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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 61

The Mystery of Iniquity

"The mystery of iniquity doth already work." 2 Thess. 2:7.

1. Without inquiring how far these words refer to any particular event in the Christian Church, I would at present take occasion from them to consider that important question, -- In what manner the mystery of iniquity hath wrought among us till it hath well-nigh covered the whole earth.
2. It is certain that "God made man upright;" perfectly holy and perfectly happy: But by rebelling against God, he destroyed himself, lost the favour and the image of God, and entailed sin, with its attendant, pain, on himself and all his posterity. Yet his merciful Creator did not leave him in this helpless, hopeless state: He immediately appointed his Son, his well-beloved Son, "who is the brightness of his glory, the express image of his person," to be the Saviour of men; "the propitiation for the sins of the whole world;" the great Physician who, by his almighty Spirit, should heal the sickness of their souls, and restore them not only to the favour, but to "the image of God wherein they were created."
3. This great mystery of godliness began to work from the very time of the original promise. Accordingly, the Lamb being, in the purpose of God, "slain from the beginning of the world," from the same period his sanctifying Spirit began to renew the souls of men. We have an undeniable instance of this in Abel, who "obtained a testimony" from God "that he was righteous." (Heb. 11:4.) And from that very time all that were partakers of the same faith were partakers of the same salvation; were not only re-instated in the favour, but likewise restored to the image, of God.
4. But how exceeding small was the number of these even from the earliest ages! No sooner did "the sons of men multiply upon the face of the earth," than God, looking down from heaven, "saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth;" so great that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil," only evil, and that "continually." (Gen. 6:1-5.) And so it remained, without any intermission, till God executed that terrible sentence, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth." (Gen. 6:7.)
5. Only "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord;" being "a just man, and perfect in his generations." Him, therefore, with his wife, his sons, and their wives, God preserved from the general destruction. And one might have imagined that this small remnant would likewise have been "perfect in their generations." But how far was this from being the case! Presently after this signal deliverance we find one of them, Ham, involved in sin, and under his father's curse. And how did "the mystery of iniquity" afterwards work, not only in the posterity of Ham, but in the posterity of Japheth; yea, and of Shem, -- Abraham and his family only excepted!
6. Yea, how did it work even in the posterity of Abraham; in God's chosen people! Were not these also, down to Moses, to David, to Malachi, to Herod the Great, a faithless and stubborn generation, a "sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity," continually forsaking the Lord, and "provoking the Holy One of Israel" And yet we have no reason to believe that these were worse than the nations that surrounded them, who were universally swallowed up in all manner of wickedness, as well as in damnable idolatries; not having the God of heaven "in all their thoughts," but working all uncleanness with greediness.

7. In the fulness of time, when iniquity of every kind, when ungodliness and unrighteousness, had spread over all nations, and covered the earth as a flood, it pleased God to lift up a standard against it by "bringing his first-begotten into the world." Now, then, one would expect "the mystery of godliness" would totally prevail over "the mystery of iniquity;" that the Son of God would be "a light to lighten the Gentiles," as well as "salvation to his people Israel." All Israel, one would think, yea, and all the earth, will soon be filled with the glory of the Lord. Nay: "The mystery of iniquity" prevailed still, well-nigh over the face of the earth. How exceeding small was the number of those whose souls were healed by the Son of God himself! "When Peter stood up in the midst of them, the number of names was about a hundred and twenty." (Acts 1:15.) And even these were but imperfectly healed; the chief of them being a little before so weak in faith that, though they did not, like Peter, forswear their Master, yet "they all forsook him and fled:" A plain proof that the sanctifying "Spirit was not" then "given, because Jesus was not glorified."

8. It was then, when he had "ascended up on high, and led captivity captive," that "the promise of the Father" was fulfilled, which they had heard from him. It was then he began to work like himself, showing that "all power was given to him in heaven and earth." "When the day of Pentecost was fully come, suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and there appeared tongues as of fire; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:1 &c.) In consequence of this, three thousand souls received medicine to heal their sickness, were restored to the favour and the image of God under one sermon of St. Peter's. (Acts 2:41.) "And the Lord added to them daily, "not such as should be saved; a manifest perversion of the text; but "such as were saved." The expression is peculiar; and so indeed is the position of the words, which run thus: "And the Lord added those that were saved daily to the church." First, they "were saved" from the power of sin; then they "were added" to the assembly of the faithful.

