deconstructionist variety would have to say that statements about the killings that involved moral judgments of right and wrong were culturally conditioned. Some would go on to say that such statements were an exercise of power. When we hear such philosophical evaluations of language in a conversation about premarital sex, the stakes seem lower and the argument seems stronger to many. When statements of right and wrong involve the indiscriminate murder of randomly selected people, the deconstructionist argument sounds ridiculous. The legal system holds a single, simple rule for determining if someone is mentally responsible: that they can distinguish between right and wrong. Part of Malvo's defense strategy involved the argument that he had been "brainwashed" by Mohammed into believing that he was doing right. Brainwashing essentially makes someone a part of a new culture, however small, with a new value system and understanding of right and wrong, complete with sanctions to enforce the value system and conformity. One of the great problems with humanity is our ability to have one set of values for how we want to be treated and another set of values for how we can treat others. Every culture does this, to our shame.

How, then, do we know right from wrong? In his biography of Harry S. Truman, David McCullough describes the varieties of voter fraud that were common in places where political party machinery flourished. After

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 211.

explaining how she and others voted multiple times under false identities, one woman remarked, “Oh, I knew it was illegal, but I certainly never thought it was wrong.”² If elections can take on this carnival spirit, what is a teenager to do when faced with the opportunity to steal all the music recordings his or her computer can store? Ever since the advances in digital recording and the creativity of programmers enabled such music sharing opportunities as Napster, the recording industry has tried to convince young people that stealing copyrighted music is wrong. After years of creating a counterculture through music and the message of self-satisfaction and self-indulgence, the music industry has begun to experience one of the reasons that wrong is wrong. The recording industry has begun to feel the effects of stealing and it feels bad to the profit and loss statement.

Though we may not acknowledge when we do evil, we are always aware of when it is done to us. That is, we understand sin and evil on the receiving end. If someone sins against me, I know it. The one who has done something may easily justify it. Unfortunately, we ourselves also have this capacity for justifying our behavior. But those who feel the hurt know they are experiencing a bad thing, and they know it right away. We do not have to be sent a letter. We do not have to read it in the newspaper. We do not have to have a list to understand that we are experiencing something bad.³

This situation raises a question about human nature. If we are made in the image of God, why do we have such a powerful capacity to excuse our behavior? The Bible describes this kind of trait beginning with the case of Cain, who rationalized the murder of his brother by asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9) and continuing all the way to Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands of any responsibility after condemning Jesus to death. This curious behavior represents a major theme throughout the Bible: something about the human heart is defective. We are told in Jeremiah 17:9 “that the heart is deceitful above all things.” It might bother us from time to time, but we can train our conscience not to bother us. Though the conscience was created by God to accuse us, we have trained it to excuse us.

Paul warns us in 1 Corinthians 3:18: “Do not deceive yourselves.” Similar warnings occur in other places, but Paul warns us head-on because we have the capacity for doing it. We can deceive ourselves about all manner of things.

2. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 156.

3. C. S. Lewis explores the experience of right and wrong in the opening section of *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 1–8.

Just because we are Christians does not mean we have lost the talent or forgotten the discipline of deceiving ourselves. Paul was writing to Christians when he said, “Do not deceive yourselves.” It is the tendency of humans to be so self-absorbed that we wind up getting lost.

In Isaiah we read, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way” (Isa. 53:6a). This is how we manage to get away from God. Made in the image of God, we aspire to act autonomously. We aspire to act like God. We will be our own gods. We make ourselves the ultimate standard of behavior so that what we do is the right thing. This is a problem once again that the Scripture points out. My favorite reference is in the book of Judges. We are told that “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6b *KJV*)—basically, “If it feels good, do it.” They had the Law, but they did not attend to the Law. They did what they thought was right all by themselves. They were a law unto themselves. Rather than conforming to the purposes of God, in our imaginations we make God over into a form that is compatible with our hearts.

We do the same thing with other people, too. We act as though we are capable of mind reading. We can decide what somebody else is thinking about us. We certainly do it with God. The human race makes God into an image that we can handle. Paul talked about this in the book of Romans:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Rom. 1:21–23)

In this passage, Paul is not simply talking about idol worship, the worship of statues and images. It was something the Romans would have been aware of, for that kind of worship prevailed in Rome, but it is possible for people of other kinds of religions to have this same attitude toward God. Paul is saying that atheism is not a problem on the planet Earth. People believe that God exists. Public opinion polls tell us that people are religious, the same way Paul said the Athenians were religious. When he went to Mars Hill in Athens Paul declared, “I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious” (Acts 17:22 *KJV*). The modern translations say “religious” instead

of “superstitious,” but I think the King James Version gets more to the essence of what religion is for the average person: religion functions as superstition. It is a hedge. It is a way to get some kind of control over the powers of the universe, to look God eyeball-to-eyeball and cut your best deal.

