

"The Sins of Men Not Chargeable to God"

Part 2

by

Rev. John M'Laurin

***"Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God';
for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt any man."
James 1:13***

First, there are several obvious things that may easily convince us that these impious thoughts are too common and ordinary.

1. It is not the way of Scripture to caution men against imaginary sins--sins that men are seldom or never guilty of--but to caution against sins which natural corruption really inclines them to. In particular, we cannot suppose that God's word would caution men against sins of the heart and thought which the heart is not really liable to; for it can never be the intention of the Holy Ghost to raise evil thoughts in men's hearts that were not there before. But the Spirit's aim is to reveal those that are there in order to cure them. An intelligent Christian will not refuse to confess that this text represents what has been sometimes the suggestion of his own heart, and which has much troubled his repose. He will not refuse to acknowledge that this text is a confirmation of that character which the epistle to the Hebrews gives of the word of God, "that it is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

A person of eminent goodness as well as intelligence was inclined to confess, that whatever curiosity others had in perusing the writings of libertines and heretics against Divine truths, for his own part he could find nothing in them that was new to him, nothing but what he had read before in the imaginations of his own corrupt heart; and that the chief prejudices against God's perfections and precepts were enforced there with as much eloquence and efficacy, perhaps, and set in as strong a light as in any heretical book of the world.

It is certain that a man carries in his breast, while under the slavery of sin, a capacious source of heretical thoughts against God's attributes as well as libertine thoughts against his laws. The former have as great an influence in hindering due love and esteem to God in his heart as the latter have in hindering obedience to him in his life. And it is certain that of all the ungodly thoughts that arise from unrestrained corruption, none flow more naturally from it than these by which men justify or excuse themselves--and which they cannot do without blaming God.

2. Man's inclination to blame God for his sins makes itself known by his forwardness in blaming God for his sufferings. Sin is the cause of his trouble; and therefore were he perfectly and sincerely convinced that God is infinitely free from the blame of the cause, he could not be so prone to blame him for the effect. It requires no great insight into human nature to observe an unaccountable inconsistency in the way many men think of God's providence. They ascribe the good that befalls them to chance or to themselves, and the evil that befalls them to God. They are ever ready to acknowledge his providence in their affliction in order to repine and fret against

him, while they seldom or never seriously acknowledge it in their prosperity, to thank him for it. While they overlook the undeserved goodness of God in what they enjoy, they allege it is undeserved displeasure that makes them suffer.

Let it be noted that the day in which men will be called to give an account for such thoughts is called the "*day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*" (Rom. 2:5). Men must then answer not only for their disobedience in committing sin but also for their arrogance in blaming him for it. Truly sinful actions are now papered over with false excuses. But when the books of that awful court shall be opened, it is certain that these false excuses will appear in their true colors; and rising to view in their blackest forms these actions will be found truly sinful. Men must then give an account of how they came to blame God for what they suffered, without thanking him for what they enjoyed. Happy would we be if we had the same view of sin now that we shall certainly have then. And surely nothing can be more rational; for what will appear true then must really be so now. Therefore it is certainly a useful preparation for that day to be active now in acquiring, through God's grace, that view and sense of sin which will otherwise be forced upon us by his righteous vengeance.

Having sufficiently made our case, let us now carefully consider the principal evidence of this branch of doctrine; that is, the ingratitude of men to God for his infinite mercy in sending his Son to save them from their sins. The more we consider it the more we may be convinced, that cold thoughts about divine mercy in the work of redemption flow in a great measure from men's false thoughts of God's righteousness in the works of providence; that is, in plain words, men do not love him ardently for their deliverance because they blame him secretly for their danger.

This point deserves our particular attention, because as gratitude for redeeming mercy is the soul and center of Christianity to which all religious meditations should be referred, the chief importance of the doctrine in the text consists in its subservience to that end. It is obvious to anyone who considers the doctrine of redemption, that it tells us of God's infinite love and incomparable tenderness and condescension. Redemption is an incomprehensible mystery of kindness. Our conduct toward him is an incomprehensible mystery of ingratitude.

There are indeed many mysteries in human nature, but they all come far short of this. Consider the fact that human nature, corrupt and perverse as it is, is not yet wholly lost to all sense of gratitude in other cases, but that frequently the hearts of even the worst of men are softened with a kindly sense of singular favors, that the coldest and hardest hearts are sometimes melted with undeserved favors. Consider also that in these other cases our acknowledgments rise naturally in proportion to our obligations. But these greatest temporal favors when compared with eternal ones are but trifles! And yet, insignificant as they are, they beget sometimes a very high degree of gratitude, and swell men's hearts with such generous sentiments toward their benefactors that they take pleasure in nothing more than serving them. If we consider all this and compare it with the returns we make to our greatest (yea, in effect, our only) benefactor for the greatest benefits he could give or we receive or imagine, we might question whether we have more reason to be astonished at God's love or at our own ingratitude.

How astonishing to think that we should be so strongly affected with earthly favors--favors from worms like ourselves, favors of very little importance and of very short continuance, favors proceeding from such imperfect love and oftentimes mixed with many injuries; that we should be so strongly affected with such favors as these and so little with the love of God in Christ. Consider his love--love so perfectly pure and impartial; love so free in its motives that it is

exercised toward men who no have merit to deserve it, no power to requite it, and who have never earnestly sought after it; love that is so infinitely tender in its nature, so inestimably precious in its effects, so rich and abundant in its fruits; love so constant, so lasting, yea everlasting; love so glorious in all its manifestations. To think that this should be the only friendship to which most men make no returns, the only kindness to which they have no grateful passion might seem incredible, if there were any arguing against experience.