9. In order clearly to see how they were already saved, we need only observe the short account of them which is recorded in the latter part of the second and in the fourth chapter. "They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine, and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers:" That is, they were daily taught by the Apostles, and had all things common, and received the Lord's supper, and attended all the public service. (Acts 2:42.) "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions, and parted them to all men, as every man had need." (Acts 2:44, 45.) And again: "The multitude of them that believed," now greatly increased, "were of one heart and of one soul: Neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common." (Acts 4:32.) And yet again: "Great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: For as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them at the Apostles' feet: And distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." (Acts 4:33-35.)

10. But here a question will naturally occur: "How came they to act thus, to have all things in common, seeing we do not read of any positive command to do this" I answer, There needed no outward command: The command was written on their hearts. It naturally and necessarily resulted from the degree of love which they enjoyed. Observe! "They were of one heart, and of one soul:" And not so much as one (so the words run) said, (they could not, while their hearts so overflowed with love,) "that any of the things which he possessed was his own." And wheresoever the same cause shall prevail, the same effect will naturally follow.

11. Here was the dawn of the proper gospel day. Here was a proper Christian Church. It was now "the

Sun of Righteousness" rose upon the earth, "with healing in his wings." He did now "save his people from their sins:" He "healed all their sickness." He not only taught that religion which is the true "healing of the soul," but effectually planted it in the earth; filling the souls of all that believed in him with righteousness, -- gratitude to God, and good-will to man; attended with a peace that surpassed all understanding, and with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

12. But how soon did "the mystery of iniquity" work again, and obscure the glorious prospect! It began to work (not openly indeed, but covertly) in two of the Christians, Ananias and Sapphira. "They sold their possession," like the rest, and probably for the same motive; but afterwards, giving place to the devil, and reasoning with flesh and blood, they "kept back part of the price." See the first Christians, that "made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience;" the first that "drew back to perdition;" instead of continuing to "believe to the" final "salvation of the soul!" Mark the first plague which infected the Christian Church; namely, the love of money! And will it not be the grand plague in all generations, whenever God shall revive the same work O ye believers in Christ, take warning! Whether you are yet but little children, or young men that are strong in the faith, see the snare; your snare in particular, -- that which you will be peculiarly exposed to after you have escaped from gross pollutions. "Love not the world, neither the things of the world! If any man love the world," whatever he was in times past, "the love of the Father is not" now "in him!"

13. However, this plague was stayed in the first Christian Church, by instantly cutting off the infected persons. By that signal judgment of God on the first offenders, "great fear came upon all;" (Acts 5:11;) so that, for the present at least, not one dared to follow their example. Meantime believers, men full of faith and love, who rejoiced to have all things in common, "were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." (Acts 5:14.)

14. If we inquire in what manner "the mystery of iniquity," the energy of Satan, began to work again in the Christian Church, we shall find it wrought in quite a different way; putting on quite another shape: Partiality crept in among the Christian believers. Those by whom the distribution to everyone was made had respect of persons; largely supplying those of their own nation, while the other widows, who were not Hebrews, "were neglected in the daily administration." (Acts 6:1.) Distribution was not made to them according as everyone had need. Here was a manifest breach of brotherly love in the Hebrews; a sin both against justice and mercy: Seeing the Grecians, as well as the Hebrews, had "sold all they had, and laid the price at the Apostles' feet." See the second plague that broke in upon the Christian Church! -- Partially; respect of persons; too much regard for those of our own side; and too little for others, though equally worthy.

15. The infection did not stop here, but one evil produced many more. From partiality in the Hebrews, "there arose in the Grecians a murmuring against" them; not only discontent and resentful thoughts, but words suitable thereto; unkind expressions, hard speeches, evil-speaking, and backbiting, naturally followed. And by the "root of bitterness" thus "springing up," undoubtedly "many were defiled." The Apostles indeed soon found out a means of removing the occasion of this murmuring; yet so much of the evil root remained, that God saw it needful to use a severer remedy. He let loose the world upon them all; if haply by their sufferings, by the spoiling of their goods, by pain, imprisonment, and death itself, he might at once punish and amend them. And persecution, God's last remedy for a backsliding people, had the happy effect for which he intended it. Both the partiality of the Hebrews ceased, and the murmuring of the Grecians: And "then had the churches rest, and were edified;" built up in the love of God and one another; "and, walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comforts of the Holy

Ghost, were multiplied." (Acts 9:31.)