This happens in all sorts of religious traditions. It is possible for everyone to reconceive God, regardless of the religious tradition within which they function: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, or even Christianity. Over the last two thousand years, from time to time some Christians have attempted to remake God into something more compatible with the way they want to be. We saw this going on in the Crusades. The knights of Europe and the little kings and the little princes invaded Palestine to kill people for Jesus—to get back the Holy Land. Why? They wanted the sacred property. The Jesus whose kingdom was not of this world was not compatible with their state policy, so they reworked him into a warrior.

The same thing happened with the Inquisition when anyone who dissented from the teachings of the Church of Rome could be arrested and tortured and put to death for not believing the right way. Is this the way Jesus seemed to go about things in the New Testament? But we can remake God any way we want if we set our minds to it. In the South, America had its own tradition of slavery. In the nineteenth century, preachers of all denominations worked hard to justify slavery, and the justification was that slavery is mentioned in the Bible. There are many things in the Bible that God did not approve. So this is part of the burden of being human: to what extent have we put on lenses that allow us to distort what God has told us about himself?

With Judaism we find in the Old Testament the story of Job’s friends. Job’s friends told Job what God is like: “Job, if you’re suffering, that means God doesn’t like you and he’s punishing you.” Their teaching was that anyone who suffers is being punished by God. The teaching tells us much less about suffering than it tells us about what they thought God is like. They were comfortable with that teaching. Why? They were not suffering; they were prosperous; they were healthy. They concluded that God liked them and did not like Job. That same teaching filtered through a stream of Judaism for centuries. We can almost hear the tone of the conversation with Jesus: “Jesus, these Galileans were killed by the Romans and their blood was mixed with the sacrifice. God must have really hated them, huh?” And Jesus would have said something like, “I wouldn’t jump to a conclusion like that, if I were you. Do you think God had it in for them? Or the group of people

killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think God had something against those people that were killed, any more than against you? Best you look to yourself rather than trying to justify yourself just because you're not experiencing the same pain someone else is experiencing" (Luke 13:2–5, author's paraphrase). The punishment attitude toward suffering and pain created a type of teaching about God and an image of what God is like. This teaching about God makes me "good" by comparison with those who suffer, because I am not suffering. Relatively speaking, I am good.

The *heart* in the Hebrew Scriptures often does not refer to the organ that pumps blood through the body. Instead, it is a metaphor for the human spirit. As often as not, it refers to the intellectual dimension of the human spirit. David cried, "Create in me a clean *heart*, O God, and renew a right *spirit* within me" (Ps. 51:10, *κῆρ*, emphasis added). When I was a little boy I was told that the Psalms were poems, so I read the Twenty-third Psalm trying to make it rhyme. I could never make it rhyme because Hebrew poetry works in a different way. Hebrew poetry rhymes not by the sounds of words but by ideas, so heart and spirit are ideas that mean the same thing. The heart or the mind exchanges God as he is (the glory of the immortal God) for some other standard that we conceive in our minds—one that sets us up as the standard of value and behavior (Rom. 1:21–23). Thus, we have made God conform to what we are like in our feelings and attitudes and beliefs.

Paul defined sin as coming "short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). This is probably the most famous statement about sin in the Bible, and perhaps the most simple to understand. I have heard some people say that the statement is not strong enough. It does not say anything about the injury to God's honor, the anger of God, the diabolical nature of transgression, the enormity of sin. In short, it is just too bland to say that sin is only coming short of the glory of God. If that is your perspective, you have not considered seriously enough the meaning of the glory of God.

Being made in the image of God, we all have a degree of many of the qualities of God: goodness, truthfulness, mercy, compassion. As our continuum of values has suggested, however, it is one thing to have a degree of one of these qualities, and it is quite another thing to be that quality. Hitler loved children and dogs. He seems to be covered by the oft stated popular view that anybody who loves dogs can't be all bad. He loved children so much that he allowed the children of the Hitler Youth to defend Berlin against the army of the Soviet Union. He gave them the final honor of dying to

uphold his name and his dignity. If that isn't love, what is? To have a degree, a faded shadow of the true thing, forms the condition of the human race.

