

OF SIN IN GENERAL.

1 JOHN III. 4.—*Sin is the transgression of the law.*

IN these words we have an answer to that question, ‘What is sin?’ It is a *transgression of the law*: for ‘where no law is, there is no transgression,’ Rom. iv. 15. But because the word *transgression* seems to import something positive and actual, therefore it is added in the Catechism, it is a ‘want of conformity unto the law,’ which is a more general definition: and this meaning the word in the original most properly bears. Hence both a want of conformity unto the law of God, and a transgression of it, are taken into the description; and in effect they are both one thing.

In the further illustration of this subject, it will be proper to shew,

- I. What that law is whereof sin is the transgression.
- II. Wherein the nature of sin consists.
- III. Wherein the evil thereof lies.
- IV. Deduce a few inferences.

I. I am to shew what is that law whereof sin is the transgression. It is the law of God, even any law of his whereby he lays any duty upon any of the children of men, whether it be the natural law which is written even in the hearts of all men, Rom. ii. 15. or the revealed law and will of God, written in the Bible, whether it be the law strictly so called, or the gospel, whose great command is to believe in Christ; the transgression of which command is the great sin of the hearers of the gospel. In a word, the law of which sin is the transgression, is any law or command of God which he obliges us to obey. More particularly,

1. There is a law engraven upon the hearts of men by nature, which was in force long before the promulgation of the law from Mount Sinai. This is the light of reason, and the dictates of natural conscience concerning those moral principles of good and evil, which have an essential equity in them, and shew man his duty to God, to his neighbour, and to himself. There is a law in all men by nature, which is a rule of good and evil. They have notions of right and wrong in their consciences; which is evident by those laws which are common in all nations for the preservation of human society, the encouraging of virtue, and discouraging of vice. These laws are to be found among men who have not the benefit of divine revelation for regulating their lives. Now, what standard else can they have for these but common reason, and the light of nature?

Every son and daughter of Adam brings with them into the world a law in their breast; and when reason clears up itself from the clouds of sense, they can distinguish between good and evil, between things which ought to be done, and things which they should avoid. Every man finds a law in his heart that checks and rebukes when he offends, and cherishes and encourages him when he does good. None are without a legal indictment and a legal execution within themselves, Rom. ii. 14, 15.

2. There is another law which was given to the Jewish nation by the ministry of Moses. This is spoken of by Christ, John xvii. 19. 'Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law? By this we are to understand the whole system of divine precepts concerning ceremonial rites, judicial processes, and moral duties. Accordingly there was a threefold law given by Moses.

(1.) The ceremonial law, which was a certain system of divine positive precepts, with relation to the external worship of God. It was wholly taken up in enjoining those observances of sacrifices and offerings, and various methods of purifications and cleansings which were typical of Christ, and of that sacrifice of his which alone was able to take away sin.

(2.) The judicial law consisted of those institutions which God prescribed the Jews for their civil government. For, whereas, in other commonwealths, the chief magistrates give laws unto the people; in this the laws for their religion and for their civil government were both divine, and both immediately from God. So that the judicial law was given them to be the standing law of their nation, according to which all actions and suits between party and party were to be tried and determined; as in all other nations there are particular laws and statutes for the decision of controversies that may arise among men.

3. There is the moral law which is a system or body of those precepts which carry an universal and natural equity in them, being so conformable to the light of reason, and the dictates of every man's conscience, that as soon as ever they are declared and understood, we must needs subscribe to the justice and righteousness of them. We have the sum of this law in the ten commandments. This law continues in its full force and power, obliging the conscience as a standing rule for our obedience. Our Lord tells us, Matt. v. 17. that 'he came not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfil them.' The ceremonial law was abolished by the death of Christ, and the judicial law, so far as it concerned the nation of the Jews as a commonwealth and body politic, particularly touching their not marrying out of their own tribes, their not alienating the inheri-

tance of their fathers, the raising up of seed to their deceased brother, &c., but such of these political laws as are common to men in general, and founded upon the law of nature, are still binding and in force, such as the laws for punishing criminals and other offenders, the laws against oppressing of widows, orphans, strangers, the fatherless, &c. These are a standing rule of equity and justice; they are of a moral nature, and therefore of perpetual obligation. So that the law of which sin is the transgression, is to us the law of nature in our hearts, and the moral law contained in the scriptures, and summed up in the decalogue, as well as the positive laws of the gospel of Christ.

