

SIN IMMEASURABLE

NO. 299

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 BY THE REV. C. H. SPURGEON,
 AT EXETER HALL, STRAND.

“Who can understand his errors?”
Psalm 19:12.

WHAT we know is as nothing when compared with what we know not. The sea of wisdom has cast up a shell or two upon our shore, but its vast depths have never known the footstep of the searcher. Even in natural things we know but the surface of matters. He who has traveled the wide world over and has descended into its deepest mines, must yet be aware that he has viewed but a part of the mere crust of this world; that as for its vast center, its mysterious fires and molten secrets, the mind of man has not as yet conceived them! If you will turn your eyes above, the astronomer will tell you that the undiscovered stars, that the vast mass of worlds which form the Milky Way and the abundant masses of nebulae—that those vast clusters of unknown worlds, as infinitely exceed the little that we can explore, as a mountain exceeds a grain of sand! All the knowledge which the wisest men can possibly attain in a whole lifetime is no more than what the child may take up from the sea with his tiny cup, compared with the boundless waters which fill their channels to the brim. Why, when we are at the wisest, we have but come to the threshold of knowledge—we have taken but one step in that race of discovery which we may have to pursue throughout all eternity. This is equally the case with regard to things of the heart and the *spiritual* things which concerns this little world called man. We know nothing but the surface of things. Whether I speak to you of God, of His attributes, of Christ, of His Atonement, or of ourselves and our sin, I must confess that as yet we know nothing but the exterior; that we cannot comprehend the length, the breadth, the height of any one of these matters!

The subject of this morning—our own sin and the error of our own hearts, is one which we sometimes think we know, but of which we may always be quite sure that we have only begun to learn, and that when we have learned the most we shall ever know on earth, the question will still be pertinent, “Who can understand his errors?”

Now, this morning I propose first of all, very briefly indeed, to *explain the question*; then at greater length to *impress it upon our hearts*; and lastly we will learn *the lessons which it would teach us*.

I. First, then, let me EXPLAIN THE QUESTION.—“Who can understand his errors?”

We all acknowledge that we have errors. Surely we are not so proud as to imagine ourselves to be perfect. If we pretend to perfection, we are utterly ignorant, for every profession of human perfection arises from perfect ignorance! Any notion that we are free from sin should at once teach us that we abound in it. To vindicate my boast of perfection, I must deny the Word of God, forget the Law and exalt myself above the testimony of the Truth of God! Therefore, I say, we are willing to confess that we have many errors, yet who among us can understand them? Who knows precisely how far a thing may be an error which we imagine to be a virtue? Who among us can define how much of iniquity is mingled with our uprightness—how much of unrighteousness with our righteousness? Who is able to detect the component parts of every action, so as to see the proportion of motive which would constitute it right or wrong? He were indeed a crafty man who should be able to unmask an action and divide it into essential motives which are its component parts. Where we think we are right, who knows but what we may be wrong? Where even with the strictest scrutiny we have arrived at the conclusion that we have done a good thing, who among us is quite sure that he has not been mistaken? May not the apparent good be so marred with internal motive as to become a real evil?

Who again can understand his errors, so as always to detect a fault when it has been committed? The shades of evil are perceptible to God, but not always perceptible to us. Our eyes have been so blinded and its vision so ruined by the Fall, the absolute black of sin we can detect, but the shades of its darkness we are unable to discern. And yet the slightest shadow of sin is perceptible to God and that very shade divides us from the Perfect One and causes us to be guilty of sin. Who among us has that keen method of judging himself, so that he shall be able to discover the first trace of evil? “Who

can understand his errors?" Surely no man will claim a wisdom so profound as this. But let us come to more common matters by which, perhaps, we may the more understand our text. Who can understand the *number* of his errors? The mightiest mind could not count the sins of a single day! As the multitude of sparks from a furnace, so innumerable are the iniquities of one day. We might sooner count the grains of sand on the seashore, than the iniquities of one man's life. A life most purged and pure is still as full of sin as the sea is full of salt; and who is he who can weigh the salt of the sea, or can detect it as it mingles with every fluid particle? But if he *could* do this, he could not tell how vast an amount of evil saturates our entire life and how innumerable are those deeds and thoughts and words of disobedience which have cast us out from the Presence of God and caused Him to abhor the creatures which His own hands have made!