The closer one comes to God, however, the purer the qualities become. The farther one moves from God, the more corrupt the qualities become. The more comfortable and satisfied one is with one's own distorted image of God, the more distorted and corrupt and depraved and polluted the qualities become. Thus, some of the most brutal acts of cruelty in history have been committed in the name of God, the human reimagined God that we have created.

Separation from God is the basis for sin and evil. Just having "one degree of separation" places us short of the glory of God. Some people may be just one degree short of the glory of God, while other people may be infinitely short of the glory of God, but the farther away from God we find ourselves, the greater the capacity for evil. The more we have distorted the truth of God, the greater the capacity for evil. Only proximity to God leads to goodness. Good is what God does because God is what good is.

The last night Jesus spent with his disciples, they shared the Passover meal. After supper he told them, "I am the vine; you are the branches" (John 15:5). With these words he expresses the necessity of "proximity" to reinforce what he had spent the previous three years explaining about himself. With the concept of proximity he conveyed his divine nature: "apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We find throughout the rest of the New Testament that the apostles understood that the solution to sin and death rested upon proximity to God through Jesus Christ. The qualification of salvation appears throughout the New Testament as being "in Christ." Sometimes that little phrase appears as "in him," "in the Lord," or some similar form. People easily and casually pass over the little phrase and take it for granted without realizing its significance: to be present with God because we are "in Christ Jesus." Thus, those "in Christ" do not fall short of the glory of God anymore. They have been brought into the presence of God through his Son.

Every major religion teaches that humanity somehow is alienated from God, but the alienation looks different from the perspective of each theological system because of their differing conceptions of God. In monotheism (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) God is understood as the Creator, while people are understood as creatures. In Islam and Judaism, sin is understood primarily as transgression or violation of the Law. Christians often think of

sin that way, but primarily the New Testament treats sin as a basic problem of human nature that involves a broken relationship with God. Sin is ultimately a relational issue. The violation of the Law is one of many ways that the broken relationship works itself out. The damage to human nature is enormous.

With Hinduism we find a different understanding of sin because Hinduism does not have a Creator God. In Hinduism, everything is God, but different concentrations of the divine occur that result in different manifestations of God. This book is God; the chair where I sit is God; my shirt is God; I am God, you are God, the tiles in the ceiling are God, we are all a part of God and God is one. There is a wholeness to the Hindu system. In that theological system, sin consists in differentiation from everything else. It is not very dissimilar from Buddhism, Zen Buddhism in particular, in which there is no God as a self-conscious being. In Zen Buddhism, one might say that nothing is God, because nothing really exists. I am not, you are not, this book is not, the chair in which I sit is not. We just think they are. Sin consists in thinking that we exist at all as independent entities. By thinking that we exist, and by thinking that a physical world exists, we have entrapped ourselves in the physical, which really is not here. Trapped in the illusion of the physical, we are separated from what we are, which is God. The challenge of life is to escape the bondage of the endless cycle of reincarnation that perpetuates the idea of the individual self and return to the emptiness, the unconscious. The ultimate aim is to return to the unconscious like a drop of water falling in the ocean, where it is lost in the great emptiness. As long as I think I am here, I am separated from God because of my consciousness. Hinduism, on the other hand, does not deny the existence of the physical so much as it denies the distinction of one thing from another. Yet it shares with Zen Buddhism the need to escape the physical and ascend to the bliss of being one with the One. These religions represent radically different understandings than being created by a personal God who is self-conscious, who has a purpose, and who is capable of love. The unconscious does not love, does not think, does not even contemplate himself, because he is not a "him," but a "nothing."

The religions of the world have radically different understandings of God and radically different understandings of heaven or, more properly, the state of people after death. When a Christian talks about heaven, it has a radically different meaning from what a Zen Buddhist means by "the ultimate state." For me, heaven involves seeing God and every other individual per-

son face-to-face and being known by God and everyone else. In Zen Buddhism, however, people lose their identity completely and disappear as they become lost in the emptiness of everyone else. In the present culture of the West, we can no longer assume that everyone means the same thing when they talk about God, heaven, salvation, and sin. These are radically different ideas in different religions.

