

# Estrangement from the Self: Sin and the Human Body

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Theological accounts of human sinfulness tend to have a deceptive simplicity across Christian traditions. Sin appears as a result of the first disobedience by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. After a brief discussion, they nibble on the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, in direct violation of God's command, and it is all downhill from there. Adam and Eve try to shift the blame around, first onto the serpent (who said it was a good idea), then onto the woman (who made the suggestion to Adam), and finally onto God (for creating the woman in the first place). The end is inevitable: hurtful words, hostility, and ejection from the Garden. Disobedience, we are told, is the origin story of sin. It is all far too familiar to make a real impact—until you read it as someone with responsibilities for a dependent of your own. What struck me now that I am a mother is what bad parenting is on display here. God offers his creatures no time-out (or time-in) to let tempers cool, no possibility for forgiveness. And worst of all, failing to handle his own considerable anger, God lashes out with a punishment that appears frankly disproportionate to the offense. Rejection does not inspire obedience; quite the opposite. So, what is to be learned here? Not that God is a rash parent, but that estrangement (here represented by the couple's ejection from Paradise) is a natural consequence

of disobedience. Adam and Eve experienced it in at least three different though related ways: as estrangement from God, from each other, and from themselves, in both spirit and body. This third kind of estrangement is, to my mind, the most insidious, the one least appreciated because it feels to us the most normal.

This concept of sin as internal catastrophe for the embodied self does not exclude the more external understanding of sin as fault and punishment. Both hold true, but the latter—sin as punishment—is easier to comprehend. It just makes sense that Adam and Eve must somehow pay for what was, after all, their own fault. Sin and its effect on the human self is harder to define. But how we understand sin matters; it is our sinfulness and the resulting need for salvation that determines what kind of salvation we need. The nature of the injury shapes the nature of the remedy. New Testament writers used two different metaphors to describe sin and salvation. First is the image of a change in legal status (going from a state of sin to a state of grace) and second, one of healing (underscoring internal change). Ever since, Christian theologians have tried to balance both understandings of what salvation entails. However, following the Great Schism of 1054, when communion between the Latin



Cornelis van Haarlem and Hendrick Goltzius, *Ixion*, from *The Four Disgracers*, 1588. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

and Greek churches ceased, Western theologians have tended to emphasize the idea of sin as a juridical problem.

This is not to say that all Western writers were wrong about sin. Many leading Western theologians, Thomas Aquinas among them, were well aware that sinful actions were injurious to the human self as well as resulting in a state of guilt before God. And yet, whatever the reason, the sense of sin as a debt against another was emphasized both in the theology and the practice of the Latin church in the centuries after the schism. And while we know little of how individual priests spoke with their parishioners in the confessional, the main way ordinary faithful learned of the effects of sin on their lives was from the church practices that surrounded them. This brings us to two mainstays of pre-modern religious life in the West: indulgences and the Latin Mass.

In the medieval Western Church, penance was a serious affair. Sinners (that is, all the baptized) wishing to avoid eternal damnation had to confess their sins to a priest with a

sufficiently contrite heart. Confession was thought to remove the eternal punishment resulting from sin, but the temporal punishment could only be undone in the temporal realm, the here and now. The medieval Church pointed the faithful toward an array of activities that contributed to atonement, such as fasting, pilgrimages, and abstinence from food or sex. If unfinished in one's earthly life, atonement was to continue in purgatory, where the saved continued their purification until they were deemed ready for heaven. This is where indulgences came in. They were certificates that one could purchase from a bishop or his representative. In exchange for money, they offered remission of the temporal punishment due to sin whose guilt had already been forgiven. Indulgences were believed to satisfy some or all of this punishment or debt, shortening or eliminating time spent in purgatory.

To ridicule indulgences has been a part of Protestant rhetoric against Roman Catholicism since Luther's times. And yet the practice grew out of a legitimate pastoral need for flexibility. What if someone was unable to perform charitable acts of the kind the Church deemed crucial? What if this person was unable to work at a soup kitchen, but could provide enough funds to have someone else run it? Would that not benefit the poor just as much? Over time, the donation came to be separated from the charitable deed, and the impression was that it was the money that effected the release from punishment. This practice, and the prominence it gained, cemented the conception of sin as a kind of debt against God that could only be canceled by imputing someone else's merit in exchange for money. In other words, the practice

of indulgences gave the impression that the problem with sin had primarily to do with how to satisfy the debt incurred, giving rise to an external sense of sin and sinfulness.

