

THE DOCTRINE  
*of*  
‘‘CAPITAL SINS’’

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## THE DOCTRINE OF “CAPITAL SINS”

The doctrine of “capital sins” teaches that in the administration of discipline in the house of God, there are, or may be, cases of sin in which, though the one who sinned has truly repented, the people of God may with-hold forgiveness and restoration. This doctrine has been taught and practised by the “brethren” referred to. We quote from the ministry of two of their prominent leaders, which sets out the teaching.

In an address on “The Administration of Cleansing,” Mr. S. McCallum, speaking of the case of sin referred to in 1 Cor. 5, says, “God is there, His holiness is there, and let none of us think that the magnification of grace minimises holiness, or unrighteousness, or lawlessness. The magnification of grace is to show how things can be met. In this chapter the character of the evil being the kind it is, is met by excision, so that the last word is, “remove the wicked person from amongst yourselves.” This particular kind of evil has to be dealt with on this line. It *necessitates* the *judicial infliction* that Paul alludes to in 2 Cor. 2. (Mr. M’s. italics).

It may be said that if he was repentant what more is to be looked for when he is restored? I suggest to the brethren various features linked with

the subject that is before us, the administration of cleansing . . . . Normally in cases amongst us where there is repentance, remission is extended, but the degree of sin in 1 Cor. 5 requires this extreme exercise of discipline.”

(Readings and Addresses in Australia, 1953. p.373).

We now quote from readings on Matthew's Gospel with Mr. G. R. Cowell at Bournemouth in May, 1955. Mr. Cowell was speaking of the “loosing” in Matt. 18; 18 and remarked that we always have in mind the loosing.

“M.P.S. Then the way back by way of repentance would always be open ?

G.R.C. It would, and in John that is put first, “Whose soever sins ye remit they are remitted”

A.C.S.P. May I refer further about that? Did not beloved Mr. Taylor used to speak of “capital sins” and is not sin of that character contemplated in 1 Cor. 5, where the apostle makes no reference to any possibility of repentance with the man for the moment ?

G.R.C. I think so. The saints at Corinth had no option. It was the Lord's commandment through Paul that they should withdraw from that man. The Lord's Name required it.

M. P. S. You mean that even had he been repentant at the time of the assembly meeting, the public position, and the Lord's Name required withdrawal?

G. R. C. The question of repentance is not referred to. Something had arisen which necessitated putting away, or, as we should say in the light of 2 Tim. 2, withdrawal.” (God with us. p. 35).

It will doubtless strike the reader that there is no reference to the scriptures which give the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ regarding repentance, and forgiveness and restoration. For it is remarkable that it is the Lord Jesus Himself who teaches the truth on this subject. In the light of this it is strange that such able and godly men should base their teaching on a chapter that makes no reference at all to repentance, apparently overlooking the Lord's own teaching on this very subject. Evidently, they do not find any authority in what *He* taught for their doctrine of "capital sins." Such scriptures as Luke chapters 15, 17, and 24, and Revelation, chapter 2, set out the Lord's teaching on repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

Nothing in our remarks on this subject should weaken in our souls the seriousness of sin. The death of Christ forbids it. "Christ our passover has been sacrificed" (1 Cor .5: 7). His death measures the distance of *every* sin from God. One sin would have necessitated His death to cleanse it and clothe the sinner in Divine righteousness. The sacrifice that provided the coats of skin for the first sinners teaches this. (Gen. 3: 21). As another has helpfully said , the death of Christ shows two things; how God hates sin, and how He loves the sinner.

Nothing in these remarks should lessen in our thoughts the importance of the discipline that deals, in the faithfulness of love, with evil in the house of God. It is the divinely appointed means for maintaining in a practical way among the people of God, the holiness that becomes His house. Unfaithfulness

in this important matter, as any Christian can see, accounts for the failure and public ruin of the church. So important is separation from evil, that when evil is unjudged in the Christian profession the *individual* believer is called upon to depart from it in the Name of the Lord; and to purge himself from those who remain where evil is unjudged, so that he may be a vessel to honour, sanctified, serviceable to the Master, prepared for every good work. (2 Tim. 2).