If we are our own standard, and each person's values are as valid as the next, is it possible ever to escape from relativism? It may work as long as another's values do not cause injury to me, but what happens when I feel sinned against? What happens when I feel that evil has been done to me? Rather than everyone being equally right, could it be that everyone is equally wrong? That is pretty much where the human race finds itself. If the heart is deceitful, what can be a reliable guide? If the heart is deceitful above all things, then how do we get out of this little merry-go-round that we are on?

If we had a list of all the wrong things, would that do it? It is an intriguing thought, but we have had lists before. Islam takes the restrictions and the obligations of its faith quite seriously. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons also stress the duties, restrictions, and obligations of religion. The Ten Commandments appear in Scripture as a list. Perhaps if we added on to the Ten Commandments we could have a perfect list. The world has never lacked for rules and regulations. We had the rules and regulation lists long before Hammurabi (1792–1750 B.C.) made a comprehensive list of the rules in Babylon. We have only discovered that adding more rules and regulations does little to aid us in keeping the few we began with.

The Old Covenant

In recent months, the press has given attention to an interesting situation that arose in Alabama when the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court installed a massive stone monument in the Supreme Court building that included a depiction of the Ten Commandments. Several years earlier a controversy arose in Kentucky when copies of the Ten Commandments were posted in school rooms. The Ten Commandments include moral laws (do not kill, do not steal, do not lie) and religious ceremonial laws (observe the Sabbath day, do not make any images of God, worship only the God of Israel). One of the reasons that people associate sin with rule breaking is because so many modern American Christians think that the Ten

Commandments are the heart of Christian faith. They are not. They were the heart of the experience of a nation that disappeared twenty-five hundred years ago. The Ten Commandments were part of the covenant (agreement) that God made with Israel when he brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. God delivered the covenant laws to Moses. Under the terms of the covenant God promised to bless the new nation of Israel as long as the people kept God's commandments. For the next half millennium, God warned Israel through the ancient prophets that if they did not obey his covenant with them, he would give their land to another people the same way he had taken it from the Canaanites and given it to Israel.

Because of the unique relationship between God and the people of Israel, the prophets often describe Israel's sin as disobedience of the Law. Israel had made promises to God and God had made promises to Israel, as in a marriage. Israel violated the covenant with God. Rebellion and transgression are the sins of those who know God and claim to be followers of God. Israel actually rebelled against God. The people continued to keep the ceremonial rituals, complete with sacrifices at the temple by the priests specified in the covenant, but it was only a "technical" obedience. The people maintained the general religious tone while accepting a broad inclusion of other forms of religion alongside the state religion. All in all, they missed the point of the covenant. Though the covenant called for specific feasts and sacrifices, God complained through the prophet Amos:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
 I cannot stand your assemblies.
 Even though you bring me burnt
 offerings and grain offerings,
 I will not accept them.
 Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
 I will have no regard for them.
 Away with the noise of your songs!
 I will not listen to the music of your harps.
 But let justice roll on like a river,
 Righteousness like a never-failing stream!

—Amos 5:21–24

Like most people everywhere, the people of Israel were religious. They also used their religion as a cover for how they treated the poor and the weak. The point of the covenant was that Israel should learn from God in close relationship and live out the character of God. Instead, the prophets described Israel as an unfaithful wife who has committed adultery (Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16:32–34; Hos. 1:2). It was easier to worship the nature gods of the other nations because they had no moral expectations. Sacrifice was simply bribery to get the gods on their side. This God of Israel made no deals. He had expectations. Several years ago I heard a radio interview of a young Englishwoman who had taken up the revival of pagan religion in one of the neo-druid cults. In explaining why she had turned to witchcraft, she said, “It allows me to be religious without having to be good.” The covenant aimed at instilling in Israel a knowledge of God and the character of God manifest as justice and care for the weak. After complaining through the prophet Isaiah about the meaningless festivals and sacrifices, God enjoined the people:

Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,
learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.

—*Isa. 1:16–17*

The old covenant that God made with Moses and the people of Israel came to an end in 587 B.C., when the armies of Babylon captured the city of Jerusalem and carried the leading families into captivity in Babylon. The land was taken and given to others, according to the prophets who foretold the doom of Israel. In announcing the end of the nation, Jeremiah referred to the establishment of the nation when God brought the freed slaves into the land that had belonged to the Canaanites:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. Tell them that this is what

the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant—the terms I commanded your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.’ I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey’—the land you possess today.” (Jer. 11:1–5a)

The nation ended, but the people continued. Having lost their political autonomy, the people could no longer keep the majority of the Law of the covenant and could only keep the ceremonial law. From their experience, however, they learned the character of God. The children of Israel never again flirted with other gods. During the last days of the vassal province of Judea under the Roman Empire, the sect of the Essenes established a community at Qumran beside the Dead Sea, where they followed a daily regimen in hopes that one of their number could keep the covenant Law for just one day. If someone could keep the Law perfectly, they believed that the Messiah would come.