II. I proceed to shew wherein the nature of sin consists. It consists in a want of conformity to the law of God, or a disconformity thereto. The law of God is the rule; whatsoever is over this rule, is sin. The law of God is set as a mark to us; and so the word *sin*, in the first language properly signifies a not hitting the mark; and *transgression* is a swerving from the right line, or a going off the way. So it is called 'a going aside,' Psal. xiv. 3. Now, nothing is conformable to the law which is not perfectly so; for if it be in the least disagreeable thereto, it is not conformable to it, more than that which wants half an inch of an ell is truly an ell of measure; and therefore any want of that conformity is sin. The law of God requires universal conformity to it. Now the law or command of God requires a twofold conformity.

1. A conformity of the heart to it. It reaches the inward man, seeing God is a spirit, and that omniscient One who knows the heart; and the whole heart must be subject to him. Therefore our Saviour says, Mark xii. 30. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.'

2. A conformity of the life both in words and deeds. Hence says David, Psal. xxiv. 3, 4. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? and who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not lift up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.' And forasmuch as the law requires some things, and forbids other things both in heart and life, the want of conformity to it in these respects, either in heart or life, is sin. Hence we may infer,

1. Sin is no positive being, but a want of due perfection, a defect, an imperfection in the creature; and therefore it is, (1.) Not from God, but from the creature itself. (2.) It is not a thing to glory in, more than the want of all things. (3.) It is a thing we have reason to be humbled for, and have great need to have removed. (4.) It is

not a thing to be desired, but fled from and abhorred, as the abominable thing which God hateth.

2. Original sin is truly and properly sin. Look to yourselves as you came into the world, and ye must smite on your breast, before ye have sucked the breasts, and say, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' For we come into it with Adam's sin imputed, Rom. v. 12. stript of original righteousness, and the whole nature corrupted. This is the sin of our nature, being a want of conformity in our souls to the law of God, which requires all moral perfection of us, Matth. v. ult. 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' Instead of which we have a bent of soul quite contrary to the law, Rom. viii. 7. 'The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.'

3. The first motions of sin, and the risings of that natural corruption in us, before it be completed with the consent of the will to the evil motion, are truly and properly sin. The apostle calls this *lust*, and distinguishes it from sin, *i. e.* the sin of our nature, and from the consent to it and execution of it, which he calls 'obeying these lusts,' Rom. vi. 12. and tells us that it is condemned by the law, Rom. vii. 7. Therefore a thing may be our sin, though we know it not to be so, 1 Tim. i. 13. and though it be not our will, yea though against our will, Rom. vii. 16. For it is neither our knowledge, or opinion, nor our will, but the law of God, that is the rule.

4. All consent of the heart to and delight in motions towards things forbidden by the law of God are sins, though these never break forth into action, but die where they were born in the inmost corners of our hearts, Matth. v. 28. 'Whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.' Speculative filthiness is a disconformity to the law. There is heart murder as well as actual murder, ver. 22.

5. All omissions of the internal duties we owe to God and our neighbours are sins, as want of love to God or our neighbours. Want of due fear of God, trust and hope in him, &c. are internal sins of omission.

6. Hence a man sins by undue silence and undue speaking, when the cause of God and truth require it; seeing the law bids us speak in some cases, but never speak what is not good.

7. Hence also a man's sins, when he omits outward duties that are incumbent on him to perform, as well as when he commits sin of whatever kind in his life.

8. *Lastly*, The least failure in any duty is sin; and whatever comes not up in perfection to the law is sinful. And therefore we

sin in every thing we do, and our best duties deserve damnation, and cannot be accepted according to the law. Wherefore the duties of wicked men are absolutely rejected, seeing they are under the law; and the duties of the godly are no otherwise accepted, but as washed in the blood of Christ, which takes away the sin cleaving to them.

Further, nothing can be a sin but what is a transgressing of the law of God, who only is Lord over the conscience. Therefore, if there be no law of God in the case, there is no transgression affecting the conscience. But it must be considered, that the law of God commands some things expressly, and others things by good consequence. No law of God commands a servant expressly to do such and such a particular piece of work that is lawful, which he is bidden do by his master; but the law of God says, 'Servants, obey your masters;' and therefore it is sin if he do not that work. The case is the same as to men's laws. Therefore the apostle says, Rom. xiii. 5. 'Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.' Now, men's laws are either contrary to God's laws, or agreeable and subservient thereto, as being for the glory of God, or the good of the nation in general. As to the first of these, ye cannot obey without sin, as if the Queen and Parliament should command you to receive human ceremonies in the worship of God. As to other things that are good and just, we are obliged to obey, as is clear from Rom. xiii.; and therefore the conscience is not altogether unconcerned in the laws of men. And therefore, if ye would be tender Christians, before ye go against the laws of the land, consider well whether their commands be unlawful, or whether they be such as are good and just; for doubtless magistrates have a power to make laws for the good of the land in general; and what they so make we are obliged to respect, otherwise we contemn the ordinance of God, and regard not the good of our neighbour, and thereby sin against God; as is acknowledged in the case of those that now export grain, to the general distress of the country. And I apprehend, that if we would lay the case home to ourselves, we would have less liberty than we have in some things that are not scrupled at.