16. It seems to have been some time after this, that "the mystery of iniquity" began to work in the form of zeal. Great troubles arose by means of some who zealously contended for circumcision, and the rest of the ceremonial law; till the Apostles and Elders put an end to the spreading evil, by that final determination, -- "It seemed good unto the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay on you no greater burden than these necessary things; that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication." (Acts 15:28, 29.) Yet was not this evil so thoroughly suppressed, but that it frequently broke out again; as we learn from various parts of St. Paul's Epistles, particularly that to the Galatians.

17. Nearly allied to this was another grievous evil, which at the same time sprang up in the Church; -- want of mutual forbearance, and, of consequence, anger, strife, contention, variance. One very remarkable instance of this we find in this very chapter. When "Paul said to Barnabas, Let us visit the brethren where we have preached the word, Barnabas determined to take with him John;" because he was "his sister's son." "But Paul thought it not good to take him who had deserted them before." And he had certainly reason on his side. But Barnabas resolved to have his own way. Kai egento paroxusmos, -- and there was a fit of anger. It does not say, on St. Paul's side: Barnabas only had passion, to supply the want of reason. Accordingly he departed from the work, and went home; while St. Paul went forward "through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches." (Acts 15:41.)

18. The very first society of Christians at Rome were not altogether free from this evil leaven. There were "divisions and offences" among them also; (Rom. 16:17;) although, in general, they seem to have "walked in love." But how early did the "mystery of iniquity" work, and how powerfully, in the Church at Corinth! Not only schisms and heresies, animosities, fierce and bitter contentions were among them; but open, actual sins; yea, "such fornication as was not named among the Heathens." (1 Cor. 5:1.) Nay, there was need to remind them that "neither adulterers, nor thieves, nor drunkards" could "enter into the kingdom of heaven." (1 Cor. 6:9, 10.) And in all St. Paul's Epistles we meet with abundant proof, that tares grew up, with the wheat in all the Churches, and that "the mystery of iniquity" did every where, in a thousand forms, counterwork "the mystery of godliness."

19. When St. James wrote his Epistle, directed more immediately "to the twelve tribes scattered abroad," to the converted Jews, the tares sown among his wheat had produced a plentiful harvest. That grand pest of Christianity, a faith without works, was spread far and wide; filling the Church with a "wisdom from beneath," which was "earthly, sensual, devilish," and which gave rise, not only to rash judging and evil-speaking, but to "envy, strife, confusion, and every evil work." Indeed, whoever peruses the fourth and fifth chapters of this Epistle, with serious attention, will be inclined to believe, that even in this early period the tares had nigh choked the wheat, and that among most of those to whom St. James wrote, no more than the form of godliness, if so much, was left.

20. St. Peter wrote about the same time "to the strangers," the Christians, "scattered abroad through" all those spacious provinces of "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia" Minor, "and Bithynia." These, probably, were some of the most eminent Christians that were then in the world. Yet how exceeding far were even these from being "without spot and blemish!" And what grievous tares were here also growing up with the wheat! Some of them were "bringing in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them:" (2 Pet. 2:1 &c. :) And "many followed their pernicious ways;" of whom the Apostle gives that terrible character: "They walk after the flesh," in "the lust of uncleanness, like brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed. Spots they are, and blemishes, while they feast with you;" (in the

"feasts of charity," then celebrated throughout the whole Church:) "having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest, for whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever." And yet these very men were called Christians, and were even then in the bosom of the Church! Nor does the Apostle mention them as infesting any one particular church only; but as a general plague, which even then was dispersed far and wide among all the Christians to whom he wrote!

21. Such is the authentic account of "the mystery of iniquity" working even in the apostolic Churches! -- an account given, not by the Jews or Heathens, but by the Apostles themselves. To this we may add the account which is given by the Head and Founder of the Church; Him "who holds the stars in his right hand;" who is "the faithful and true Witness." We may easily infer what was the state of the Church in general, from the state of the seven Churches in Asia. One of these indeed, the Church of Philadelphia, had "kept his word, and had not denied his name;" (Rev. 3:8;) the Church of Smyrna was likewise in a flourishing state: But all the rest were corrupted, more or less; insomuch that many of them were not a jot better than the present race of Christians; and our Lord then threatened, what he has long since performed, to "remove the candlestick" from them.