But if evil is judged, and repented of, by an individual or a company, it is another matter. In the history of the church, as depicted by the Lord, in Rev. 2 and 3, we find that when love waned in Ephesus, this was soon followed in Pergamos and Thyatira by unfaithfulness in failure to deal with evil. But the Lord calls for repentance and gives space for repentance even to Jezebel, as Paul did to the Corinthians; but "*if not*", His judicial stroke would fall. (Rev. 2: 5, 16, 21, 22. 2 Cor. 12: 21; 13: 1, 2).

Now, what the doctrine of "capital sins" says is that even if there is repentance there must in certain cases be the judicial stroke. It is obviously quite the opposite of what the Lord says, even in the case of Jezebel in Thyatira.

Equally obviously it is against His teaching in Luke's gospel. If we take chapter 15, the Lord speaks several times of joy in heaven over one repentant sinner. It has been pointed out repeatedly that the words, "being such," in 1 Cor. 5: 5, mean that the one who had sinned was unrepentant, still in his sin, and "being such," was to be dealt with in the name of

the Lord, as Paul commanded. Do our brethren who teach this doctrine think that heaven rejoices over a wicked person? For if a *repentant* person is to be put away as a *wicked* person, then there is a strange contradiction between the Lord's teaching in Luke 15 and His apostle's teaching in 1 Cor. 5. It has been rightly said that the mind of heaven is to be reflected in the assembly on earth. Would this be so if while heaven was rejoicing over a repentant sinner, the assembly was putting away the same one as a wicked person? The doctrine of "capital sins" taught by these "brethren" is clearly contrary to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. True repentance involves a *moral* change in the repentant one. A repentant sinner is *not* a wicked person and cannot be put away or withdrawn from as such. 1 Cor. 5: 13 has *no application* to a repentant sinner.

The words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 17: 3, 4, are intended to put us on our guard against failure to forgive one who has sinned *if he repents*. He says, "Take heed to yourselves; if thy brother should sin, rebuke him; if he should repent, forgive him. And if he should sin against thee seven times in a day, and seven times should return to thee, saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him." There is to be rebuking as the one that sinned at Corinth was rebuked (2 Cor. 2 - 6). Sin is serious and is not to be belittled. But when there is repentance and confession, there is to be forgiveness. The Lord's first words are important. "Take heed to *yourselves*". The Corinthians were slow in rebuking the brother who sinned as 1 Cor. shows; they were slow in forgiv-

ing him when he repented as we learn from 2 Cor. 2. The failure in faithfulness on the one hand, and in grace on the other, was due to lack *in themselves*. So Paul tells them in the latter scripture to take heed to themselves lest their lack of grace in forgiveness should damage the brother, and give Satan an advantage over them. Such teaching would guard us against the doctrine of “capital sins”. We are absolutely nothing and nowhere apart from forgiving grace, yet we are so slow and so poor in expressing it to others. Hence these warning words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 17, and again in the latter part of Matthew 18.

It is indeed a fundamental principle of this dispensation that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in Christ’s Name (Luke 24); and “beginning at Jerusalem,” the worst place on earth at that time. Surely it was the place where the worst “capital sin” in man’s history had been committed—the crucifixion of the Lord. Yet such is the grace of the dispensation, and this is the grace we are to express, “even as God also in Christ has forgiven you.” Thus will God, as revealed in Christ, be expressed in the administration of His house, “the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” (1 Tim. 3: 15).

During the time that this doctrine has been taught among these “brethren,” much has been said about a person’s “measure of repentance” not being deep enough, and forgiveness in some cases, withheld for that reason. The Lord in His teaching refers to repentance, never to a “*measure of repentance*,” It is true that some are more deeply repentant than

others. But if we look at the prodigal to whom the Lord refers in Luke 15, we might think and say his repentance was not deep enough. For we would say, no truly and thoroughly repentant person would come, as the prodigal did, proposing the terms on which he might be restored. Yet, he *had* repented. He had said, "I have sinned." He had confessed his unworthiness. He had turned his back on the far country and his face was towards his father's house. He was moving in that direction. No doubt some of us would have said and quite truly, as we fear has often been said, "He has a good bit to come; his repentance is not deep enough; he has not bottomed things yet." BUT—"his father saw him and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." The repentance that commenced in the far country, and continued on his road homewards, was completed in his father's embracing arms. His course had been thoroughly wicked, as his elder brother said. But he repented, and in perfect grace, is forgiven and fully restored.

