

THE
MIND
OF
CHRIST

Legacy Edition

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Last Generation for Christ Publishing

ISBN 978-1-62154-990-1

Innocent Until Proven Guilty

Babies are beautiful. Isn't that what every proud parent thinks looking at such a tiny bit of humanity sleeping peacefully? The very picture of innocence. There is probably no other time in life when a human being is more free of any taint of evil.

But wait. There are those who look at that same baby and see something quite different. Instead of sweet innocence, they see a baby born with a nature and inheritance so corrupt that the baby is lost and condemned as it draws its first breath; a little package of life tainted with the sin of Adam and Eve, even though that "original sin" was thousands of years in the past.

What does the Bible teach? Are babies born innocent or guilty? And what does this mean for adults, whether or not they are Christians? Do they live constantly in a state of sin, needing constant forgiveness for the constant sin of a corrupt nature?

Could we have misunderstood such a basic question as What is sin? To be more precise, What is the nature of that sin for which we are condemned and lost for eternity?

Let's look at some easy-to-understand Bible texts. "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). Now does a baby know the difference between right and wrong? And is it possible that we might not always know the right thing to do or say, and unwittingly do or say the wrong thing? In neither case—for the baby or the adult—is sin involved. A mistake, yes, but no sin and no guilt.

Perhaps Jesus can help us understand. Speaking to the Pharisees one day, "Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:41). Jesus was telling them that sin is not counted as guilt when there is no opportunity to know what is right. The Pharisees

were certainly born with the same fallen natures with which we are born, but this did not automatically make them sinners.

On another occasion Jesus said, "If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now they have both seen and hated both Me and My Father" (John 15:24). It was when the light—Jesus—came to them, and they chose to reject that light that they were counted guilty of sin. See John 3:19.

So, is the Bible telling us that condemnation and guilt are not our birthright and that we do not automatically live in a state of sin because of Adam's "original sin"? Is the Bible telling us that to become guilty of sin we must know what is true and right, and deliberately choose to reject the truth and do what God has forbidden? Then perhaps that baby is innocent after all, and doesn't need to be baptized immediately to wash away its presumed inherited guilt from Adam and Eve. And we don't live in a

constant state of sin because we have fallen natures.

This means that sin and guilt come into existence for us only when we have "light." When we know what God wants us to do, and refuse to do it (James 4:17), we become sinners, in need of forgiveness and cleansing. Sin is not the accident of being born in a sinful world with a fallen nature because of Adam's sin. Rather, sin is the choice we make when we know the difference between right and wrong, and we say, "I want to do it my way, because I don't like God's way."

On one occasion Jesus and His disciples found a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples had a question for Jesus about how we become sinners. "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents" (John 9:2, 3). The disciples assumed that his blindness proved that he was a sinner, and they were con-

fused about how that sin could have been transmitted to him since he was born that way. Jesus' response shows that blindness, and sin as guilt, are not the same thing.

This means that we must make a distinction between the results of sin and the guilt of sin.

When Adam sinned, the entire world began an unbroken pattern of pain, suffering, deterioration and death. Plants, animals, and human beings all suffer the tragic results of the curse of sin. We are born in a sinful world, to sin-affected parents, with a nature inclined to sin. But there is no indication in Scripture that we are lost, condemned, or guilty for any of these results of Adam's sin. The sin for which we give up eternal life is *choosing* to disobey when we know what God's will is.

A clear example of this principle is found in the Old Testament. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son"

(Ezekiel 18:20). The point is simple. We are each responsible for our *own* sins—our own bad choices.

If a life of sin is inevitable—because of inheriting a weak, fallen, human nature—then I am not responsible for it; it is someone else's fault and problem. However, if sin is my own choice, then I alone am responsible, and I must deal with it directly, rather than blaming someone else.

Sin and guilt originate only within the higher faculties of the mind responsible for choosing good or evil. The whole person suffers the effects of natural law as part of the earth's cycle of sin. But God does not hold us responsible for inheriting defective equipment. Sin is about deliberately breaking God's law (see 1 John 3:4). Sin, at its root, is self-love. It is putting self above God.

All aspects of God's method of saving sinners are affected by what we believe sin and guilt to be. If sin is the nature we

inherit and will keep until Jesus comes, then:

1. Jesus could not be born with our nature,
2. the focus of the gospel must be constant forgiveness for constant sin, and
3. we will never be free from sin until Jesus comes.

