

The Misery of Man

by

Adolphe Monod

*For God has bound everyone over to disobedience
so that he may have mercy on them.*
(Romans 11.32, NIV)

The man who thoroughly understands this single verse has the key to the whole Bible.

The doctrine of the Bible has two fundamental articles: the misery of man and the mercy of God. My text mentions them both, and sets them over against each other. *For God has bound everyone over to disobedience* – this is man’s misery; *so that he may have mercy on them* – this is God’s mercy.

I shall discuss these two declarations in two sermons. Today I shall show you man’s misery; leaving it for next Sunday to show the remedy for this misery in the mercy of God.

My first sermon is based on the first part of the whole passage: *God has bound everyone over to disobedience* ... It needs some explanation. In the first place, to connect it with the rest of the chapter – where the apostle has divided the human race into two classes – Jews and non-Jews – we see that his complete idea is the following: *God has bound them all* – that is, Jews as well as non-Jews – *over to disobedience*.

We are not to think that the apostle’s assertion is limited to the Jews and non-Jews of his time. It concerns all men, of all times. This is clearly established by another passage¹, where he announces the same verdict, extending it to all mankind. *But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin* ... We may, therefore, lay aside the distinction between Jews and non-Jews and confine ourselves to the general thought of the text, that *God has bound all men over to disobedience* ...

The word “disobedience” might be replaced by the synonymous word “sin”, which is more commonly used in Scripture, and which the apostle uses in the parallel passage from the Epistle to the Galatians, which we have just quoted. As to this expression *God has bound all men over to sin*, it would be as unnecessary as it is easy to prove by the Bible as a whole that it does not mean that God constrains men to sin, but that He declares them to be sinners. Finally, the man in question is “natural man”²; that is, man as he is “by nature”³ and before he has undergone that radical change which Scripture calls “conversion”.

¹ Galatians 3.22

² This is how I translate, very much like the English and German versions, the Greek expression that is less clearly translated in our versions as the “animal man” (*l’homme animal*). The etymology of this expression (psychic man, from *psyche*, which means soul or breath of life) and a comparison of 1 Corinthians 15.44-49 with Genesis 2.7 show that the man of whom St Paul speaks is the man having received the breath of life, a descendant of Adam and resembling the latter, belonging to the earth and this world. The word *psychic* is also found in James 3.15 and Jude 19, where our versions translate it by sensual (*sensual*); here again, I would translate by ‘natural’. I might also add that the natural (actual) state of man is not to be confounded with his normal (primitive) state.

³ Ephesians 2.3

So this is the teaching of the text: *God has declared that every man, in his natural state, is a sinner.* It is of this truth that I wish to convince you today.

Does this wish seem to you uncharitable? Would someone complain that from among so many themes which I might have brought to this pulpit I have selected such a harsh one? I answer by a comparison. A man falls seriously ill; his sickness is incurable, if neglected; curable, if treated in time. Two friends visit him; one of them says: “You are well”, and the other: “You are sick, and if you do not see a doctor, your life is in danger.” The kindness of the first, isn’t it cruel? And the cruelty of the second, isn’t it kind? I am about to perform today the office of the second friend – and God keep me from ever performing that of the first! I will not be kind to you as the world is, which covers up the sickness of your soul in order that you may remain sick and may die, but I will be harsh very much like St Paul, or St John, or Jesus Christ, or God, who denounce your sin, so that you seek healing and live; and I ask God for the grace to convince you of sin, with power, with authority but above all with love.

First of all, please understand what I mean by saying that we are all sinners. The word “sin” is misunderstood by many; and from this arises the common objection to the truth of the text. “The gospel”, it is said, “exaggerates when it includes all under the universal accusation of sin; it speaks contrary to experience. If one should look at my life he would see that I am not a sinner; that I am neither greedy, nor evil, nor a drunkard; that I am not a treacherous friend, nor an ungrateful son, nor an unfaithful husband. And even if I were, I know others who surely are not.” Those who speak thus confound two different things – *sin* and *vice*. I do not say that all men are vicious. If I did, I would not only exaggerate, but expressly contradict myself; for vice is an immoral state which brings upon the person who lives in it the blame of other men – it is a disgrace. That this is true can also be seen from the fact that in the most philosophical of modern languages the word *vice* was originally synonymous with *shame*⁴. Just as when we speak of a man with a feeble constitution we tacitly acknowledge that other men are of a stronger constitution; when we speak of a vicious man, we tacitly acknowledge that there are men who are not. Greed is a vice; there have to be generous men. Intemperance is a vice; there have to be sober men. Malignancy is a vice; there have to be loving men. All men are not vicious; but all men are sinners, which is a very different thing.