22. Such was the real state of the Christian Church, even during the first century; while not only St. John, but most of the Apostles were present with and presided over it. But what a mystery is this, that the All-wise, the All-gracious, the Almighty, should suffer it so to be, not in one only, but as far as we can learn, in every Christian society, those of Smyrna and Philadelphia excepted! And how came these to be excepted Why were these less corrupted (to go no farther) than the other Churches of Asia It seems, because they were less wealthy. The Christians in Philadelphia were not literally "increased in goods," like those in Ephesus or Laodicea; and if the Christians at Smyrna had acquired more wealth, it was swept away by persecution. So that these, having less of this world's goods, retained more of the simplicity and purity of the gospel.

23. But how contrary is this scriptural account of the ancient Christians to the ordinary apprehensions of men! We have been apt to imagine, that the Primitive Church was all excellence and perfection; answerable to that strong description which St. Peter cites from Moses: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people." And such, without all doubt, the first Christian Church, which commenced at the day of Pentecost, was. But how soon did the fine gold become dim! How soon was the wine mixed with water! How little time elapsed, before the "god of this world" so far regained his empire, that Christians in general were scarce distinguishable from Heathens, save by their opinions and modes of worship!

24. And if the state of the Church in the very first century was so bad, we cannot suppose it was any better in the second. Undoubtedly it grew worse and worse. Tertullian, one of the most eminent Christians of that age, has given us an account of it in various parts of his writings, whence we learn that real, internal religion was hardly found; nay, that not only the tempers of the Christians were exactly the same with those of their heathen neighbours, (pride, passion, love of the world reigning alike in both,) but their lives and manners also. The bearing a faithful testimony against the general corruption of Christians, seems to have raised the outcry against Montanus; and against Tertullian himself, when he was convinced that the testimony of Montanus was true. As to the heresies fathered upon Montanus, it is not easy to find what they were. I believe his grand heresy was, the maintaining that "without" inward and outward "holiness no man shall see the Lord."

25. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, in every respect an unexceptionable witness, who flourished about the middle of the third century, has left us abundance of letters, in which he gives a large and particular account of the state of religion in his time. In reading this, one would be apt to imagine, he was reading an account of the present century: So totally void of true religion were the generality both of the laity and clergy, so immersed in ambition, envy, covetousness, luxury, and all other vices, that the Christians of Africa were then exactly the same as the Christians of England are now.

26. It is true, that during this whole period, during the first three centuries, there were intermixed longer or shorter seasons wherein true Christianity revived. In those seasons the justice and mercy of God let loose the Heathens upon the Christians. Many of these were then called to resist unto blood. And "the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church." The apostolic spirit returned; and many "counted not their lives dear unto themselves, so they might finish their course with joy." Many others were reduced to happy poverty; and being stripped of what they had loved too well, they "remembered from whence they were fallen, and repented, and did their first works."

27. Persecution never did, never could, give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest it ever received, the grand blow which was struck at the very root of that humble, gentle, patient love, which is the fulfilling of the Christian law, the whole essence of true religion, was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and power upon the Christians; more especially upon the Clergy. Then was fulfilled in the Christian Church, what Sallust says of the people of Rome: *Sublata imperii aemula, non sensim, sed praecipiti cursu, a virtutibus descitum, ad vitia transcursum.* [Mr. Wesley doubtless quoted from memory; and this accounts for the slight mistake into which he has here fallen. the passage referred to does not occur in Sallust, but in Velleius Paterculus, and reads thus: -- *Remoto Carthaginis metu, sublataque imperii aemula, non gradu, sed praecipiti cursu, a virtute descitum, ad vitia transcursum.* Lib. ii. cap. 1. -- Edit.] Just so, when the fear of persecution was removed, and wealth and honour attended the Christian profession, the Christians "did not gradually sink, but rushed headlong into all manner of vices." Then "the mystery of iniquity" was no more hid, but stalked abroad in the face of the sun. Then, not the golden but the iron age of the Church commenced: Then one might truly say,

Protinus irrupit venae peioris in aevum Omne nefas; fugere pudor, verumque fidesque, In quorum subiere locum fraudesque, dolique, Insidiaeque, et vis, et amor sceleratus habendi. At once, in that unhappy age, broke in All wickedness, and every deadly sin: Truth, modesty, and love fled far away, And force, and thirst of gold, claim'd universal sway.