The English Puritans who executed Charles I and established a commonwealth in England for a few years tended to think of themselves as an extension of the old covenant nation of Israel. Thus, they tended to view sin in legal terms like the Law of Israel. While the English Puritan experiment failed in England, the Puritans of New England considered their venture in the New World as the reestablishment of God’s holy nation. They tended to consider the covenant of Law as the model for God’s people at all times. This resulted in a legalistic view of sin that influenced all of American society. The irony is that even the irreligious in America tend to be legalists even in their rejection of rules! The covenant of rules never dealt with the problem of human nature. It only brought it to light. Paul explained to the Galatians that the law served as a school master or custodian until God made a new covenant that he extended to all people (Gal. 3:19–25).

The New Covenant

The last night that Jesus was with his disciples, he spent most of the evening explaining to them the significance of the “new covenant.” The term

only has meaning in relation to the original covenant God made with the people of Israel when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the land that had belonged to the Canaanites. With the warnings of judgment if Israel refused to keep the covenant, God also gave a promise of hope beyond the loss of land. God promised a new covenant that would not involve a legal code written on stone like the first covenant (Jer. 31:31–34). The new covenant would be written on the human heart by the Spirit of God. It would not involve the possession of land by people but the possession of people by God. If the problem of humanity is that we are separated from God, what would it mean for God to come and embrace us, bring us back to him, and take possession of us?

Jesus said a great deal that last night about what it would mean for people when God's Holy Spirit took possession of them, but he made an important point about what it meant with respect to sin. The critical passage is John 16:8. Note the various ways that English translations render this verse. When the Holy Spirit comes, he will

- reprove the world of sin (KJV)
- convict the world of guilt in regard to sin (NIV)
- convict the world of sin (NKJV)
- convict the world concerning sin (NASV)
- prove to the people of the world the truth about sin (NCV)
- convince the world of its sin (NLT)

What is the difference between these translations? The word *convict* is often used in the modern translations. What does the word *convict* bring to mind for the modern person living in the United States? What kind of a word is it? Where do people use this word? It is a word normally associated with the legal system. It is a word used in court. What does it mean or suggest to most people? It suggests that someone broke the law, they got caught (or arrested), they were tried and found guilty, and they will be punished for their crime. That tends to be the way we think of the term in the modern world. It has to do with the idea of transgression of the law and guilt.

When I was a prison chaplain, issues of salvation with regard to inmates concerned me. Prisons contain a lot of what is known as “jailhouse religion.” To a certain extent it looked as though some people had the attitude, “I’ll come to chapel until I go up for parole, and then who knows what I’m

going to do when I get out on the streets.” On the other hand, I witnessed a number of genuine conversions in prison. Rather than rehabilitation, many people experience regeneration—their lives actually change. There was one type of person in prison, however, that I was particularly concerned with. Psychologists refer to these people as antisocial personalities. At one time they were called sociopaths. They supposedly do not feel guilt for wrong behavior. I wondered if it is possible for people to be saved if they cannot feel guilt. Can they ever feel a conscience? If they cannot feel guilt, can they turn to God? Is there a certain person that God has decided cannot be saved? Has God determined that he will not allow some people to be saved? It was a big question for me, and it all revolved around this verse in John and the idea of the conviction of sin.

This idea of conviction is a popular idea in American culture. This perspective views sin basically as breaking the rules. And what are the rules? Basically, they are rules about being nice. This popular view regards sin as a matter of not being nice. Every culture develops its own list of what is nice and what is not. If the popular idea of sin is that it means “breaking the rules,” what happens when people no longer believe the rules? This is what happened in the United States after the 1960s. People just did not believe the rules anymore. More important, they did not believe the rules applied to them.

