

The Rejected Corner Stone

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The peculiar characteristic of the influence of any form of sin upon our nature is the narrowing tendency which it manifests. It matters not what the sin is. The man who gives himself up to the self-indulgence of passion and lust simply cuts himself off day-after-day from all that makes his life worthwhile, and narrows and limits himself until there is nothing left of himself but the burned and charred cinder of an exhausted body. I might weary you with the morbid tales of the lines of those who have started upon the primrose path of dissipation and grossness. At first the way seems joyous and happy, for its beauty is revealed by the over-shadowing lights of the good things which we are leaving behind. But passion is a jealous master, and allows no rivals to dispute with it the occupancy of the house it occupies. The result is that one-by-one the good things of life are forced to one side and left to perish by the wayside, until at last the sinner finds himself bereft of all that once made life seem real to him and he is forced to rely upon the only object which he has left. The pleasure which he once pursued now has him securely imprisoned within its narrow painful walls. The world, and all its beauty, has been shut from his life, and he becomes a prisoner of his own selfish aims and evils in the very midst of the world.

But more subtle still, and no less dominating and cruel, are the sins of the spirit. It is less easy to detect the subtle influences of the spirit-life that lead us away from the great highways of good noble, healthy-minded living, into the underground corners which are strewn with dead men's bones.

I wish to speak of one or two of these subtle, insidious sins that erect about us the great gloomy walls of selfish isolation and loneliness.

Perhaps one of the most common is sensitiveness. We find a moment of relaxation in our activities for doing good, and stop to consider how much good we have accomplished, and we fancy that people do not quite appreciate what we have been doing. We fancy that they are a little bit critical. To be sure, our sensitiveness arises from our desire to please, to do good, to do right. But we must never allow it to enter into our lives for a moment. Because if we stop to think of it, there are only two kinds of people who criticize. Those who do nothing themselves, and are forever criticizing what the workmen are doing, are always in evidence. But their criticism is not worth the breath they waste in giving it. The only way for a sensitive person to do in the presence of such a critic is to simply ignore them. There is absolutely no value in what they say, and their remarks are not worth a moment's consideration.

The other class of critics consists of those who work themselves. Their remarks are based upon experience, and are worthy of consideration, and should be welcomed with open arms, and profited by as far as is in us. But there is absolutely no ground here for sensitiveness. Such criticism we need and wish for, and must have, for it helps.

But consider where it leads us to if we permit these little feelings of sensitiveness to become our masters. In time we come to look with suspicion upon every remark that is made to us. We look for some hidden sarcasm, some pointed arrow in every sentence that is uttered in conversation with those with whom we meet. In time this sensitiveness leads us to look not merely for the hidden arrow in the sentence spoken to us, but we see the hidden arrow is sent from its bow by hidden evil. By and by, we think the hidden evil has become master of the speaker, and our sensitive mind strikes from the coteries of friends one whose only fault is that they are a victim of our sensitiveness.

We have not the time to permit these little sensitive thoughts to find way into our life and poison the happiness of every hour that we live. Its result is the inevitable one of a spirit that built about itself a wall of fog and mist. Which prevents it from seeing but a few of the people

walking about out there in the world. Those few are seen as indistinct, spectral beings, as unlike the real being as the shadow is like the man who casts it.

Sensitiveness is closely akin to, and is in fact a result of, another sin which is spoken of under the well-worn phrase, lack of sympathy. Sympathy is that peculiar and tremendous power of being able to put one's self in the other man's position. Of being able, by the power of imagination, to see just the situation that the other person is in, and by that delicate power of appreciation to think the very thoughts that he is thinking, to weep with him that weeps, to rejoice with him that rejoices. "To understand" how another feels, to perceive what is in his mind even before he speaks, that is sympathy.

To fail to show this sympathy, to fail to enter into the deep interests, to see life from the point of view of those who need and to whom we would give the best that we have in us, is one of the common sins that makes life miserable, and shuts us from the Kingdom of Heaven every day that we live. It is our lack of sympathy that makes us gloomy and pessimistic when we see the wrongs of the world. It deprives of the joy which our friends have, it deprives of the joy of helping them with the only help that is worthwhile. It is another wall-building sin, which erects about the lookout upon life a great black gloomy wall of self-centeredness, which closes in on our vision of life, and narrows our interests down to a mere narrow slit in the wall through which we can look with but a distracted gaze upon the world without.

Lack of sympathy is but a form of conceit. We fail to interest ourselves in others because we are too well satisfied with ourselves. We may not admit our fault here. We declare and affirm that we are entirely humble, and fully appreciate our own shortcomings, but the fact remains nevertheless, that the failure to show sympathy is a public confession of self-satisfaction and arrogance, a declaration stronger than words that we are tinged with Phariseeism and hold ourselves aloof from ordinary human beings.

This conceit and arrogance manifests itself in a thousand and one petty ways. But perhaps the most pointed and significant is the declaration which we hear often from people that the world is so wicked, men are so busied with worthless lives, that we can find no associates with whom we care to mingle. Above the common herd, standing alone upon a self-erected pedestal, and unwilling to come down. One thing is certain, the common herd are not influenced by the imposing spectacle enough to take the trouble to knock it down, and chances are that the self-made god will still remain in the loneliness of his pigmy mountain top.