The cause of it can never be perfectly known until we are free from that deceitfulness of heart which the prophet Jeremiah affirms to be so mysterious that God only knows it. Yet some of its causes are unfolded in scripture, and the more we consider the text the more we may be convinced that it makes a very remarkable revelation: men are incapable of giving due gratitude to God for sending Christ to redeem them from sin while they barefacedly blame him for their temptations to sin. Men will not be thankful to a deliverer for rescuing them from danger if they blame him for their falling into it. Therefore, in comparing men's unjust thoughts of providence with their ingratitude for redemption, the former will be found to be a principal source of the latter, and the latter reveals the former as the effect shows the cause.

In this way men forego that inestimable blessing of love and joy in believing, and that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory. There is no doubt that with many the cause of ingratitude for redemption is their disbelief of it. But it is hard to charge all who are guilty of ingratitude with downright infidelity. Rather, as the tares in the parable were mixed with the wheat, so the belief of the doctrine of redemption is sadly clouded, and its influence is marred by a wretched mixture of low and unworthy thoughts of God--at least suspicions and suggestions--which men are susceptible to in varying degrees. Were it not for these inward prejudices, the doctrine of redemption in its intrinsic beauty would have such light and brightness, such glory in it, that it would be hard to conceive how it should not have an irresistible influence in ravishing every sincere believing heart with a love stronger than death, and with such transports of joy and admiration as would make for the happiest state of mind in the world.

But while dismal prejudices are entertained, it is no surprise that the minds of men are darkened and their hearts so disordered and confused that that amiable doctrine of the crucified Jesus appears mean and lowly in their eyes. It is no wonder that so many have no relish for it and, in fact, find nothing more distasteful. They look on redemption as a doctrine that demands more gratitude than it deserves. To them Jesus Christ has no form, no majesty, no beauty that they should thank him.

2. These considerations make it too evident that unworthy thoughts of God are both common and very hurtful. Therefore it should be a meditation of the greatest importance (and not looked upon merely as an amusement or matter of curious speculation) to take heed of the clearest evidence which serves to refute these thoughts, and to show that they are as false and unreasonable in themselves as they are disparaging to God. But before we proceed let us note, that when men cherish and entertain such unworthy thoughts of God instead of rejecting them, they deal far more unjustly with God than they do with others.

For example, consider a good man who has attained an established character of holiness and virtue, and a known deceiver brings a great many plausible accusations against him. Those who know that good man will not believe those accusations, even though they may not be able to answer them all. They will especially not believe them if the affair be dark and intricate, and if they are certain that the virtuous person could not gain any profit or pleasure thereby.

To set this matter in a clearer light, we may observe that appearances and probabilities may sometimes be on the side of error and falsehood; otherwise there would be no difference between probability and certainty. And in some singular cases it has happened that there has been such a strange complication of presumptions and probabilities of guilt laid against an innocent person that strangers to his character have indeed believed him guilty, while they who were acquainted with the situation found it impossible to doubt his innocence.

Now let us apply all this to the present case with regard to God (and it is a sad thing if God alone should have no friends to vindicate him). If men had due respect to him or were heartily inclined to do him justice, then all the reasons that restrain them from rash censures and lowly thoughts of the most virtuous men in the world would have unspeakably more force against rash censures and lowly thoughts of the Creator! The devil and our own corrupt hearts are such notorious deceivers that the experiences we have of their duplicity are innumerable. But so are the evidences we have of God's holiness and goodness innumerable. Now it may be that there are some perplexities and difficulties about the divine actions that might cause us to blame God. Yet all the rest of God's innumerable actions (distinguishing them, as certainly we should, from those of his creatures), and the whole history of his providence, and the whole tenor of his works and ways plainly and evidently give us a uniform character of the most spotless holiness, the most amiable goodness, the most untainted righteousness. Thus the imputation which the corrupt hearts of men malign him with is as absolutely inconsistent with the rest of his character as night is with day, and darkness with light.

God's providence, especially concerning the actions of his rational creatures, is very dark and intricate, and no one can perfectly comprehend the least part unless he comprehends the whole. We have been but lately created from nothing and entered into God's world. We see but a very small part of his works, and that part itself very darkly. That we should not know the reasons for all his actions is so far from being a matter of wonder, that it would be an incomprehensible wonder if it were otherwise.

Lastly, to complete the parallel, since nothing can be added to infinite happiness, it is thus impossible that God could propose any advantage to himself by these unbecoming acts which the corrupt hearts of men lay to his charge.

Therefore, on all these accounts we should conclude that whatever difficulties man's corrupt nature may suggest against God's holiness, by no means should they be put in the balance with that infallible evidence we have for his holiness---evidence both from God's word, which cannot deceive us, and from his works, which are so perfectly agreeable to it.

We may gain a more lively impression of this, through divine grace, by taking a particular view of the principal evidence we have for the apostle's doctrine from God's word and works.

This is part two of Sermon I in *Sermons and Essays: by the Late Rev. Mr. John M'Laurin*, published from his manuscripts by John Gillies (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1811). **Note:** The text has been paraphrased for easier reading and clarity.

The reader will find this sermon continued in Part 3.