28. And this is the event which most Christian expositors mention with such triumph! yea, which some of them suppose to be typified in the Revelation, by "the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven!" Rather say, it was the coming of Satan and all his legions from the bottomless pit: Seeing from that very time he hath set up his throne over the face of the whole earth, and reigned over the Christian as well as the Pagan world with hardly any control. Historians, indeed, tell us, very gravely, of nations, in every century, who were by such and such (Saints without doubt!) converted to Christianity: But still these converts practised all kinds of abominations, exactly as they did before; no way differing, either in their tempers or in their lives, from the nations that were still called Heathens. Such has been the deplorable state of the Christian Church, from the time of Constantine till the Reformation. A Christian nation, a Christian city, (according to the scriptural model,) was nowhere to be seen; but every city and country, a few individuals excepted, was plunged in all manner of

wickedness.

29. Has the case been altered since the Reformation Does "the mystery of iniquity" no longer work in the Church No: The Reformation itself has not extended to above one third of the Western Church: so that two thirds of this remain as they were; so do the Eastern, Southern, and Northern Churches. They are as full of heathenish, or worse than heathenish, abominations, as ever they were before. And what is the condition of the Reformed Churches It is certain that they were reformed in their opinions, as well as their modes of worship. But is not this all Were either their tempers or lives reformed Not at all. Indeed many of the Reformers themselves complained, that "the Reformation was not carried far enough." But what did they mean Why, that they did not sufficiently reform the rites and ceremonies of the Church. Ye fools and blind! to fix your whole attention on the circumstantial of religion! Your complaint ought to have been, the essentials of religion were not carried far enough! You ought vehemently to have insisted on an entire change of men's tempers and lives; on their showing they had "the mind that was in Christ," by "walking as he also walked." Without this, how exquisitely trifling was the reformation of opinions and rites and ceremonies! Now, let any one survey the state of Christianity in the Reformed parts of Switzerland; in Germany, or France; in Sweden, Denmark, Holland; in Great Britain and Ireland. How little are any of these Reformed Christians better than heathen nations! Have they more, (I will not say, communion with God, although there is no Christianity without it,) but have they more justice, mercy, or truth, than the inhabitants of China, or Indostan O no! we must acknowledge with sorrow and shame, that we are far beneath them!

That we, who by thy Name are named, The heathens unbaptized out-sin!

30. Is not this the falling away or apostasy from God, foretold by St. Paul in his Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:3.) Indeed, I would not dare to say, with George Fox, that this apostasy was universal; that there never were any real Christians in the world, from the days of the Apostles till his time. But we may boldly say, that wherever Christianity has spread, the apostasy has spread also; insomuch that, although there are now, and always have been, individuals who were real Christians; yet the whole world never did, nor can at this day, show a Christian country or city.

31. I would now refer it to every man of reflection, who believes the Scriptures to be of God, whether this general apostasy does not imply the necessity of a general reformation Without allowing this, how can we possibly justify either the wisdom or goodness of God According to Scripture, the Christian religion was designed for "the healing of the nations;" for the saving from sin by means of the Second Adam, all that were "constituted sinners" by the first. But it does not answer this end: It never did; unless for a short time at Jerusalem. What can we say, but that if it has not yet, it surely will answer it The time is coming, when not only "all Israel shall be saved," but "the fullness of the Gentiles will come in." The time cometh, when "violence shall no more be heard in the earth, wasting or destruction within our borders;" but every city shall call her "walls Salvation, and her gates Praise;" when the people, saith the Lord, "shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified." (Isa. 60:18, 21.)

32. From the preceding considerations we may learn the full answer to one of the grand objections of infidels against Christianity; namely, the lives of Christians. Of Christians, do you say I doubt whether you ever knew a Christian in your life. When Tomo Chachi, the Indian Chief, keenly replied to those who spoke to him of being a Christian, "Why, these are Christians at Savannah! These are Christians at Frederica!" -- the proper answer was, "No, they are not; they are no more Christians than you and Sinauky." "But are not those Christians in Canterbury, in London, in Westminster" No: no more than

they are angels. None are Christians, but they that have the mind which was in Christ, and walk as he walked. "Why, if these only are Christians," said an eminent wit, "I never saw a Christian yet." I believe it: You never did; and, perhaps, you never will; for you will never find them in the grand or the gay world. The few Christians that are upon the earth, are only to be found where you never look for them. Never therefore, urge this objection more: Never object to Christianity the lives or tempers of Heathens. Though they are called Christians, the name does not imply the thing: They are as far from this as hell from heaven!

33. We may learn from hence, Secondly, the extent of the fall, -- the astonishing spread of original corruption. What among so many thousands, so many millions, is there "none righteous, no, not one" Not by nature. But including the grace of God, I will not say with the heathen poet, --

Rari quippe boni: numero vix sunt totidem, quot Thebarum portae, vel divitis ostia Nili.

