
II CORRUPTION

What is wrong with human beings, anyway? Why is it so difficult for us to do the right thing? Why is it so difficult even to know what is right? Why is there so much conflict within and among us? No realistic consideration of ethics can go very far without facing up to these painful and discouraging questions.

The Christian diagnosis of the root cause of this unpromising human condition is: sin. Those who turn to Christianity for meaning and hope hear, first of all, some very bad news. Man's ethical and moral problem is not a minor one. It is extremely serious. The reason for our moral disability and ethical confusion is that we are possessed and ruined by an evil power. The hold of evil upon us is pervasive, profound, and the consequences are disastrous. We are thoroughly and, as far as all human resources are concerned, hopelessly corrupt.

It is important to note that sin, as Scripture describes it, is the ruination of the good. Evil has no independent existence. In this respect the Christian understanding of evil is different from other philosophies and religions which teach that a dark and evil force has always existed and worked against the good power of God. Scripture, on the other hand, teaches that God alone in His

goodness has existed from all eternity, and that evil has emerged and spread within the good creation that He made.

The details of the origin of evil are shrouded in mystery. However, the nature of evil as the distortion of that which was good is clearly revealed. Everything evil is something good gone out of control. Pride, for example, is self-respect enlarged disproportionately. Lust is the sexual impulse running unchecked or misdirected. Greed is an appreciation for material things which has become idolatrous or selfish. Every vice is a virtue turned upside down or inside out. Everything evil is something good that has been corrupted. The source and mastermind of all evil is a fallen angel.

I. GOD'S CREATURES

Behind this interpretation of evil as the corrupted good is faith in God as the Creator. We human beings and everything else in the universe have been made by Him. However, He is not responsible for what is wrong with us. He is not the source or cause of the corruption that mars and threatens us. He is only the source of what is right with and about us.

A. Created Good

Not only Adam and Eve but all human beings, including you, were created good. That information may come as a surprise. We are accustomed to hearing only (and this will be stated on pp. 26 f.) that we have been sinful from the very beginning of our existence. However, it is also true that each of us was created good.

In this connection it is important to keep in mind that God's work of creation in you is a continuous process. It is not something that happens only once, at conception or birth; it goes on throughout life as God develops and sustains you. Not only physically, but also psychologically, emotionally, intellectually, and in every other way God is supporting you and unfolding you as a person.

Furthermore, you are a unique product of His creative art. No one else in human history has ever been exactly like you in

appearance, personality, or ability, and no future individual will be an exact replica. Like everything else that He does, God's creative work in you is good—perfect, in fact. God makes no blunders when He creates. There are no unfortunate omissions or defects in His creation. As the young black child quoted in Transactional Analysis literature says, "God don't make no junk!"

B. Created for Fellowship

God had a definite purpose in mind when He created man, an exciting and ennobling purpose not shared by any other earth creature. His purpose was and is that human beings might be aware of Him, that we might know who He is and what He is like. He created us with a capacity for fellowship with Him, that we might be close to Him in a bond of love, trust, and respect. This, of course, involves the ability to communicate with Him—we have senses to perceive His revelation, minds to assimilate it, hearts to believe, as well as means of responding to Him in attitude, word, and deed.

God made us to be in intimate and constant contact with Him, listening and answering, receiving and giving. Other creatures on this planet were made for the environment and for each other. We human beings, in addition, were made for God Himself, for a conscious and loving relationship with Him. Until and unless that fellowship is established we are missing the very purpose of our existence and will experience frustration and emptiness as a result. As Augustine says, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee."

C. Created in God's Image

Through a close relationship with us God desires to exert an influence on us. Through our awareness of Him and interaction with Him He wants us to become like Him, to acquire His own attitudes and ways. Actually, something like this happens in all close personal relationships. Every human being to whom you have been close has left an impression on you. Consciously or unconsciously you adopt some values, mannerisms, and behavior patterns of the people who are important to you. After

years of living together, especially if the relationship is warm and close, a husband and wife will often begin to physically resemble one another.

In a very real and profound way God is working to make us like Himself. He made us in His own image, the Bible says. In this case, since God is not a physical being, the resemblance implied in this word *image* is not physical. Rather it is a *moral* likeness. God made us to be like Him in character and conduct. What, in a word, sums up God's character and conduct? "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Through a close personal relationship in which He lavishes the fullness of His love upon us, God intends to stimulate and cultivate in us the kind of love that characterizes Him. "No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12, RSV). The invisible God becomes "visible" in the loving actions of those who are in fellowship with Him. We are to become the physical human manifestations, projections, and replicas of the God who relates to us in love.

II. CORRUPT FROM BIRTH

Paradoxically, despite God's good creative work in us and despite His high purpose and destiny for us, we are not born good, free, and pure. Rather, we are born corrupt, sinful, enslaved by evil. We are born losers—all of us.

A. Corruption Simultaneous with Creation

The relationship between God's good creation in us and our corruption by sin is not what we might expect. It is not that we were first created good and then subsequently corrupted. It is not that by conception, prenatal development, and birth God produced an innocent child who then was tempted and defiled by exposure to the evil influences of the world.