III. I come now to shew wherein the evil of sin lies. It lies,

1. And principally, in the wrong done to God, and its contrariety, (1.) To his nature, which is altogether holy. Hence the Psalmist says, Psal. li. 4. 'Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight.' David had exceedingly wronged Uriah in defiling his wife, and procuring the death of himself; yet he considers his great sin in that matter as chiefly against God, and

contrary to his holy nature. (2.) In its contrariety to God's will and law, which is a sort of a copy of his nature. And God being all good, and the chief good, sin must needs be a sort of infinite evil.

2. In the wrong it doth to ourselves: 'He that sinneth against me,' says the personal Wisdom of God, 'wrongeth his own soul,' Prov. viii. 36. For, (1.) It leaves a stain and spiritual pollution on the soul, whereby it becomes filthy and vile; and therefore sin is called filthiness, and is said to defile the soul, whereupon follows God's loathing the sinner, Isa. i. 15. and shame and confusion on the sinner himself, Gen. iii. 7. (2.) It brings on guilt, whereby the sinner is bound over to punishment, according to the state in which he is, until his sin be pardoned. This ariseth from the justice of God and the threatening of his law; which brings on all miseries whatsoever.

But more particularly upon this head, when men pass the bounds and limits which God hath set them in his law, then they transgress it. All the violations of negative precepts are transgressions of God's law. The design of the moral law is to keep men within the bounds of their duty; and when they sin they go beyond them. Sin is indeed the greatest of evils; it is directly opposite to God the supreme good. The definition that is given of sin expresses its essential evil. It is the transgression of the divine law, and consequently it opposes the rights of God's throne, and obscures the glory of his attributes, which are exercised in the moral government of the world. God is our King, our Lawgiver, and our Judge. From his right and propriety in us as his creatures, his title to and sovereign power and dominion over us doth arise and flow. Man is endued with the powers of understanding and election, to conceive and choose what is good, and to reject what is evil; is governed by a law, even the declared will of his Maker. Now, sin, being a transgression of this law, contains many evils in it. As,

1. It is high rebellion against the sovereign Majesty of God, that gives the life of authority to the law. Therefore divine precepts are enforced with the most proper and binding motive to obedience. *I am the Lord.* He that commits sin, especially with pleasure and design, implicitly denies his dependence upon God as his Maker and Governor, and arrogates to himself an irresponsible liberty to do his own will. This is clearly expressed by those atheistical designers, who said, 'Our lips are our own; who is Lord over us?' Psal. xii. 4. The language of men's actions, which is more convincing than their words, plainly declares, that they despise his commandments, and contemn his authority, as if they were not his creatures and subjects.

2. It is an extreme aggravation of this evil, that sin, as it is a disclaiming our homage to God, so it is in true account a yielding subjection to the devil; for sin is in the strictest propriety his work. The original rebellion in paradise was by his temptation; and all the actual and habitual sins of men, since the fall, are by his efficacious influence. He darkens the carnal mind; he sways and rules the stubborn will; he excites and inflames the vitious affections, and imperiously rules in the children of disobedience. He is therefore styled the prince and god of this world. And what more contumelious indignity can there be, than to prefer to the glorious Creator of heaven and earth, a damned spirit, the most cursed part of the whole creation? More particularly, sin strikes at the root of all the divine attributes.

(1.) It is contrary to the unspotted holiness of God, which is the peculiar glory of the Deity. Of all the glorious and benign constellations of the divine attributes which shine in the law of God, his holiness hath the brightest lustre. God is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works: but the most precious and venerable monument of his holiness is the law. This is a true draught of his image, and a clear copy of his nature and will. It is the perspicuous rule of our duty, without any blemish or imperfection. See what a high encomium the apostle gives it, 'The commandment is holy, just, and good,' Rom. vii. 12. It enjoins nothing but what is absolutely good, without the least mixture and tincture of evil. It is a full and complete rule, in nothing defective, and in nothing superfluous, but comprehends the whole duty of man. The sum of it is set down by the apostle, Tit. ii. 11. We are to *live soberly, i. e.* we are to abstain from every thing that may blemish and stain the excellency of our reasonable nature. We are to live *righteously*. This respects the state and situation wherein God hath placed us in the world for the advancing of his glory. It includes and comprehends in it all the respective duties we owe to others, to whom we are united by the bands of nature, of civil society, or of spiritual communion. And we are to live *godly*, which takes in all the internal and outward duties which we owe to God, who is the Sovereign of our spirits, whose will must be the rule, and his glory the end of all our actions. In short the law is so contrived and framed, that abstracting from the authority of the Lawgiver, its holiness and goodness lays an eternal obligation upon us to obey its dictates. Now, sin is directly and formally a contrariety to the infinite sanctity and purity of God; consisting in a not doing what the law commands, or in doing that which it expressly forbids; and God cannot look upon it, but with infinite detestation, Hab. i. 13. He