I cannot give you a more precise idea of what *sin* means than by recalling to you the original meaning in the language of the New Testament. The Greek word which we translate as “sin” means *to miss the goal, to lose one’s way*. The sinner is a lost being; he is a traveller with a destination before him, but who has chosen a path that does not lead to it. Or, putting in place of the figure what it signifies: the sinner is one who ought to follow a certain moral direction, and who takes the opposite direction. Having thus explained what it is to be a sinner, I shall now show that we are all such by nature, because we ought to love God more than everything else and, in our natural state, we do love something else more than God.

If to establish these two points I had to confine myself to the Scriptures everything would be said in few words; for I dare say that in no book can you find anything more clearly established, or more constantly implied, than are these two assertions in the Scriptures, namely, that man must love God more than everything else, and that it is his nature to love something else more than God.

⁴ The German word *Laster* (see the corresponding entry in Adelung’s Dictionary).

As to the first, one of the distinctive characteristics of the Scriptures is to put God especially in the foreground, and boldly claim for Him our first attention and our first love. To love God above everything was the very spirit and substance of the old law. The first commandment of the Decalogue is this⁵: *You shall have no other gods before me*. This does not only mean that “you shall reserve to God your external worship, to the exclusion of every other being that is called god”, but also “you shall reserve to God your inner worship, your love, in preference to every other object”. This is how the prophets and Moses explained this commandment. Incidentally, Moses elsewhere states this more clearly⁶: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*. The new law, which is⁷ *the perfect law*, while abrogating the old to some extent, sustained and developed and put in its true light the fundamental principle that we must love God more than everything else. Jesus Christ answered the question of the expert in the law: *Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?* by citing the commandment of Moses: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment*.⁸ It is true that he adds another one: *Love your neighbour as yourself*. But he makes us understand, by the epithet which he applies to it that it is *second*, and *like the first*. And elsewhere he shows, as do his apostles, that his commandment to love one’s neighbour is subordinate to love to God, and necessarily follows from it. He recommends it, not so much as a fundamental commandment than as a consequence and a symptom of the first being observed, according to the words of St John⁹: *He has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister*. You should not object to this by pointing out that the gospel several times puts *love* above the commandments of the law¹⁰, because the word *love* has a broader meaning in the original language of the New Testament than in our own; it means love in general, Christian love; pure, unselfish affection, whether applied to the Creator or to the creature¹¹. Moreover, in order not to leave any doubt that love of God ought to rule over and regulate every other love, Jesus Christ chose, among all our affections, the one most mandatory – namely, the love of our neighbour; and, among all the exercises of this love, the one most indispensable – namely, filial piety, and then declared that even filial piety must be constantly subordinated to piety toward God¹²: *Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me ...* He thus firmly maintains, with all the Scriptures, that man must love God above everything else.

The Scriptures do not speak less clearly on the second proposition: that man by nature is not in this condition, but that he loves something else more than God. It would be easy for me to cite texts in which this disorder is affirmed¹³: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray ... far from their shepherd; each of us has turned to our own way*. We have all started as *children of rebellion*, alienated from God, without love for him, living after our own desires, without seeking his will; *like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath; the whole world is under the control of the evil one; we are dead in your transgressions and sins; if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*. But if I limited myself to these isolated quotations, I could give you the impression that the Scriptures have declared the

⁵ Exodus 20.3

⁶ Deuteronomy 6.5

⁷ James 1.25

⁸ Matthew 22.36 et seq.

⁹ 1 John 4.21

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13

¹¹ Translator’s comment: Monod uses the French word *charité* above, and adds: “... this is why it has been translated by love (*amour*) in several languages”.

¹² Matthew 10.37 ; Luke 14.26

¹³ Isaiah 53.6 ; Ephesians 2.1-3 ; Colossians 1.21 ; 1 John 1.8,10 ; 5.19 ; Titus 3.3

disorder of man's affections only in isolated passages which, you might think, I have gathered with difficulty, and considering which one has to account for the time, the occasion, and a certain exaggeration of language. But in reality the Scriptures assert these things not so much by isolated declarations, by indirect allusions, by its letter, than by its spirit, its overall teaching and in passages where it explains and develops its principles most completely. But this is all I can show you in a few words. In order to prove the truth of this assertion, I have to invite you to read the Bible, calling to your attention one particular portion which I especially commend to your study: namely, the first three chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, from which I have taken my text.

There is no doubt that the object of this Epistle was to exhibit Christian doctrine ; for St Paul himself, from the very beginning, announces his intention in this verse, which is, as it were, the title of the whole work¹⁴: *the gospel ... is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes ...*

Well, read then these three chapters all together, and with the attention that is needed to understand St Paul's way of speaking, which is often puzzling at first sight, because of his ardour and abundance; you will see that he bases the entire economy of salvation on the disorder of man's natural affections, in terms so strong and positive, that after reading them, you will have to admit that it is not possible to enter the Christian faith without having acknowledged this disorder, any more than one can enter a house without going through the door. As Paul wishes to bring the reader to the conclusion – which he announces at the outset and which he repeats at the end of his argument – that God from now on offers man “justification by faith” because he cannot hope to obtain it “by works” (which means, if we explain St Paul by St Paul, that God now offers eternal life graciously to man, because man cannot hope to obtain it as a reward), the apostle establishes as a fact that all, Jews as well as non-Jews, have become unworthy of reward and quite to the contrary, deserve punishment, because all of them are sinners, and he proves the sin, both of Jews and non-Jews, by recalling what history tells us of their corruption.