But if sin is our own choice, then:

1. Jesus could inherit our nature,
2. the gospel is both forgiveness and transforming power, and
3. we can live the obedient life that Jesus lived.

Jesus, Our Brother or Distant Cousin?

Jesus Christ is both our remedy for sin and our example for overcoming it (1 Peter 2:21, 22). His name is well-known,

yet people have many uncertainties about Him as a man. Was He really God? Was He really a human being? Could He sin? Was He really tempted? Did He struggle with problems and feelings like those that trouble us?

There are some basic texts which form a foundation for understanding who Jesus was. "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6, 7). So we know that Jesus was really God (John 8:58) and we know that He was really a man. John makes the point even more clear. "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God" (1 John 4:2).

But let us go a step farther. What kind of human being did Jesus become? "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same...

For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren" (Hebrews 2:14, 16, 17). Notice how the point is emphasized that Jesus Himself likewise partook of the *same* flesh and blood that we have.

If Jesus was born of the seed of Abraham, then we only have to ask the question, What nature did all the descendants of Abraham receive? Clearly, they all received fallen nature as a birthright. Notice also that the text says that Jesus was made like His brethren (us) in *all things*. We must not pass over these texts superficially or rewrite them to meet our preconceptions. Jesus really took our nature.

Under the law of heredity, we receive natural tendencies from our parents; thus Jesus received natural tendencies from His mother, for she was a fully human mother. As a human being like us, Jesus inherited the physical results of the fall, such as

hunger, fatigue, thirst and mortality, as well as the tendencies all of us must contend with, toward traits such as selfishness, pride, jealousy and gluttony. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that the chain of heredity was broken between Mary and Jesus. Many times He called Himself "the Son of man."

We can rejoice that Jesus did not sidestep the ugliness of being born into a fallen world, to a fallen mother, with a fallen nature. We indeed have a Saviour who is very near to us. He did not quarantine Himself from the disease of a fallen nature, giving us instructions by long-distance communication. He stepped right into the battle zone with us. With tender love He takes our hand and will lead us out of the quagmire in which we find ourselves, if only we follow Him (Psalm 23). Praise God for such a Saviour!

But was Jesus tempted as strongly as we are tempted to yield to attractive temptations? Did He have to struggle as we do?

Let us consider what temptation actually is. Not only does Satan tempt us, as he tempted Eve and Jesus Himself, "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (James 1:14). So our temptations do not arise only from outside ourselves, but from within our natures. We are drawn by our own fallen tendencies and drives. The word "lust" is sometimes translated "desires" or "passions." In fact, the majority of our temptations may arise from this source.

The question is, Was Jesus tempted in this way or not? Scripture gives us clear answers on this point. "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). A simple, straightforward reading of this text tells us that Jesus was tempted just like we are tempted.

Since most of our temptations are due to the drives and impulses of our fallen human natures, if Jesus did not take this

fallen nature, then He could not be tempted as we are tempted. He could not be tempted with my temptations to selfishness, pride, anger, discouragement, lust, appetite, carelessness, rebellion, and a host of other temptations arising out of my fallen nature. But this text tells us that He lived without sinning in spite of being tempted in all the same ways that I am tempted. What an encouragement to us who must live our entire lives fighting against a nature that would otherwise destroy us!

Jesus Himself said, "I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me" (John 5:30). In the garden of Gethsemane, when He faced the horrific penalty for all our sins, He prayed to the Father "not My will, but Thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). He bids anyone who would be His disciple to "deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Like Jesus, we must surrender our own inclinations and seek to do

God's will alone.

Why is all this important? "For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Because Christ took our nature and was tempted in all points as we are, we can have full confidence that in His name we can approach the very throne of God, and know that He will give us the help we need.

But there is one important difference between Christ and all other human beings. God told Mary, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). No other human being has ever had the Holy Spirit for a father. This is the most remarkable difference between Jesus and other humans. Jesus was "God

manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16).

Because the Holy Spirit was in control of His life from His very conception, Christ never yielded to the temptation to sin at any time. Although His nature was the same as our nature, His character was pure and holy from birth. Jesus was holy from His first entrance into the world, and He remained holy for the rest of His life.

The very good news is that I can have the same controlling power of the Holy Spirit and the same victory over sin when I choose to surrender my life to God. I can have the same connection with God that Jesus did by the process of the new birth. "According as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:3, 4).

