

**T**he message of the Christian gospel does not flatter man. Instead, it honestly states the facts concerning his bankrupt spiritual condition. Such a diagnosis is by no means gladly received by the multitudes who have deemed the message of God most unwelcome. However, no cure was ever effected by rejecting the correct diagnosis of the problem. Salvation for the sinner begins with submission to the accuracy of God's assessment of the situation.

Just how does the Bible describe the spiritual condition in which unconverted man was born and still continues? No more comprehensive statement of the Bible's teaching on the subject may be found than that set down in the *Shorter Catechism*. Question 18 asks: "Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?" The answer is concise: "The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called Original Sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it" (cf. Romans 3:10;

5:19; Ephesians 2:1; Psalm 51:5; Matthew 15:19). We may be offended by this diagnosis, but the truth is that no doctor ever spoke with such kind frankness to his patient as the Lord does in His word to sinful man.

### **Universal**

Considering this statement of man's sinfulness, it has to be noted that there are no exceptions to this condition. "There is no man which sinneth not" (2 Chronicles 6:36). This is a key doctrine in the word of God. Men may find many distinctions of lifestyle and behaviour between themselves and others in modern society. Those



# MAN'S GREATEST PROBLEM

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distinctions may indeed be valid, reflecting well on those who make them, but it does not alter the truth of the declaration that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). A man may say of himself that he is no murderer, he has no sympathy with moral perversion, and he seeks to be honest in his dealings with all whom he meets, but that does not mean that he is without sin. As a minister, I have spent a lifetime visiting the sick and the dying. Not everyone whom I knew to be dying appeared to be as ill as was actually the case. Some may even have cherished hopes of a full recovery. Yet the facts clearly indicated that without God’s intervention, the disease from which they were suffering, though not visibly so as yet, was nevertheless quenching the life of the body.

So it is with sin. Many show the clearest evidence of sin’s terrible power and destructive tendencies in their lives. But the absence of those symptoms in the lives of others does not indicate that their spiritual condition is any better than those whose lives clearly manifest their dominance by sin. All have sinned. Every heart is sinful. All are guilty before God. For this reason, all need the help and healing of Christ the Saviour.

## Total

Some may say that though they are sinners, they nevertheless are capable of pleasing God because they are not all bad. The second thing that the catechism answer states is equally as important as the fact that every man is a sinner. It is this: Every man is a sinner through and through. If the first truth is unpalatable to many, this doctrine is even more so. But it is true whether men like it or not. Man’s whole nature is corrupted by sin. Theologians describe this as total depravity. Each one of us was “shaped in iniquity; and in sin” did our mothers conceive us (Psalm 51:5). Consider these words: “The wicked

are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3). Lest we think that such a term as *the wicked* could not include us, ponder the words spoken by God to His own people: “I knew that thou wouldst deal very treacherously, and wast called a transgressor from the womb” (Isaiah 48:8). A transgressor from the womb! That is how it is with all mankind. At our birth, we were by “nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Ephesians 2:3). Rank, social position, education, environment, circumstances—none of these matters. The infant in the king’s nursery has this in common with the babe in the most squalid hovel—both are sinners, utterly and totally. This does not mean that all men are as bad as they could possibly be. Plainly that is not so. But it does mean that no part of man’s nature is free from the taint of sin. Whatever we do is soiled and stained by the sinful nature that reigns within us.

This being so, men are incapable of producing works that can merit their entrance to heaven. Our best efforts “come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Let us take up the bow of good works and fire off as many arrows as we may, we will never reach the target of perfect holiness required by the holy law of God. Romans 3:20 makes it clear: “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” When a sinner attempts to keep the law of God, he learns by experience that he is a sinner. Let a man take hold of a tonne weight and strain to lift it with all his strength, and the exercise will leave him exhausted and a little more knowledgeable about himself—he is not able to lift a tonne! All our attempts to keep the law as a means of achieving heaven will result only in our coming face to face with our sinfulness and our incapacity to meet the holy standards of God. We thus learn our guilty, condemned, and helpless state before God (cf. Romans 7:7–10).

## Curable

God’s word depicts mankind lying in a lost, condemned, and helpless state. Nowhere is this picture more vividly drawn than in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. Man in his depraved and helpless state is represented by the “certain man” who “went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead” (v. 30). The priest and the Levite, who “passed by on the other side” (vv. 31–32), are representative of man’s religious endeavours, which utterly fail to save him; indeed, they do not even come near to bringing him deliverance from his sin. The Samaritan (v. 33), in the Jews’ eyes a despised and contemptible figure, is representative of the Lord Jesus Christ who came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

While the injured man could do nothing for himself and was doomed to die as a result of the treatment he had received from the robbers, there came One, despised and hated, who did what none would or could do—bind up his wounds and pay completely for the means of his recovery.

Yes, we are sinners, helpless and unable to redeem ourselves from the damnation which will most certainly engulf us; but there is One who has the means and the power, and above all, the will, to deliver us from death—Jesus Christ, who is mighty to save. Man’s sin problem is universal and total, but thank God, it is curable because “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). ■



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