cannot but hate that which is opposite to the glory of his nature, and to the lustre of all his perfections.

(2.) Sin vilifies the wisdom of God, which prescribed the law to men as the rule of their duty. The divine wisdom shines resplendently in his laws. They are all framed with an exact congruity to the nature of God, and his relation to us, and to the faculties of man before he was corrupted. And thus the divine law being a bright transcript both of God's will and his wisdom, binds the understanding and will, which are the leading faculties in man, to esteem and approve, to consent to and choose, all his precepts as best. Now, sin vilifies the infinite wisdom of God, both as to the precepts of the law, the rule of our duty, and the sanction annexed to it for confirming its obligation. It taxes the precepts as an unequal yoke, and as too severe and rigid a confinement to our wills and actions. Thus the impious rebels complained of old, 'The ways of the Lord are not equal:' they are injurious to our liberties, they restrain and infringe them, and are not worthy of our study and observation. And it accounts the rewards and punishments which God has annexed as the sanction of the law to secure our obedience to its precepts, weak and ineffectual motives to serve that purpose. And thus it reflects upon the wisdom of the Lawgiver as lame and defective, in not binding his subjects more firmly to their duty.

(3.) Sin is a high contempt and horrid abuse of the divine goodness, which should have a powerful influence in binding man to his duty. His creating goodness is hereby contemned, which raised us out of the dust of the earth unto an excellent and glorious being. Our parents were indeed instrumental in the production of our bodies; but the variety and union, the beauty and usefulness, of the several parts, was the high design of his wisdom, and the excellent work of his hands. Man's body is composed of as many miracles as members, and is full of wonders. The lively idea and perfect exemplar of that regular fabric was modelled in the divine mind. This affected David with holy admiration, Psal. cxxxix. 14, 15, 16. The soul, or principal part, is of a celestial original, inspired by the Father of Lights. The faculties of understanding and election are the indelible characters of our honour and dignity above the brutes, and make us capable to please God and enjoy our Maker. Now, God's design in giving us our being was to communicate of his own fulness to, and to be actively glorified by intelligent creatures, Rev. iv. 11. None are so void of rational sentiments, as not to own, that it is our indispensable duty and reasonable service to offer up ourselves an entire living sacrifice to the glory of God. What is more natural, according to the laws of uncorrupted reason, than that love should

correspond with love? As the one descends in benefits, the other should ascend in praise and thankfulness. Now, sin breaks all these sacred bonds of grace and gratitude, which engage us to love and obey our Maker. He is the just Lord of all our faculties, intellectual and sensitive; and the sinner employs them all as weapons of unrighteousness to fight against God. Again, it is he that upholds and preserves us by the powerful influence of his providence, which is a renewed creation every moment, daily surrounding us with many mercies. All the goodness which God thus bestows upon men, the sinner abuses against him. This is the most unworthy, shameful, and monstrous ingratitude imaginable. This makes forgetful and unthankful men more brutish than the dull ox or stupid ass, who serve and obey those that feed and keep them. Yea it sinks them below the insensible part of the creation, which invariably observes the law and order prescribed by the Creator. This is astonishing degeneracy. It was the complaint of God himself, Isa. i. 2. 'Hear, O heavens, and give ear O earth: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.'

(4.) The sinner disparages the divine justice, in promising himself peace and safety, notwithstanding the wrath and vengeance that is denounced against him by the Lord. He labours to dissolve the inseparable connexion that God hath placed between sin and punishment, which is not a mere arbitrary constitution, but founded upon the desert of sin, and the infinite rectitude of the divine nature, which unchangeably hates it. The sinner sets the divine attributes a contending as it were with one another, presuming that mercy will disarm justice, and suspend its power by restraining it from taking vengeance upon impenitent sinners. And thus sinners become bold and resolute in their impious courses, like him mentioned, Deut. xxix. 19. who said, 'I shall have peace though I walk in the imagination of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst.' This casts such an aspersion on the justice of God, that he solemnly threatens the severest vengeance for it; as you may see in ver. 20. 'The Lord will not spare him, but the anger of the Lord, and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven.'