Rather, from the very beginning of our existence, and throughout life as the process of creation continues, we are constantly being corrupted by sin. As God proceeds with our origin and development He performs each step perfectly. And yet, at

each step Satan intervenes to distort, pervert, wreck what God has done. The devil cannot create anyone or anything, for only God can create. However, the devil can corrupt, and he does this in each of us from the very beginning of the creative process and keeps on doing so as long as we are alive.

By way of illustration imagine an automobile manufacturing plant in which every part was perfect and all assembly work was done correctly. The result should have been absolutely perfect automobiles. However, at each step of the process, as these perfect parts were being perfectly assembled, a saboteur wrecked what was done—marred the polished surfaces of the moving parts, put foreign and abrasive materials into fuel and lubricants, shorted-out the electrical system, disrupted vital linkages, disturbed delicate adjustments—with the result that the finished product, though perfectly made, was, nevertheless, junk.

Our corruption by sin occurs simultaneously with our creation by God. Our human nature is, on the one hand, God's good creation. On the other hand, it is also thoroughly and completely corrupt. From a human point of view it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between God's creation in us and our corruption. However, Scripture carefully distinguishes between them, and it is important for us also to be aware of the difference. One who does not realize the difference might regard God as the source of sinfulness. He might reason incorrectly that since we are sinful from the very beginning of our existence and since God is our Creator, God must also be the Creator of sin. This would be a serious and dangerous error. The differences between creation and corruption is the difference between God's work and that of the devil.

B. Corruption As Deficiency

What kind of damage has the devil done to each of us? One aspect of this damage may be described as a deficiency, the lack of certain basic and vital human responses. The devil's corrupting influence, first of all, destroys our ability to respond and relate to God. The components of faith are missing, and there is no way that we ourselves can replace them. Corrupt as we are from birth we cannot respect God as we should (fear). Nor can we desire and serve God as we should (love). Nor can we confide

in and rely on Him as we should (trust). Our entire attitude toward God is deficient. We are out of touch with Him from birth and unable to reestablish contact.

Our ability to respond to other people is also gravely impaired. Instead of the warm and generous attitude that is necessary for solid human relationships, we are dominated by self-interest. It is difficult for us to love others and give of ourselves to others, unless, of course, it promises to be to our ultimate advantage. We lack the ability fully to love others just as truly as we lack the ability to believe in God.

C. Corruption As Evil Inclination

Corruption is more than the absence of something good and necessary. It is also the presence of something evil and destructive. The corruption of sin manifests itself in revolt against God and lovelessness toward people. We sinful human beings are driven creatures. Not only are we helpless to do the right, as was mentioned in the previous section, but we are also pushed relentlessly and manipulated constantly to do what is wrong.

Under the sway of corruption we have the uncontrollable impulse to turn against God, revolt against His will, disrespect and disobey Him. We are also strongly inclined to neglect, exploit, or hurt other people. All human conflicts are expressions of this inborn tendency toward evil, this powerful inclination to turn against God and against people. Conflicts occur when either or both parties are acting out their corruptness.

D. Transmission of Corruption

The corruption of sin is transmitted from parents to children. Along with a variety of traits and potentials, along with the gift of life itself, your parents conveyed to you the terrible problem of sin. The corrupting presence and power of the devil came to you through them. Automatically and inescapably from the very beginning of your existence you lacked faith and love and were inclined, instead, toward evil. This is what the term *original sin* refers to.

Many have the impression that original sin is primarily inherited guilt. They think that God blames us for the wrong done by our ancestors all the way back to Adam and Eve. It is true that

there is guilt attached to original sin. However, the guilt is not for what someone else has done. Rather the guilt is related to this corruption that has been present in us from the very beginning of our existence. The newborn infant is guilty before God and under His wrath, not because he or she has done something wrong, not because he or she is being held responsible for someone else's wrong, but because he or she is corrupt.

E. Source and Force of Corruption

The Bible reveals that the source and force of human corruption is a personal being who is intelligent, powerful, and evil. Corruption is not an accident; it is a conspiracy masterminded and implemented by Satan, God's great enemy. There are those even in Christian circles who deny that there is such a being as the devil. According to them the devil is simply an ancient mythological way of trying to account for human weakness and sin. However, the teaching of Scripture as well as a great deal of human experience confirms the reality of the devil and his role in our corruption. The devil himself may well be the one who prompts disbelief in his existence. If so, it is a very shrewd strategy. If we do not believe that he exists, we will be inclined to relax our defenses and thus be all the more vulnerable to his attacks.

F. Corrupting Influences

The corruption which the devil initiates and perpetuates is also reinforced by the evil influences of other corrupt persons, individually and collectively. We sinful human beings have a way of bringing out the worst in one another. Corruption is spread and deepened as we treat one another lovelessly and as we are exposed to one another's irreverence, godlessness, and immorality.