When in the house of God ourselves we are not to forget the mercy and abundant grace that has brought us in. In 1 Timothy Paul writes of the house of God, and of the order and discipline its holiness requires. But he tells us in the first chapter, how, as the chief of sinners, he had been brought in. He says twice, "I obtained mercy;" "the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant;" He showed him all long suffering. These first impressions of God and of Christ as we are brought into the house of God are not to be forgotten in dealing with others who

may sin. Yet if there were those who sinned seriously and *did not repent*, faithfulness required discipline and Paul did not spare. (1 Tim. 1: 13-20; 2 Cor. 12: 2-13, 2.

The difficulty arises as the Lord Jesus warned, with *ourselves*, “Take heed to yourselves;” as His apostle, too, warned the Corinthians. Where there is repentance, there is to be forgiveness; for, if we fail in this, God is misrepresented in the grace of the dispensation, apart from which, in exceeding abundance, none of us would be in His house at all.

The writer was present at an “assembly meeting” when some sought to put into practice the doctrine of “capital sins.” It was a case where it was evident to all that the person involved was truly and openly repentant. The evil of the effort to prevent forgiveness and restoration was so manifest, that when it was resisted, the brethren would not sanction the application of the evil doctrine. But those who resisted it were condemned for doing so when the matter was known beyond the locality where it took place. In the address of Mr. M., referred to earlier, he rightly warned his hearers about the action of Ahaz who substituted a pavement of stone for the twelve oxen on which Solomon had placed the laver for cleansing. (2 Kings 16: 17). On the occasion referred to, when this doctrine of “capital sins” was sought to be enforced against a repentant sinner, the brethren felt the cold hard stone of the pavement of Ahaz enter their souls. They would not have it. But those who held the doctrine then called for a reading

on Leviticus 14 and 2 Cor. 2, endeavouring vainly to establish, in principle, teaching that in practice was obnoxious to the people of God, and would have misrepresented Him in His house.

The Lord's teaching would apply in dealing with *servants* of His who have failed, although, alas! the doctrine of "capital sins" has been applied in dealing with them. But we have instructive examples of the Lord's dealings with His servants who failed. We are to be His imitators so that in our dealing with *His* servants He is rightly represented.

In Matthew 11, John the Baptist, sent from prison a message to the Lord that must have wounded His tender heart. "Art Thou he that should come, or *do we look for another*?" If we did not know our own hearts, we could hardly believe John would send such a message to the Lord. Could there be "another" than Jesus? Had not John baptized Him and seen the Spirit of God as a dove descend upon Him? Had he not heard the Father's voice from heaven acclaim Him, "My Beloved Son, in whom I have found My delight"? Had he not testified that this is the Son of God? Could there be "another" than *He*, than Jesus? No doubt, though he wavered for the moment, John was basically right in his heart in regard to the Lord. How painful to the Lord, however, must have been this sorrowful failure on the part of His servant! Yet how tender is the hidden rebuke He sends in His reply to John by his disciples. "Blessed is whosoever shall not be offended in Me." Do not be offended in Me, says the lowly, suffering,

rejected Saviour to His failing servant. How meek and lowly in heart He was! For it is in the hour of His rejection, contemplated in this chapter of Matthew, that He received this painful message. Only one Foot never faltered in the suffering pathway of the will of God! Only one Head never bowed to the storm of hatred His faithful testimony raised! Blessed Master! But oh! how tender, how true to His failing servants! There has never been anyone born of women, greater than John, He says; greater than a prophet, Jehovah's messenger sent before His face. John has failed "in prison," we may say; look at him "in the wilderness," says the Lord. We might say, in view of John's painful defection regarding the Lord Himself, this was not the time to say such things. The Lord says them. If he has failed in the prison, we are not to forget his firmness and fearless faithfulness "in the wilderness."