Sin somehow relates to the last judgment, and this intensifies the idea that conviction is a legal matter. We tend to think of the last judgment as a trial or court case because the word *judgment* is often understood in legal terms. Certainly throughout the Middle Ages, the church taught about the last judgment as though it were a legal proceeding or trial. It seems that sin relates to a trial and being found guilty, but how can I have a trial now and be convicted if the last judgment is at some point in the future?

In the United States we have a long tradition of thinking of the last judgment as a trial. In the classic American short story “The Devil and Daniel Webster,” this view carries the plot.⁴ In an age of regional rivalry, the story celebrated the oratorical and persuasive powers of Daniel Webster, who defends a young politician in a trial in hell. It seems that the young politician had sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for success. At the young man’s wedding supper the Devil showed up to claim his soul. Webster was there

4. See Stephen Vincent Benét, *The Devil and Daniel Webster and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000).

and offered to defend him in the trial. Of course, the trial was rigged because the Devil had packed the jury with Black Beard the Pirate, Attila the Hun, and other people of their quality and reputation. Webster was so persuasive and eloquent, however, that he managed to get the fellow off and return him to his wedding supper to live happily ever after.

Many Americans view the last judgment as a trial in which good and bad deeds are weighed against one another. Those who have done more good deeds than bad deeds go to heaven. Those who have done more bad deeds than good deeds go to hell. This understanding lies behind the talk about all people being “basically good.” On the scales of justice, people tilt slightly toward the good side. In the words of the children’s cartoon, “all dogs go to heaven.” This view leaves room for those really bad people that we do not like, and they will all go to hell. In the end, each one of us becomes the self-authenticating standard of good and evil, because we regard ourselves as basically good. Evil belongs to that category of people worse than me.

My mother had a bout with colon cancer in 2001. She was seventy-eight years old then. She had surgery and went through the year of chemotherapy. Soon after her initial surgery and shortly after her first chemotherapy, she had her annual physical with her doctor. Afterward she told me that she got the most wonderful report! She said, “I am in wonderful, wonderful, health. The doctor says he just doesn’t know anybody my age in as good health as me, except for that touch of cancer.” The spiritual condition of people is much the same. It only takes a little dab of cancer to affect the entire body. Sin affects the human spirit in the same way. A person with cancer is almost, but not quite, healthy. A person with sin is almost, but not quite, what he or she was created to be. There is something about sin that causes a person to “fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

As it happens, the last judgment is not the last trial. It is not actually a court case at all. It will not involve a marshaling of evidence and presentation of the arguments by lawyers making their best case for acquittal. God will not weigh the evidence and consider a verdict. There is no cutoff percentage for good versus bad deeds. The last judgment is, in fact, exactly what it says it is: a judgment. A judgment is a declaration of the way things are. It is a statement of fact. It declares the opinion of an evaluation: goats over here, sheep over there. It is not a lengthy process of evaluation to decide “Is this a sheep or a goat?” It is just a statement of the nature of things. God knows which is which. It involves immediate knowledge on the part of

God. In the judgment, God discloses what he knows. God does not need to be convinced or persuaded. There is no further information needed. It is what Jesus was talking about when he said, “by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt. 7:20 KJV). A good tree cannot produce bad fruit. A bad tree cannot produce good fruit.

We generally do not think of incompetence as sin. People cannot help it if they do not have the ability to perform a particular task or function. Everyone is incompetent in some areas and gifted in some areas. What happens, though, when people convince themselves that they are talented in an area in which they are actually incompetent? Who is the judge, if it is a matter of personal opinion? We can make any number of excuses for the failure of major corporations over the last fifty years, but the place of incompetence in leadership ranks at the top. It even has a term in the business world: the Peter Principle. People rise to their own level of incompetence. We see the effects of people driven by arrogance, pride, vanity, conceit, stubbornness, envy, jealousy, or factionalism to undertake a job or accept a responsibility for which they are totally unsuited. They are encouraged to do it by people with wrong motives, and many employees and stockholders suffer the consequences. Thus, incompetence becomes a sin issue in terms of the damage done by people who will not face the truth about themselves. The Dilbert comic strip depends upon this feature of life for its success. We must either laugh or cry about the situation. We see it in corporate life, in government agencies, in nonprofit organizations, in religious institutions, in education, and every other sphere of life where two or more gather. How we deal with our own incompetence reflects something deeper than a mere rule. It goes to the heart of our nature and how we measure up.