[The following is Gifford's translation of this quotation from Juvenal: --

-- The good are few! "the valued file" Scarce pass the gates of Thebes, the mouths of Nile.
-- Edit.]

As if he had allowed too much, in supposing there were a hundred good men in the Roman Empire, he comes to himself, and affirms there are hardly seven. Nay, surely, there were seven thousand! There were so many long ago in one small nation, where Elijah supposed there were none at all. But, allowing a few exceptions, we are authorized to say, "The whole world lieth in wickedness;" yea, "in the wicked one," as the words properly signify. "Yes, the whole heathen world." Yea, and the Christian too; (so called;) for where is the difference, save in a few externals See with your own eyes! Look into that large country, Indostan. There are Christians and Heathens too. Which have more justice, mercy, and truth the Christians or the Heathens Which are most corrupt, infernal, devilish, in their tempers and practice the English or the Indians Which have desolated whole countries, and clogged the rivers with dead bodies

O sacred name of Christian! how profaned!

O earth, earth, earth! how dost thou groan under the villainies of thy Christian inhabitants!

34. From many of the preceding circumstances we may learn, Thirdly, what is the genuine tendency of riches: What a baleful influence they have had, in all ages, upon pure and undefiled religion. Not that money is an evil of itself: It is applicable to good as well as bad purposes. But, nevertheless, it is an undoubted truth, that "the love of money is the root of all evil;" and also, that the possession of riches naturally breeds the love of them. Accordingly, it is an old remark,

Crescit amor nummi, quantum ipsa pecunia crescit:

"As money increases, so does the love of it;" and always will, without a miracle of grace. Although, therefore, other causes may concur; yet this has been, in all ages, the principal cause of the decay of true religion in every Christian community. As long as the Christians in any place were poor, they were devoted to God. While they had little of the world, they did not love the world; but the more they had of it, the more they loved it. This constrained the Lover of their souls, at various times, to unchain their persecutors; who, by reducing them to their former poverty, reduced them to their former purity.

But still remember, riches have, in all ages, been the bane of genuine Christianity!

35. We may learn hence, Fourthly, how great watchfulness they need who desire to be real Christians; considering what a state the world is in! May not each of them well say,

Into a world of ruffians sent, I walk on hostile ground: Wild human bears, on slaughter bent, And ravening wolves surround

They are the more dangerous, because they commonly appear in sheep's clothing. Even those who do not pretend to religion, yet make fair professions of good-will, of readiness to serve us, and, perhaps, of truth and honesty. But beware of taking their word! Trust not any man, until he fears God! It is a great truth,

He that fears no God, can love no friend:

Therefore stand upon your guard against every one that is not earnestly seeking to save his soul. We have need to keep both our heart and mouth as "with a bridle, while the ungodly are in our sight." Their conversation, their spirit, is infectious, and steals upon us unawares, we know not how. "Happy is the man that feareth always," in this sense also, lest he should partake of other men's sins. O "keep thyself pure!" "Watch and pray, that thou enter not into temptation!"

36. We may learn from hence, Lastly, what thankfulness becomes those who have escaped the corruption that is in the world; whom God hath chosen out of the world, to be holy and unblamable. "Who is it that maketh thee to differ" "And what hast thou which thou hast not received" Is it not "God" alone "who worketh in thee both to will and to do of his good pleasure" "And let those give thanks whom the Lord hath redeemed and delivered from the hand of the enemy." Let us praise him, that he hath given us to see the deplorable state of all that are round about us, to see the wickedness which overflows the earth, and yet not be borne away by the torrent! We see the general, the almost universal contagion; and yet it cannot approach to hurt us! Thanks be unto Him "who hath delivered us from so great a death, and doth still deliver!" And have we not farther ground for thankfulness, yea, and strong consolation, in the blessed hope which God hath given us, that the time is at hand, when righteousness shall be as universal as unrighteousness is now Allowing that "the whole creation now groaneth together" under the sin of man, our comfort is, it will not always groan: God will arise and maintain his own cause; and the whole creation shall then be delivered both from moral and natural corruption. Sin, and its consequence, pain, shall be no more: Holiness and happiness will cover the earth. Then shall all the ends of the world see the salvation of our God; and the whole race of mankind shall know, and love, and serve God, and reign with him for ever and ever!

Edited by Travis Tindall with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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