The Latin Mass was another place where the faithful encountered the Church's view of sin in action. In the West, the Mass was conceived as a reenactment of Christ's sacrifice at Golgotha, offered to God the Father by the priest on behalf of the faithful. The bread and wine represented the priest's and the people's willingness to participate in Christ's sacrifice. The Church believed that only through this participation could each human being be sanctified—that is, rendered righteous before God. Here again is that legal idiom, the sense of sin as debt. And while it is unlikely that the faithful would have understood much of the Latin spoken by the priest during Mass, the accompanying sermons as well as religious images such as crucifixes depicting Christ as a sacrificial victim communicated a sense of the Church's teaching. Like indulgences, the Mass presented salvation in terms of a legal metaphor, as something granted by a judge whose wrath had been placated by the presentation of a sacrificial victim.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the Reformers eventually rejected the very idea of indulgences and of the Mass as a sacrifice. In their view, not good works but faith alone could make a human being righteous before God, satisfying the debt to God incurred by sin. Nevertheless, while the Reformers offered a contrasting view of salvation, they confirmed the Roman Catholic understanding of sin as a debt or a crime, something that makes the individual guilty before God. And even more significant for

our discussion here, the Reformers' rejection of indulgences (and of the idea that good works in general were efficacious for salvation) further shifted the conversation about sin away from any consideration of the effects of sin on the person of the believer.

But there is more to the story of human sinfulness. To consider the way in which the fall injured the self is also to consider the effect of sin on the human person. The fathers of the Greek-speaking Church understood human nature to be a composition of two elements—soul and body—or sometimes three—spirit, soul, and body. The distinction is mostly one of terminology; the latter writers saw the spirit as a higher faculty of the soul, and both camps agreed that the main distinction was between the material body and the immaterial soul or spirit. What matters here is that sin impoverishes all aspects of the human person, both its material and immaterial attributes. The body is degraded by sin as much as the soul or spirit.

Since Augustine of Hippo, Christian writers have theorized about evil as a kind of absence (of God, of goodness, of love), in which case we can think of sin in the embodied self as a lack of something, a dynamic absence of proper limits and boundaries, of proportion, of correct balance, and of direction. These kinds of absences seem applicable to emotions, which are our embodied reactions to internal and external stimuli, as well as to appetites and desires. They amount to a kind of estrangement from what is good and beautiful, perpetuated in ways both large and small.

Where and how sin resides in our embodied selves is not merely a quibble among theologians. It matters to all

of us, because—like all good theology—it ought to make sense of everyone’s experience, not only of that of the saints. If the Christian tradition is right, this state of self-estrangement ought to be everyone’s concern, because, whether we acknowledge it or not, it is experienced by all. This state of injured interiority feels so familiar that it seems entirely normal. We are habituated to it.

We can gauge just how habituated we are to self-estrangement only indirectly, by what we lack. How many of us find contentment, rest, peace, consolation, and joy often—or ever? How many of us find it easy to strive for goodness, or even choose to focus on it intermittently? And, if we are honest, how many of us find the idea of a virtuous life actually appealing? This is a good place to mention Augustine’s famous prayer asking God to “grant [him] chastity” but, crucially, “not yet.” This man understood what he was up against. And if this is one of the most consequential defenders of Christianity, what chance do the rest of us have? What is clear, however, is that we are all out of sync with our natural (that is, prelapsarian) ability to participate in Goodness itself. This loss of participation in God is, then, the main effect on our interiority of man’s disobedience. It is an internal injury that torpedoes one’s very self; if left untreated, it results in the eventual draining of all goodness and beauty from life, the manifestation of the ugliness of death.

If I have learned anything from watching James Bond movies, it is that a torpedo does not destroy a warship directly. The ship sinks haltingly, by being thrown off balance as water fills some but not all of its internal compartments. The damage can

sometimes be mitigated, depending on the watchfulness and competence of the crew. It may sink or it may not. Human nature in the wake of the fall suffers a similar fate. It lacks the necessary attributes to fulfill its rightful vocation, but it can be saved.

The church fathers debated the fall at great length. In describing its effects, they converged around the wording of the book of Genesis, which describes man as having been created in God’s “image” and “likeness.” Basil of Caesarea, among others, championed the view that the fall obliterated man’s likeness to God but not God’s image. This means that humans lost the ability to commune with God effortlessly, while retaining God’s self-manifestation imprinted on us. There are many different opinions as to what the “image” corresponds to, where it resides. Some have argued it is the will; others that it is in the mind. It helps me to think of it as a kind of muscle memory for the heart (which in this context encompasses one’s spiritual center). But what is clear is that this imprint of God on our interiority has become harder to access and decode, perhaps a little like a piece of software that has been scrambled by hackers.

Our bodies have been degraded as well, but even here an imprint of God persists. Writing in the medieval period, Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas insisted that not only the soul but also the human body was created in the image of God. This is a profound insight. For one, it allows us to banish the incorrect understanding that, whereas the spirit and soul can strive toward healing, the body is merely a dead weight on our spiritual journey. Not so. Our bodies also have a sense of what is and is not beneficial, in a way that is only now being

properly understood by psychiatrists and neuroscientists.