In this sense, righteousness is not a moral term, though it has been applied to moral situations. It is not even a legal term. Righteousness is a construction term. When people build buildings, they want them to be *right*. People who take pride in their work want it to be *right*. They want a door to open and to swing properly. For it to swing properly it must be hung *right*. Since ancient times, builders have used a simple instrument called a *plumb line* to determine if something is *right*. The plumb line is composed of a cord or string tied to a weight that could be as simple as a stone. The plumb line is very accurate. It allows a builder to know if a wall or a door is right with respect to a standard. The standard is gravity, which pulls the cord straight because of the weight tied to its end. If a wall is straight, it will form

an angle of 90 degrees with respect to the floor. This angle is referred to as a *right* angle. Allowing for the way language changes over centuries, we might say that the plumb line reveals whether or not a *righteous* angle has been formed. The righteousness of the wall is not an arbitrary opinion of the builder who might think that it looks fine to him. A certain type of builder “eyeballs” the construction, and the resulting product is a mess. For a wall to be right, it must be measured with respect to a standard.

God used the analogy of the plumb line to describe the spiritual condition of Israel in ancient times. In Amos 7:7–9 God essentially told the people through the prophet Amos that he had placed a plumb line against them. When he built the nation, it was right. Because the people were leaning far away from the standard, however, God planned to tear down the wall. Righteousness is the idea of an evaluation with respect to a standard. Relativism allows us to compare ourselves with anything and come out better. I can compare myself with Hitler or Osama bin Laden, and I come out pretty good. Righteousness is another matter, though, and the righteousness that is referred to in the Scripture is the righteousness of God. We are told that he will judge the world in righteousness. A plumb line stretches beside me, and the standard is now the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He is the standard by which I am compared. Am I good compared to Jesus Christ? When Christ is the standard for goodness, all of a sudden I fall short. In his science fiction story *Out of the Silent Planet*, C. S. Lewis describes a visit to Mars by someone from Earth. The intelligent creatures on Mars have no experience with deceit, envy, lying, gluttony, gossip, vanity, murder, stealing, or any of the other ways humans fall short of the glory of God. Because the person from Earth is a philologist (a scholar of the development of language), he learns the language of the Martians, but he has difficulty coming up with a term to describe the problem of sin that causes people to behave the way we do. He finally says it is because people are “bent.” We still use the expression. When people lose control of themselves, we may tell them not to get “bent out of shape.”

Sin strikes at the very nature of a person and her or his relationship with God. Instead of relativism, it is a matter of relationship. Sin involves much more than mere transgression or breaking of a rule. It is possible to sin, Paul said, without transgressing the Law (Rom. 4:15). You may not even know the Law. You cannot transgress the Law unless you know the Law. Even if you do not know the Law, however, it is still possible to sin. Sin is

ultimately a matter of one's relationship with God and the fact that we turn every one to our own way (Isa. 53:6).

A person can even sin in observing the Law, according to Jesus (Matt. 6:1–18). Watch out how you pray. Watch out how you give to the poor. Watch out how you fast. You can do a good thing with the wrong motive and it is sin. Ironically one can violate the Law and fulfill it. Jesus upset the religious community by healing people on the Sabbath day. He technically violated the Sabbath day, but he fulfilled the meaning of the Law.

So what is the righteousness of God, and what does it mean to be convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit? It does not mean a legal conviction. Properly understood, the idea of conviction captures the meaning of the Greek text brilliantly. In contrast to relativism, some ideas are held with conviction. A “conviction” is not simply a criminal record. It is an unshakable belief about something. This understanding of conviction strikes at the heart of the New Testament idea and what even the King James Version means by the term *reprove*. It involves the idea that the Holy Spirit will convince in such a strong, powerful, and unshakable way that sin is a problem in one's life. Conviction means that a person is absolutely convinced that something is a problem. Ironically, a person may experience the conviction of sin without understanding what has happened. I would argue that people around us every day are under the conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit without realizing what is going on, because they are ignorant.

As long as people think of sin only as breaking the rules and conviction only as feeling guilty about breaking the rules, the great state of ignorance will continue. When people begin to understand that sin involves a spiritual state of being, the ignorance will begin to diminish. Then they can begin to understand that any spiritual state of being that does not line up with Christ is the condition we call sin. People experience the debilitating effects of sin in many varied ways other than guilt. Through these experiences, the Holy Spirit makes clear to people, convinces them, gives them a conviction that an aspect of their life is unsatisfactory, but the experience may have nothing to do with what we normally think of as morality. Now we turn to explore how people experience sin.