Jesus' victory was remarkable, not because as God He acted like God, but because as man He did not act like every other man. He lived a life that was supposed to be impossible to live. Jesus proved that with God the impossible is possible. Because of Christ's victory, the way is now prepared for God to do the impossible in us.

Sin: Destiny or Choice?

How can God do the "impossible" in us? We are all sinners—not by birth or by inheritance or by bad luck, but by our own choices to do things our way instead of God's way. "For all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God," and "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 3:23; 6:23). By our own choices we deserve to be excluded forever from the eternal life that God has planned for the human race. It is only when we realize our desperate situation that we will reach out to God for deliver-

ance from our hopeless plight. In His infinite love, God has provided a way out of our dilemma, and we need to find His remedy, rather than the human-invented "remedies" which only make us feel good as we proceed on our way to destruction.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). The first step is to believe in the great price Jesus paid for our sins. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). How can we help but love the One who gave His life for us, and repent of the sins that nailed Him to the cross (Romans 2:4)?

Since we can do nothing to change our past choices, when we repent, which means to be sorry for our sins and turn away from them, God forgives or pardons us. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteousness of his way, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 54:1).

teous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7; see also 2 Chronicles 7:14; Proverbs 28:13; Matthew 6:14, 15). Then we are no longer guilty sinners. This is called justification, which no good deeds or valiant efforts can provide. "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24).

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Each of us is given a measure of faith (Romans 12:3). When we exercise that faith, believing and trusting in the promises of His Word, we receive peace with God (John 14:27).

But as with all parts of God's saving gospel, some have counterfeited this aspect of salvation. Some Christians limit justification to forgiveness alone. They forget that forgiveness is only half of justification. Their view is only a partial

solution to our problem.

What is the second part of justification? "According to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; that being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7).

To be justified includes the cleansing of regeneration, the renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2). This is a heart experience—a complete transformation. It changes my values and my attitudes. No longer am I self-centered; now I am Christ-centered and others-centered. Now I have the mind of Christ (see Philippians 2:5). I walk "as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

How did Jesus describe the salvation process? "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Jesus did not use the word justification as Paul did, but He clearly taught that

the new birth is essential to salvation. The new birth does not follow justification—it *is* justification.

"Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin... Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:6, 7, 11).

The "old man" is our old way of living, in which selfishness rules our lives. This old man must die and be replaced by the "new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Just as the old man and sinning are synonymous, so the new creature and obedience are synonymous (see Ezekiel 36:26, 27; 1 John 3:7; Romans 2:13, 6:16).

Sanctification is another element of the gospel which must be clearly understood. It also has two parts. What does the word "sanctify" mean? "And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it" (Genesis

2:3). The most basic meaning of sanctification is "to set apart for a holy use." God set the seventh day apart for the human race to use in a holy way.

How does this meaning relate to new Christians? "But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). When we are washed and justified, we are also set apart for a holy use. God looks at us now, not in filthy garments of sin, but clothed with the pure righteousness of Christ (Zechariah 3:4; Isaiah 61:10).

What is the second part of sanctification? "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we spend time with God, we see more and more of His glory, and we become more and more like Him in character. Sanctification involves spending quality time with Jesus through

personal Bible study, prayer and yielding to His instruction so that we can be changed into His likeness. He prayed for us: "Sanctify them through Thy truth; Thy word is truth" (John 17:17). And the Holy Spirit is our Guide "into all truth" (John 16:13).

Paul gives insight into this experience. "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). "I die daily" (1 Corinthians 15:31). "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Our part is to place our will on God's side. We must die daily to our natural desires and inclinations. Moment by moment, we ask for and depend on His grace, His power, to resist temptation and obey His commandments (Romans 1:5; Hebrews 4:16; James 4:7, 8). This is Bible sanctification.

The bottom line is that God saves us through justification combined with sanctification. It is dangerous to say that we are saved by justification alone while sanctification is only a good fruit of salvation. Sanctification makes us ready to dwell in heavenly places. Dying daily to self is necessary; holiness is essential to salvation. "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Salvation is "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

"The Lord shall establish thee an holy people unto Himself, as He hath sworn unto thee, if thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, and walk in His ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9). If we are not living a sanctified life, we are not saved. Both justification and sanctification are God's gracious gifts to lost and hopeless sinners.