However, even as God's image remains imprinted on our bodies and souls, human likeness to God was not only scrambled, but was lost completely. The estrangement that resulted from the fall was an effect of human beings' losing their effortless connection to God. Gregory Palamas elaborated on the price of this loss: a complete inability to fulfill our destinies. Like a torpedoed ship, our nature cannot work on its own (in a way that does not lead to death), because its very design presupposes participation in God. Palamas' twentieth-century interpreter, John Meyendorff, emphasized that the fall separated man from the divine life and grace (understood in the Eastern church as equivalent) and "left man alone with all the insufficiencies of his created nature."<sup>1</sup>

What does this mean for us? Our feelings are out of whack, we do not want the right things, our bodies and spirits are at odds. We mess up. Gregory the Great named malice, ignorance, and weakness as the underlying reasons for all this personal chaos. In his pastoral manual entitled *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, Gregory gives advice to pastors on how best to shepherd their parishioners toward salvation while not losing their minds in the process. Gregory's take on sin is of interest here. Throughout his manual—which became hugely influential in both the Latin- and the Greek-speaking churches—Gregory approaches sin as a kind of wound to our natures. This wound has to be treated in just the right way, which is where his advice to pastors comes in. Wounds must be treated or else, he says, the patient bleeds to death.

But bad treatment is not preferable to no treatment. Gregory warns against "wounds made worse by unskilled mending," which make the injury hurt "more grievously, because it is bound improperly by the bandage." He also worries about the mental state of the patients (the sinners): they should not be "exasperated by excessive harshness," or they might give up on their treatment altogether. In other words, to discontinue the healing process is more damaging than sin itself. This suggests that Gregory saw sin as a symptom of a more fundamental disorder.

This disorder, described in the prayers of the Church as an illness or a stain, leaves us out of touch with goodness and, given that goodness was indelibly implanted in us in the form of God's image, out of touch with ourselves. We can gauge just how habituated we are to this state by evaluating it in the light of the writings of Saint Maximus the Confessor. He thought that our freedom of choice, our capacity to choose, was itself a result of the fall. A perfect nature, he argued, has no need to choose; it knows what is good instinctively. We no longer do. Having been tarnished by the fall, our nature lacks direct knowledge and feeling for what is good. Other Greek fathers put a more positive spin on our necessity to choose. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, insisted that God gave freedom to his creatures so that "freedom should properly belong to him who chooses it." But whether we see it as a burden or an honor, the fact remains that choose we must, almost all the time, often without clear direction.

The role that our passions ought to play has also been much debated. Whether or not human passions are

<sup>1</sup>John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (London: Faith Press, 1964), 121.



a result of the fall may sound like a question whose importance is merely academic. But it is not. How we answer it affects our spiritual lives. If all passions are evil, then they all must be conquered and made irrelevant to how we live. If, however, passions are not *a priori* evil, then they must be discerned and interrogated but not necessarily eliminated. Gregory Palamas, a proponent of this latter view, counseled against any efforts aimed at mortifying our passionate responses; instead, Palamas advised to reorient them from evil to good. Thus, for example, irascible anger might be turned into passion for justice or righteous wrath. What is especially appealing about Palamas's stance is his expressed interest in salvaging "the passionate part of the soul," along with its "momentum" and "activity" (we might call them "drive" or "élan"). Instead of being shamed and suppressed, this energy is then harnessed to move the person towards what is Good and Beautiful.

The good news of Christ's incarnation is that all of human nature is salvageable, both body and spirit. This is a fundamental premise (and promise) of all Christian orthodoxy: Christ assumed all of human nature so that all of it can be brought to healing. John of Damascus described it as Christ's sharing in our poor and weak nature to cleanse it and make

it incorruptible by fusing it in himself with divine nature. This means that Christ took on our torpedoed human nature, forcibly separated from its divine grace as a result of the fall, and joined it with divine nature, thereby effecting its healing and wholeness. We can participate in this healing through baptism, the Eucharist, and the pursuit of holiness.

The Greek fathers speak unanimously here: the goal of Christian life is union with God. We are restored to what we were made for by being unified to God. This process is called deification or *theosis* by the Greek fathers. As Athanasius of Alexandria famously stated, drawing on Irenaeus: "God made himself man so that man might become God." This statement was reiterated by a veritable army of Christian apologists and saints. Theosis involves recovering God's likeness that had been lost in the Fall. This is not the same as redemption. Theosis (union with God) is the broader, more inclusive category, whereas redemption is one image among many employed by the sacred tradition to articulate our salvation. The goal of theosis refers not simply to God's accepting us back, but calls for our participation in God and collaboration with God. It insists that we become like him. This is, incidentally, the only way to return to ourselves. Not a small feat, but a necessary one just the same. ✱

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