Again—even if we *could* tell the number of human sins, who, in the next place, could estimate their guilt? Before God's mind the guilt of one sin and such an one as we foolishly call a little one—the guilt of one sin merits His eternal displeasure! Until that one iniquity is washed out with blood, God cannot accept the soul and take it to His heart as His own offspring. Though He has made man and is infinitely benevolent, yet His sense of justice is so strong, stern and inflexible, that from His Presence He must drive out His dearest child if one single sin should remain unforgiven! Who, then, among us can tell the guilt of guilt, the heinousness of that ungrateful rebellion which man has commenced and carried on against his wise and gracious Creator? Sin, like Hell, is a bottomless pit! Oh, Brothers and Sisters, there never lived a man yet who really knew how guilty he was! If such a being could be fully conscious of all his own guilt, he would carry Hell in his heart. No, I often think that scarcely can the damned in Hell know all the guilt of their iniquity, or else even their furnace might be heated seven times hotter and Tophet's streams would be enlarged to an immeasurable depth! The Hell which is contained in a single *evil thought* is unutterable and unimaginable! Only God knows the blackness, the horror of darkness, which is condensed into the thought of evil!

And then again, I think our text would convey to us this idea. Who can understand the peculiar *aggravation* of his own transgression? Now, answering the question for myself, I feel that as a minister of Christ I cannot understand my errors. Placed where multitudes listen to the Word from my lips, my responsibilities are so tremendous that the moment I think of them, a mountain presses upon my soul! There have been times when I have wished to imitate Jonah and take ship and flee away from the work which God has thrust upon me, for I am conscious that I have not served Him as I ought. When I have preached most earnestly, I go to my chamber and repent that I have preached in so heartless a manner. When I have wept over your souls and when I have agonized in prayer, I have yet been conscious that I have not wrestled with God as I ought to have wrestled and that I have not felt for your souls as I ought to feel. The errors which a man may commit in the ministry are incalculable! There is no Hell, I think, that shall be hot enough for the man who is unfaithful here! There can be no curse too horrible to be hurled upon the head of that man who leads others astray when he ought to guide them in the path of peace, or who deals with sacred things as if they were matters of no weight and but of slight importance. I bring here any minister of Christ who lives and if he is really filled with the Holy Spirit, he will tell you that when he is bowed down with the solemnity of his office, he would give up the work if he dared; that if it were not for something beyond—mysterious impulses that drive him forward—he would take his hand from the plow and leave the field of battle. Lord have mercy upon Your ministers, for, beyond all other men, we need mercy!

And now I single out any other member of my congregation, and whatever is your position in life, whatever your education, or the peculiar Providences through which you have passed, I will insist upon it that there is something special about your case which makes your sin such sin that you cannot understand how vile it is! Perhaps you have had a pious mother who wept over you in your childhood and dedicated you to God when you were in your cradle. Your sin is doubly sin! There is about it a scarlet hue which is not to be discovered in an ordinary criminal. You have been directed from your youth up in the way of righteousness and if you have gone astray, every step you have taken has been not a *step* to Hell but a *stride* there! *You* do not sin so cheaply as others. Other men's scores run up fast, but where there are pence put down for other sinners, there are pounds put down for you—because you know your duty but you do it not. He who breaks through a mother's bosom to Hell goes to its lowest depths! There is in Hell a degree of torture and the deepest should surely be reserved for the man who leaps over a mother's prayers into Perdition. Or you may never have this to account for; but you may have an equal aggravation. You have been at sea, Sir. Many times you have been in danger of being shipwrecked. You have had miraculous escapes. Now every one of these shipwrecks has been a warning to you. God has brought you to the gates of death and you have promised that if He would but save your wretched soul that you

would lead a fresh life—that you would begin to serve your Maker. You have lied to your God! Your sins before you uttered that vow were evil enough; but now you break not only the Law, but your own covenant which you voluntarily made with God in the hour of sickness! You have, perhaps some of you, been thrown from a horse, or have been attacked by fever, or in other ways have been brought to the very gates of the grave. What solemnity is attached to your life now! He who rode in the charge of Balaclava and yet came back alive—saved alive where hundreds die—should from that time consider himself to be a God’s man, saved by a singular Providence for singular ends! But you, too, have had your escapes, if not quite as amazing, yet certainly quite as special instances of God’s goodness! And now, every error you commit becomes unutterably wicked and of you I may say, “Who can understand his errors?”

But I might exhaust the congregation by bringing up one by one. Here comes the father. Sir, your sins will be imitated by your children! You cannot, therefore, understand your errors, because they are sins against your own offspring—sins against the children who have sprung from your own loins! Here is the magistrate. Sir, your sins are of a peculiar dye, because, standing in your position, your character is watched and looked up to and whatever you do becomes the excuse of other men. I bring up another man who holds no office in the State whatever and who perhaps is little known among men. But, Sir, you have received special Grace from God; you have had rich enjoyment of the light of your Savior’s Countenance. You have been poor, but He has made you rich—rich in faith! Now when *you* rebel against Him, the sins of God’s favorites are sins, indeed! Iniquities committed by the people of God become as huge as high Olympus and reach the very stars! Who among us, then, can understand his errors—their special aggravations, their number and their guilt? Lord, search us and know our ways!