Be Ye Therefore Perfect...

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us to be perfect, "even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). But perfection can be a troublesome word. What does it really mean? What doesn't it mean? Some believe that it is spiritually unhealthy to emphasize the subject of perfection. Perhaps part of the problem is that we can think of "perfection" in at least four different ways.

Meaning one: "For I am the Lord, I change not" (Malachi 3:6). Only God never makes a mistake or misjudgment. This is **absolute perfection**. Absolute perfection can never be possible for created beings, because our knowledge is always limited and growing.

Meaning two: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them... And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very

good" (Genesis 1:27, 31). God made mankind in His own image—as close to God as could be possible for created beings. This is **nature perfection**. Man's nature was in complete harmony with God and the rest of creation. His mind and body worked perfectly together. His impulses and drives were in balance and in complete agreement with God's laws.

At the Second Coming, His people's fallen natures will be changed by God into perfect natures (1 Corinthians 15:51-54). This means no more sinful promptings from within themselves. Since we will have our fallen tendencies until then, this meaning cannot apply to us today.

Meaning three: "Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37). At the moment of conversion, when we surrender our lives completely to Christ, we are counted perfect in Him. What God requires of us in the conversion process is

to give Him our whole heart. He will not accept a divided heart, in which we love both God and the world (see Luke 16:13; 1 John 2:15-17). God accepts our **character surrender** and we are counted perfect in Christ.

From that point, we begin to grow and make changes as we understand new things about God's will for us. As long as we remain surrendered through this growth process, and thus our obedience keeps pace with our understanding, we continue to be counted perfect in Christ. In practical terms, this is how we maintain our saving connection with Jesus. He promises to help us "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Meaning four: "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). God wants us to

grow to full maturity. He wants to bring us to heights that we could never imagine. **Character maturity** is simply the ripening of the harvest in the individual life. We are mature in Christ when we are no longer choosing to sin against God.

This maturity is expressed by John. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for His seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). This concept can be expressed in a simple way. Christ in—sin out. Sin in—Christ out. We cannot have both Christ and sin reigning on the throne of our lives at the same time. In a mature character we have been fully transformed by His empowering grace, and therefore we are not making rebellious choices. We are choosing not to rebel against God in thought, word, or action.

In defining perfection, we have found that the two meanings that apply to us at the present time are character surrender leading to character maturity. But some

Christians do not believe that we can live without sinning before the Second Coming of Christ. Is this an impossible dream? Let's see what God says.

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Is there a way of escape for some temptations only, or for any and all temptations? Is God limited in His ability to help us escape? This text says that there is a way of escape for every temptation. There is not one temptation that comes to us that makes sinning inevitable. God has promised that if we will trust in Him, He will show us the way out of every temptation.

"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps: who did no sin, neither was guile

found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:21, 22). God promises that Christ's example of not sinning can be followed by us.

"Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). This is one of the most powerful promises in the Bible. If we will give wrong thoughts to Christ immediately, He promises to hold them in captivity so that they cannot control us. It is obvious that if Christ controls all of our thoughts, sin will not be happening in our lives.

"Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh," "I can do all things through Christ," "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (Galatians 5:16; Philippians 4:13; 2 Corinthians 12:9). The Bible is full of promises that we can overcome sin and gain continual victories in the battle against our fallen natures. (See Psalm 119:1-3, 11; 1 Thessalonians

5:23, 24; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Peter 1:10; 1 John 3:6; 4:17; 5:3, 4, 18; Jude 24.)

One other reality at the end of time is important. "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be" (Revelation 22:11, 12). The human race has been living on borrowed time—a period of probation, which ends just before Jesus returns, when everyone will have decided either for or against total loyalty to God.

The people who are alive at this time are described in this way: "Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus." "And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God" (Revelation 14:12, 5). These verses describe a people

actually living sinless lives despite fallen natures, something that Satan has worked tirelessly to prevent (Revelation 12:17). If there really is a close of probation, then full character maturity must be possible, which means living without yielding to sinful desires, fully obedient to God's commands.

"And the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes" (Ezekiel 36:23).

God will vindicate His own name by providing His people with the divine power to obey His law perfectly. This is crucially important in the final resolution of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The deceptive power of the enemy will be destroyed once and for all (Nahum 1:9). Through His people, God will provide the last evidence needed to protect the universe against sin ever arising again. Hallelujah!