(5.) Sin strikes against the omniscience of God, and at least denies it implicitly. There is such a turpitude adhering to sin, that it cannot endure the light of the sun, nor the light of conscience, but seeks to be concealed under a mask of virtue or a veil of darkness. What is said of the adulterer and the thief, is true in proportion of every sinner, 'If a man sees them, they are in the terrors

of the shadow of death.' And hence it is, that many who would blush and tremble if they were surprised in their sinful actings by a child or a stranger, are not at all afraid of the eye of God, though he narrowly notices all their sins in order to judge them, and will judge them in order to punish them.

(6.) *Lastly*, Sin bids a defiance to the divine power. This is one of the essential attributes of God that makes him so terrible to devils and wicked men. He hath both a right to punish and power enough to revenge every transgression of his law that sinners are guilty of. Now, his judicial power is supreme and his executive power is irresistible. He can with one stroke dispatch the body to the grave, and the soul to the pit of hell, and make men as miserable as they are sinful: and yet sinners as boldly provoke him as if there were no danger. We read of the infatuated Syrians, how they foolishly thought that God the protector of Israel had only power on the hills but not in the valleys, and therefore renewed the war to their own destruction. Thus proud sinners enter the lists with God, and range an army of lusts against the armies of heaven, and, being blindly bold, run on headlong upon their own ruin. They neither believe God's all-seeing eye, nor fear his almighty hand. You see then what an evil sin is in its nature. It is high rebellion against God, and strikes at the root of all his attributes.

I shall conclude with a few inferences.

1. If ye would see your sins, look to the law of God. That is the glass wherein we may see our ugly face. Hence the apostle says, Rom. vii. 7. 'I had not known sin but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.' Look to it for what is past and present, in order to your being humbled in the sight of a holy God. Look to it for your direction, if you would shun the fatal rocks of sin for the time to come. It is not what this man says, but what the word of God says, that is to be the rule of your duty.

2. See here what presumption it is in men to make that duty which God has not made so, and that sin which God has not made so in religion. This is for men to set themselves in God's room, and their will for the divine will. This is true superstition, however far the guilty seem to themselves and others to be from it. And in this too many of different denominations agree, making that duty and sin which God never made so. In this general they agree, however they differ in particulars. This is expressly forbidden, Deut. iv. 2. 'Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it.' Remarkable is the reason of this prohibition, 'that ye may keep the command-

ments of the Lord your God which I command you.' For to both agrees what our Lord said, Matt. xv. 3. 'Why do ye transgress the commandment of God by your traditions?' Witness the deep ignorance of matters of salvation and the power of godliness, wherein many are kept by reason of these principles, which have no footing in the word of God.

3. Flee to Jesus Christ for the pardon of sin, for his blood and Spirit to remove the same. All the waters of the sea will not wash it out, but that blood alone. And repent and forsake your sin, or it will be your ruin. Consider it is the greatest evil. For,

(1.) It is most contrary to the nature of God, who is the greatest good; and that which is most contrary to the greatest good, must needs be the greatest evil. It may be looked on as the nadir to zenith. The devil is not so contrary to God: for God gave the devil a being, but not sin. It is sin that makes the devil opposite to God; it is the master, he the scholar. The fire is hotter than the water which it heats. Sin fights against God; it is a deicide; and, as one says, the sinner so far as in him lies, destroys the nature of God. Sin is a dethroning of God, yea it strikes at his being. It musters up its forces in the open field against God, and when it is beaten from thence, it has its strong holds to go to; yea, like the thief on the cross, when it is crucified, it spits its venom against him. It is a walking contrary to him; and it rises against him even to the last gasp.

(2.) Sin is the mother of all evils that ever were or shall be. It is the big-bellied monster that is delivered daily of all other evils as its births. It is that which has brought forth all the fire-brands that ever were. What cast the angels out of heaven, or Adam out of paradise? Sin draws the sword against nations, makes women husbandless, mothers childless, and brings on wars, famine and pestilence. Personal evils, whether on soul or body, temporal, spiritual, and eternal, are all from sin. It must needs then be the greatest evil.

(3.) Sin is the concluding stroke of wrath on the soul. It is that to which people are entirely given up. And what is it that makes hell in the world, that God gives as the last stroke after all the rest? Why, it is to give up the soul to sin; Ezek. xxiv. 13. 'Because I have purged thee, and thou wast not purged, thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee,' That is the doom, 'Let him that is filthy be filthy still.' He that was delivered up to Satan, was restored again: but we never hear of any being restored who were given up to themselves. Better be given up to the devil than to sin.