II. I have thus tried briefly to explain my text; now I come to THE IMPRESSING OF IT ON THE HEART, as God the Holy Spirit shall help me.

Before a man could understand his errors there are several mysteries which he must know. But each one of these mysteries, I think, is beyond his knowledge, and consequently the understanding of the whole depth of the guilt of his sin must be quite beyond human power. Now the first mystery that man must understand is *the Fall*. Until I know how much all my powers are debased and depraved, how thoroughly my will is perverted and my judgment turned from its right channel, how really and essentially vicious my nature has become, it cannot be possible for me to know the whole extent of my guilt. Here is a piece of iron laid upon the anvil. The hammers are plied upon it lustily. A thousand sparks are scattered on every side. Suppose it possible to count each spark as it falls from the anvil; yet who could guess the number of the unborn sparks that still lie latent and hidden in the mass of iron? Now, Brothers and Sisters, your sinful nature may be compared to that heated bar of iron. Temptations are the hammers; your sins the sparks. If you could count them (which you cannot) yet who could tell the multitude of unborn iniquities—eggs of sin that lie slumbering in your souls? Yet you must know this before you know the whole sinfulness of your nature! Our open sins are like the farmer’s little sample which he brings to market. There are granaries full at home. The iniquities that we see are like the weeds upon the surface soil; but I have been told, and indeed have seen the truth of it, that if you dig six feet into the earth and turn up fresh soil, there will be found in that soil six feet deep, the seeds of the indigenous weeds to the land. And so we are not to think merely of the sins that grow on the surface, but if we could turn our heart up to its core and center, we would find it as fully permeated with sin as every piece of putridity is with worms and rotteness! The fact is, that man is a reeking mass of corruption. His whole soul is by nature so debased and so depraved, that no description which can be given of him even by Inspired tongues can fully tell how base and vile a thing he is! An ancient writer said once of the iniquity within that it was like the stores of water which are hidden in the depths of the earth—God once broke up the fountains of the great deep and then they covered the mountains twenty cubits upward. If God should even withdraw His restraining Grace and break up in our hearts the whole fountains of the great depths of our iniquity, it would be a flood so wondrous that it would cover the highest tops of our hopes and the whole worm within us would be drowned in dread despair! Not a living thing could be found in this sea of evil. It would cover all and swallow up the whole of our manhood! Ah, says an old Proverb, “If man had to wear his sins on his forehead, he would pull his hat over his eyes.” That old Roman who said he would like to have a window into his heart, that every man could see within it, did not know himself, for if he had had such a window, he would soon have begged to have a pair of shutters and he would have kept them shut up, I am sure; for could he ever have seen his own heart, he would have been driven raving mad! God, therefore, spares all eyes but His own that desperate sight—a naked human heart. Great God, here would we pause and cry, “Behold, I was

shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me! You desire truth in the inward parts and in the hidden part You shall make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.”

A second thing which it will be necessary for us to understand before we can comprehend our errors is *God's Law*. If I just describe the Law for a moment, you will very readily see that you can never hope by any means to fully understand it. The Law of God, as we read it in the Ten great Commandments, seems very simple, very easy. When we come, however, to put even its naked precepts into practice, we find that it is quite impossible for us to keep them fully. Our amazement, however, increases, when we find that the Law does not mean merely what it says, but that it has a *spiritual* meaning, a hidden depth of matter which at first sight we do not discover. For instance, the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” means more than the mere act—it refers to fornication and uncleanness of any shape, both in act and word and *thought*. No, to use our Savior's own exposition of it, “He who looks upon a woman to lust after her, commits adultery already with her in his heart.” So with every Commandment—the bare letter is nothing compared with the whole stupendous meaning and severe strictness of the rule. The Commandments, if I may so speak, are like the stars. When seen with the naked eye, they appear to be brilliant points; if we could draw near to them, we would see them to be infinite worlds, greater than even our sun, stupendous though it is. So is it with the Law of God. It seems to be but a luminous point, because we see it at a distance—but when we come nearer where Christ stood and estimate the Law as He saw it—then we find it is vast, immeasurable! “The commandment is exceedingly broad.” Think then for a moment of the spirituality of the Law, its extent and strictness. The Law of Moses condemns for offense, without hope of pardon, and sin, like a millstone, is bound around the sinner's neck and he is cast into the depths. But much more—the Law deals with sins of *thought*—the imagination of evil is sin! The transit of sin across the heart leaves the stain of impurity behind it. This Law, too, extends to every *act*—tracks us to our bedchamber, goes with us to our House of Prayer, and if it discovers so much as the least sign of wavering from the strict path of integrity, it condemns us! When we think of the Law of God, we may well be overwhelmed with horror and sit down and say, “God be merciful to me, for to keep this Law is utterly beyond my power; even to know the fullness of its meaning is not within finite capacity. Therefore great God, cleanse us from our secret faults—save us by Your Grace, for by the Law we can never be saved.”