But this brings us to the root of the whole matter. These more common sins of the spirit, as well as the hundred and one others that occur to you, have their root in some common everyday selfishness that makes all sin so hideous. Wherever the man is, whoever he may be, whatever he may be doing, if his prime and dominant purpose in life is selfish, he is building about himself a wall which will shut his selfish soul from the world, and deprive himself of everything which his selfish greed longs for.

If he seeks to satisfy his selfish aim of pleasure-seeking, he soon destroys his powers of enjoying even the few pleasures which he has left in his lonely misery.

If he seeks to satisfy his selfish aim for fame, he finds that he is famous only so long as he is a tool of somebody's hand.

If he becomes filled with passion for money-making, he destroys every power in his being which money can satisfy, and in greater or less degree, we find him shutoff from the world by the prison of gold which he has built about him, and with which he has shut out the world. Even the self-centered pietist, who seeks to save only his own soul by his serious long-faced substitution for the religious life, finds himself shut out from life, excluded from the world, and left entirely unnoticed by the sinful world which he would impress by his excessive goodness.

No, the selfish life, whatever may be its form, leads to loneliness. The old theologians made one grave error in their vivid pictures of hell. They made the place social,

and misery loves company, but does not get it. The sins that we do by two and two, we must pay for one by one. The high road of selfishness which is the only road of sin, leads not to a place where we may suffer in company, but where we may suffer in isolation, alone shut from the world by our own selfishness, and no one to blame but ourselves.

One who has the courage to read Edgar Allan Poe's *Pit and the Pendulum*¹ will find a very gruesome description of one of the devices of torture in the inquisition. It was a huge iron walled cell in the midst of which was a pit. The walls of the cell were so made that the cell continually becomes smaller and smaller and smaller until finally the man is ruthlessly hurled to a watery loathsome death by the crowding [of] the ever-narrowing prison walls. It is precisely this thing that the selfish life does. It narrows, obstructs, destroys life, and crushes the victim between the walls of his own selfishness. Can the reprobate enjoy the beauties of art? Can the miser enjoy the subtle satisfaction of giving? Can the self-satisfied pietist appreciate the satisfaction that comes to an ordinary sinner when he has crushed one temptation under his foot? Does the person who lacks sympathy enjoy one half, or one ten-thousandth part as much as the person whose life is all sympathy? The way of selfishness is the way of self-destruction. That old saying of Jesus is founded upon absolute fact, whosoever would save his life must lose it.² In social, in personal, in political, in religious life, the self-centered person is a parasite living upon the life of a worn out organism. Like its namesake in the world of nature, it lives on decay, and it itself drinking the poison that means its own death.

These prisons into which the selfish person finally conducts himself are [un]desirable places in which to abide. Whether the wall be of burning cinders, of passion, or of the cold deathly damp gold of money, or the vaporous clouds of sensitiveness, or the sickly pallid sheelings of self-righteousness, and Phariseism, they are not dwellings into which one would willingly enter. As people walk along

¹ Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) published *The Pit and the Pendulum* in 1842.

² Matthew 16:25.

the great avenues of life, they turn aside at times into these little side streets, which for the time being they regard as a short cut or at least a place where they may take a satisfactory side trip, either for exploration or for rest and recreation. Once on the side street they follow its lead until at length they find themselves in an underground cavern where one has to grope along in the dark. All the boon companions have turned back or stopped by the way. The only companion we have now is Self, and slowly, candle in hand, we grope our way along through room after room, passageway after passageway in the dangerous deep, dark and dank. At last we come to the end of the long circuitous underground chamber. We must either turn and go back. Here alone we come into a sharp tussle with Self. He still persists that somewhere in the secret chamber the great pleasure, the great satisfaction is to be found. He will not retrace his steps, but persists in continuing his search after the hidden treasure. We wrestle, we tumble about in the dark, the lights which have guided him there are destroyed, we bruise ourselves upon the walls of our cell, but by some final show of strength we succeed in binding and tying the self, who had led us into the gloomy hole, and again turn our face towards the light to retrace by hand climbing the stairway, and long passages down which we had slipped so easily. Broader, brighter more cheerful becomes the way each day. The old self-destructive suicidal self has been left behind. New interests are found. New people are met now. They have new powers, new characteristics, now hopes, new ambitions. Being freed from the necessity of looking after ourselves, we have greater opportunity to look after others. Instead of one interest of life, we are interested in every person whom we meet, and our interest in them rests not in what they can do for us, but what we can do for them. We are too busy to be morbid, too much interested in other people to care about the little criticisms which may be passed upon us. We are too absorbed in what we can do for others to notice whether or not they are doing for us. Too absorbed in trying to help others to spend any time in self-examination to know whether we are fit subjects for salvation. In short, we have entirely freed ourselves from the selfish aim of saving ourselves, and are willing to be claimed for the glory of God and the service of man. In this state of mind, in this attitude towards life, is found the ultimate and

final expression of the way of living [in] which we prosper to live. It is the only condition, the only way by which we can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven or have the Kingdom of Heaven enter into us.

If we find ourselves at this moment unhappy, discontented, dissatisfied, sensitive, arrogant, lonely in our goodness, if the walls of our self-made prison are closing about us and shutting us from the light of life, the only thing for us to do is overcome the selfishness of life, and learn that the end and aim of life not to save, but to serve. We must give up seeking for the pot of gold at the base of the rainbow, or in the drab and hidden corners of life, we must leave the self, overcome and securely open the doors of our life for the free and unhindered expansion of the divine life within us. This is the only way to overcome these sins of the flesh, and sins of the spirit which destroy the happiness of life and imprison us in cells of solitary confinement.