Much in our culture sneers at God and His will for our lives. A great deal of what is communicated by the mass media and some of what passes for education is an attack against Christian faith and morality. All of this feeds the corruption which is already present and active in all of us. Unfortunately, even those whom we love and admire have this effect upon us at times, and we on them. The most devout, committed, wise, learned, obedient, and

moral Christian you know sometimes displays and acts out his corruption and, therefore, can be an evil influence.

III. COMPLETELY AND HOPELESSLY CORRUPT

Having considered what corruption is and how it is transmitted and strengthened, we now reflect on the extent of the problem. How much are we affected by our corruption? What can we ourselves do about it? What are the consequences?

A. Completely Corrupt

Corruption is pervasive. It permeates every aspect of our being—body, mind, and soul. No part of us, not even our innermost being, remains untouched and uncontaminated. Our physical appetites for food, drink, rest, and sex are all ruined and twisted by sin, so that what is intrinsically good and natural takes an evil form or direction. Similarly, our minds and thoughts are corrupted, so that the faculty which was designed to enable us to know and relate to God functions, instead, to shut God out or question His very existence. Our feelings and desires which are meant to enhance and express our relationship to God and others become largely oriented toward self-satisfaction. Even our religious impulses are perverted, so that instead of recognizing and responding to the true God we are inclined to make idols of one kind or another.

Everything that we are, and also everything that we do, is affected by sin. Some of our behavior is obviously corrupt and evil. It violates either our relationship with God or our relationship with other people, or both. It is clearly contrary to God's revealed will. We may be acutely aware of the corrupt character of this behavior. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. The sad truth is that even conduct which appears good and wholesome is tainted and unacceptable to God. Our best performance, our most obedient acts, our most sincere expressions of faith, our most generous gifts, are also marred and disqualified by our corruption.

First of all, our motives are always mixed. Even if we do some-

thing primarily out of love for God and others, there will always be some sinful selfishness present in the motive, and that spoils it. Furthermore, because of our sinfulness, our performance is never perfect, and perfection is what God requires. Consequently, everything that we do is ultimately judged by God to be inadequate and even offensive.

B. Civil Righteousness

However, even corrupt and condemned human beings are capable of external decency, and this is very important to human survival. It would be impossible for us to live in society unless most people, most of the time, were capable of a measure of honesty, justice, generosity, and compassion. Some people who do not have faith in Christ display these and other virtues. God Himself provides them with this capability.

A residual sense of God's will remains in fallen human beings. Frequently, this is called a "natural knowledge of the law," an intuitive (though imperfect) sense of right and wrong. Some men possess the rational realization that their own well-being and that of society require the exercise of these virtues. In other words, they have the conviction that it pays to do what is right. Other men may be motivated to act in a decent and respectable manner for the emotional satisfaction that this brings.

God wills and enables this civil righteousness, as it is called, for the *temporal* welfare of people. However, it has no significance for their *eternal* welfare. It does not make them right with God or eligible for salvation. Everything done by the person who is apart from God (the unbelieving and, thus, unforgiven person)—even good conduct—is sin. Only the person who is right with God can please Him.

C. Hopelessly Corrupt

There is no way for a human being of himself to overcome this corruption. We are hopelessly trapped, and we are not able to rescue ourselves or even significantly improve ourselves or our position. Like a person caught in quicksand, the more we struggle to save ourselves, the deeper we sink into corruption. Almost every sensitive and realistic person is aware of his own weakness

and imperfection. However, that we are hopelessly corrupt is by no means self-evident. The fact is that our condition, our problem, is far worse than we could ever discover on our own.

D. Consequences of Corruption

God is not tolerant of corruption. He reacts against it in a radical and decisive manner. He condemns corrupt and rebellious human beings, and consigns them to everlasting punishment in hell hereafter. God does not want us to be ignorant of these consequences. In His Word, spoken and written, He exposes our corruption and warns us of the consequences. That element of His message is called "the law." By telling us what He requires and expects—and His expectations are staggering—God makes us aware of the extent to which we deviate and fail. This, in turn, is indicative of the inner corruption which is the root of all our moral problems.

It is not pleasant to learn about our corruption and its consequences. It is, in fact, very bad news. Nothing less can prepare us for the Good News of the gospel, the message of God's mercy in Christ which provides both pardon and deliverance from the consequences of corruption. Unless we know the frightening diagnosis, we will not be interested in the remedy which God provides.

E. Corruption in the Christian

Although forgiven and counteracted, corruption is present and active in the Christian. For the sake of Jesus, because of His sacrifice, God pardons those who trust in Him. Furthermore, through the power of the Holy Spirit He works within the Christian against the power of evil. However, although pardoned and opposed, corruption remains as a continuing threat and hindrance, even to the strongest Christian. Like diabetes, when recognized and treated, corruption can be controlled and its debilitating effects minimized. However, in this life there is no cure.

Corruption is not someone else's problem. It is your problem and mine—a problem we must face up to continually, a problem with which we must live—and die. The solution is not merely a

matter of acquiring some better information, or correcting some bad habits, or gaining some new attitudes by inspiration and experience. Rather, as we have seen, the problem is deep and complex, and requires a radical solution amounting to liberation from slavery or even resurrection from the dead.