Nor yet, even if you should know these two things, should you be able to answer this question; for, to comprehend our own errors we must be able to understand *the Perfection of God*. To get a full idea of how black sin is, you must know how bright God is. We see things by contrast. You will at one time have pointed out to you a color which appears perfectly white; yet it is possible for something to be still whiter; and when you think you have arrived at the very perfection of whiteness, you discover that there is still a shade and that something may be found that is blanched to a higher state of purity. When we put ourselves in comparison with the Apostles, we discover that we are not what we should be. But if we could bring ourselves side by side with the purity of God—O what spots! What defilements would we find on our surface! The Immaculate God stands before us as the bright background to set out the blackness of our iniquitous souls! Before you can know your own defilement, your eyes must look into the unutterable Glory of the Divine Character. Him before whom the heavens are not pure—who charges the angels with folly—you must know Him before you can know yourself! Hope not, then, that you shall ever attain to a perfect knowledge of the depths of yours own sin!

Again—he that would understand his errors in all their heinousness must know the mystery of Hell. We must walk that burning heap, stand in the midst of the blazing flame—no, *feel* it! We must feel the venom of destruction as it makes the blood boil in each vein. We must find our nerves converted into fiery roads, along which the hot feet of pain shall travel, hurrying with lightning pace. We must know the extent of eternity and then the unutterable agony of that eternal wrath of God which abides on the souls of the lost, before we can know the awful character of sin! You may best measure the sin by the punishment. Depend upon it, God will not put His creatures to one pain more than Justice absolutely demands. There is no such thing as sovereign torture or sovereign Hell. God does not stretch His creature on the rack like a tyrant; He will give him but what he deserves and, perhaps, even when God's wrath is fiercest against sin, He does not punish the sinner as much as his sin might warrant, but only as much as it demands. At any rate, there will not be a grain more of wormwood in the cup of the lost than naked Justice absolutely requires! Then, O my God, if Your creatures are to be cast into a lake that burns with fire and brimstone—if into a pit that is bottomless, lost souls must be driven—then what a hideous thing sin must be! I cannot understand that torture, therefore I cannot understand the guilt that deserves it. Yet am I conscious that my guilt deserves it, or else God would not have threatened me with it, for He is just and I am

unjust. He is holy and righteous and good and He would not punish me more for my sins than my sins absolutely required.

Yet once more—a last endeavor to impress this question of my text upon our hearts. George Herbert says very sweetly—“He who would know sin, let him repair to Olivet and he shall see a Man so wrung with pain that all His head, His hair, His garments were bloody. Sin was that press and vice which forced pain to hunt its cruel food through every vein.” You must see Christ, sweating, as it were, great drops of blood! You must have a vision of Him with the spit running down His cheeks, with His back torn by the accursed whip. You must see Him going on His dolorous journey through Jerusalem. You must behold Him fainting under the weight of the Cross. You must see Him as the nails are driven through His hands and through His feet. Your tearful eyes must watch the throes of the grim agonies of death. You must drink of the bitterness of wormwood mingled with the gall. You must stand in the thick darkness with your own soul exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death. You must yourself cry that awful earth-startling cry of, “Lama Sabac-thani.” You too, must, as He did, feel all that weighs of God’s almighty wrath. You must be ground between the upper and nether millstones of wrath and vengeance; you must drink of the cup to its last dregs and like Jesus, cry—“It is finished;” or else you can never know all your errors and understand the guilt of your sin. But this is clearly impossible and undesirable. Who wishes to suffer as the Savior suffered; to endure all the horrors which He endured? He, blessed be His name, has suffered for us! The cup is now emptied! The Cross stands up no longer for us to die thereon! Quenched is the flame of Hell forever for the true Believer! No more is God angry with His people, for He has put away sin through the Sacrifice of Himself! Yet I say it again, before we can understand sin, we must know the whole of that awful wrath of God which Jesus Christ endured! Who, then, can understand his errors?

III. I hope to have your patient attention but a few moments longer while I make THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION, by touching upon the lessons which are drawn from such a subject as this.