But have not we seen the Lord's servants dealt with in a sadly different way? Years of faithful service have been forgotten. No doubt at times they have made a remark that seemed to reflect on the Lord. But inquiry, if it was made, as it certainly should be, has shown them to be clearly right concerning Him. Yet have we not to confess that occasion has been made of such remarks to "scourge" and humiliate them? We are bound to say of our actions in this and other countries "We have not so learned Christ, if we have heard Him, and been instructed according as the truth is in Jesus." (Eph. 4: 20, 21).

It was the same with the Lord in resurrection. Peter, after the plainest warning had failed terribly.

He had been with the Lord and His own in the holy seclusion of the upper room. He had heard there that precious discourse (John 13 - 16). He had listened to that wonderful prayer to the Father. (John 17). A few hours later he denied Him so dreadfully. But one look of Christ had wrought broken hearted repentance in Peter's soul. He wept bitterly. He is the first the Lord sees when He is risen. It is in Mark's gospel we learn that in His first message to His disciples, the Lord says, "Go, tell My disciples, *and Peter.*" He mentioned you specially, they could say to Peter. Mark alone records this special word to Peter. How gladly he would, as one who had himself failed and been restored! It says of the repentant sinner in Luke 7 that *when she knew that Jesus was there*, she went to Simon's house. No one so attractive as Jesus to the repentant sinner; and may we not say, no one so attractive to Jesus our Saviour, as the repentant sinner; even though that sinner be a servant who has sinned so much? Jesus rejoices, as heaven does, over *every* repentant sinner.

And John 21 would also teach us that for such there is from Him "grace upon grace." Peter had led others back into that position out of which the Lord had called them. "I go fishing," he said (John 21: 3). It was a fruitless expedition, but however dark the night of failure, light dawns as Christ comes into view (John 21: 4). A voice of authority might well have called Peter to the shore but instead, in terms of peculiar affection, He enquires "Children, have ye anything to eat"? The description in detail

of this third manifestation of Jesus shows how grace upon grace wrought in the recovery and restoration of Peter to his service. The grace that works true recovery, not only probes and exposes the cause of our failure; it also produces fresh affection for Christ, and that devotedness to Himself, to which He can commit what He values most, "My lambs" and "My sheep." But what is needed for this, as the scripture says, is *another manifestation of Jesus*. (verse 1). If other things are manifest in us than what we have learned and seen in Him, there may well be no true recovery and no fresh devotedness to Him, with those who have failed.

But the history of recent years among the "brethren" (while the writer was with them) has shown alas! another spirit in dealing with servants who had failed, a spirit so different from the spirit of the Master. It has not been His spirit but one in keeping with the doctrine of "capital sins."

One brother, speaking of such things, not disputing that discipline and threshing in some measure may be needed, remarked that the threshing should not be with "instruments of iron," as the prophet Amos says (ch. 1-3). Another, an aged brother, spoke of the spirit of Edom in the same chapter (v. 11) who "pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity." We are not to be like those of Tyre who "remembered not the brotherly covenant." (v.9). Discipline has to be measured as Deut. 25: 1-3 teaches. It has not to exceed "forty stripes." Have we not cause to fear that, in dealing with serving brothers who failed, the brotherly covenant has not

been remembered; that in the spirit of Edom, brothers have been “pursued;” have been “threshed with instruments of iron,” and have been made “despicable” by being beaten with more than “forty stripes”?

Reference should be made to another point in the address we have considered. Leprosy *in the head* made the person affected by it “utterly unclean” (Lev. 13: 43, 44). This has been made a matter of holding error instead of the truth. “The head” involves an allusion to the mind. It has been applied to those who were unable to accept “the truth” in “the authoritative ministry” of the brethren referred to.

But the Spirit of God Himself has given us in the history of Uzziah an example of leprosy in the head. (2 Kings 26). He was a king who had been “marvellously helped till he became strong.” But when he became strong, his heart was lifted up to his downfall. The pride of his heart, and the self-will that goes with it, appeared in the leprosy of his forehead. Pride, “a heart lifted up,” is most serious when it appears in those who have been “marvellously helped.” The writer does not at all charge the “brethren” with the charge they have made against others, “leprosy of the head.”

But as we look back over the history of Christians known as “brethren” during a century or more, though now sorrowfully divided, we must say they were “marvellously helped.” Have we not to fear “a heart lifted up”? Pretentious claims in recent years about ourselves in contrast to other believers

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