The first lesson is—behold the folly of all hope of salvation by our own righteousness. Come here, you who trust in yourselves. Look to Sinai, altogether in a smoke and tremble and despair! You say that you have good works. Alas, your *good* works are evil, but have you no evil ones? Do you deny that you have ever sinned? Ah, my Hearer, are you so besotted as to declare that your thoughts have all been chaste, your desires all heavenly and yours actions all pure? Oh, Man, if all this were true, if you had no sins of commission, yet what about your sins of *omission*? Have you done all that God and that your brother could require of you? Oh these sins of omission! The hungry that you have not fed, the naked that you have not clothed, the sick ones and those who are in prison who you have not visited—remember it was for sins like these that the goats were found at the left hand at last! Not for what they did, but for what they did *not* do—for the things they left undone, these men were put into the Lake of Fire! Oh, my Hearer, have done with your boasting! Pull out those plumes from your helmet, you rebellious ones, and come with your glory dragging in the mire, and with your bright garment stained, and now confess that you have no righteousness of your own—that you are all unclean and full of sin!

If but this one practical lesson were learned, it were sufficient to repay this morning’s gathering and a blessing would be conveyed to every spirit that had learned it. But now we come to another—*how vain are all hopes of salvation by our feelings*. We have a new legalism to fight with in our Christian Churches. There are men and women who think they must not believe on Christ till they feel their sins up to a most agonizing point! They think they must *feel* a certain degree of sorrow, a high degree of sense of need before they may come to Christ at all. Ah, Soul, if you are never saved till you know all your guilt—you will never be saved—for you can never know it! I have shown you the utter impossibility of your ever being able to discover the whole heights and depths of yours own lost state. Man, don’t try to be saved by your feelings! Come and take Christ just as He is and come to Him just as you are! “But, Sir, *may* I come? I am not invited to come.” Yes you are, “Whoever will, let him come.” Don’t believe that the invitations of the Gospel are given only to characters. They are, some of them, unlimited invitations. It is the duty of every man to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is every man’s solemn duty to trust Christ—not because of anything that man is—or is not, but because he is commanded to do it! “This is the command of God, that you believe on Jesus Christ whom He has sent.”—

*“O, believe the promise true,
God to you His Son has given.”*

Trust now in His precious blood, and you are saved and you shall see His face in Heaven! Despair of being saved by *feeling*, since perfect feelings are impossible and a perfect knowledge of our own guilt is quite beyond our reach! Come, then to Christ, hard-hearted as you are, and take Him to be the Savior of your hard heart. Come, poor stony conscience, poor icy soul, come as you are! He will warm you, He will melt you—

*“True belief and true repentance,
Every Grace that brings us nigh;
Without money,
Come to Jesus Christ and buy.”*

But again. Another sweet inference—and surely this might well be the last—what Grace is this which pardons sin—sin so great that the most enlarged capacity cannot comprehend its heinousness? Oh, I know my sins reach from the east even to the west—that aiming at the eternal skies they rise like pointed mountains towards Heaven. But then, blessed be the name of God, the blood of Christ is wider than my sin! That shoreless flood of Jesus’ merit is deeper than the heights of my iniquities! My sin may be great, but His merit is greater still. I cannot conceive my own guilt, much less express it—but the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s dear Son, cleanses us from all sin! Infinite guilt, but infinite pardon! Boundless iniquities, but boundless merits to cover all! What if your sins were greater than Heaven’s breadth? Christ is greater than Heaven! The Heaven of heavens cannot contain Him. If your sins were deeper than the bottomless Hell, yet Christ’s Atonement is still deeper, for He descended deeper than ever man himself as yet has dived—even damned men in all the horror of their agony—for Christ went to the end of punishment and deeper your sins can never plunge! Oh, boundless love, that covers all my faults! My poor Hearer, believe on Christ now. God help you to believe! May the Spirit now enable you to trust in Jesus! You cannot save yourself. All hopes of self-salvation are delusive. Now give up; have done with self and take Christ! Just as you are, drop into His arms. He will take you. He will save you. He died to do it and He lives to accomplish it. He will not lose the spirit that casts itself into His hands and makes Him his All-in-All.

I think I must not detain you longer. The subject is one which commands a far larger mind than mine and better words than I can gather now. But if it has struck home, I am thankful to God. Let me echo again and again the one sentiment I wish for you all to receive, which is just this—we are so vile that our vileness is beyond our own comprehension—but nevertheless, the blood of Christ has Infinite Efficacy, and he who believes in the Lord Jesus is saved, be his sins ever so many, but he who believes not must be lost, be his sins ever so few.

God bless you all for Christ’s sake.

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