Should anyone think that he can challenge this evidence by saying that these chapters of St Paul have been written for his contemporaries only, and that they do not concern us, he strangely abuses a principle in which, however, there is some truth. It is true indeed that the Gospel, which was written at a certain time and above all intended for the men of that period, contains details that have a direct application to that period only and to its men, that is: allusions, invitations, criticism and other considerations that are related to the circumstances of that time, and to its character and peculiarity. It is true also that one could apply that observation to the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans and say that some of the facts that Paul invokes in order to establish the disorder of man's affections are taken from the history of his time and cannot all refer to ours, and more importantly, that the picture which he draws is a picture of entire peoples that are seen in a single glance, composed of features that belong to different individuals, so that the disorders which he describes are not found in every man as such. All of this is true, yet it is true also that the Gospel, although it has not been written to all men, has been written for all men, and the eternal wisdom that has dictated it and in whose eyes¹⁵ *a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day*, addressed all individuals of all times, and that St Paul accuses all men of being contaminated with this bad seed, although not all of them bear the same fruit. If Paul had written to the French people of the nineteenth century rather than to the Romans of the first, he would have arrived at the

¹⁴ Romans 1.16

¹⁵ 1 Peter 3.8

same verdict, although based on partly different facts, a verdict from which he excepts nobody¹⁶: *Every mouth shall be silenced and all men held accountable to God. There is no one righteous, not even one; ... there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good*, he repeats, *no, not even one*. If somebody was to deny the universality of these declarations, if somebody was to attribute a greater part of it to the peculiarity of the period than what we just did, if somebody ventured to hold that not only certain peculiarities but whole teachings, not only some details of proof but whole arguments, as well as their conclusions, not only certain verses but whole passages, chapters, perhaps even whole books were not to be considered because they were written for contemporaries only and do not concern us – you see where this would lead. Free to cull from the Gospel, we shall only believe what pleases us and we shall reject whatever we do not like, on the grounds that it does not concern us. One can easily foresee that whatever is in line with our personal ideas will please us, and that we will not like whatever is contrary to them. Thus we will only accept those parts of the Gospel which we already believed before we read it, and that we will delete whatever goes against our ideas, i.e. precisely what could have corrected them, what God had provided especially for us. Having read its last line, we shall be at the very point where we were when we read the first – only the name will have changed; the deepest convictions and feelings will not. I do not wish to have anything in common with those human systems and forced interpretations which, under the pretence of stripping the faith from whatever is unreasonable, commit that terrible mistake against which the angel of Revelation so thoroughly warned the apostle John, by *adding to* or *taking away*¹⁷, correcting, replacing and *distorting the Scriptures*, as St Peter says¹⁸, and, if I may say so, dis-evangelise the Gospel and de-divinise the Word of God! Let this purified Gospel, this Gospel of man, teach whatever it wants, I stick to the Gospel of God, and according to this Gospel, natural man is in a state of sin, of alienation and of disorder. If man is not in this condition of disorder, then we have to strip the Scriptures of all the passages quoted above, and many others, which I have not quoted, in which this disorder is affirmed. If man is not in this condition of disorder, then we have to blot out all the passages where the need of conversion and of recovery is taught, because somebody who has not gone astray does not need to change his course and there is no need to recover what has not been lost. If man is not in this condition of disorder, then we have to blot out all the passages which proclaim this reconciliation, this wonderful liberation, this mercy that surpasses all knowledge, because there is no need for reconciliation where there was no hostility, no wonderful liberation without great danger, and no infinite mercy without infinite misery. We have to tear page after page, speech after speech, book after book; and once you have torn the Bible to pieces, you will have to tear these pieces themselves ... or agree that according to the Bible, every man in his natural state is a sinner.

When the Word of God has spoken in that way, I for one do not need any other authority. But as I fear that quite a few do not have enough faith in the Bible to admit without hesitation all that it teaches, I shall for a moment join them where they are and show them that reason itself, far from contradicting the doctrine of the Bible, cannot refuse its assent, because reason also in its own way establishes these two points: that man must love God more than anything else and that in his natural state he loves other things more than God.

It is not easy to establish by reason that our first love is due to God. It is not so much that the correctness of this assertion is unclear, but, quite to the contrary, it appears so very

¹⁶ Romans 3.9-12

¹⁷ Revelation 22.18s

¹⁸ 2 Peter 3.16

clear to me that I find the demonstration difficult because my perception is almost instinctive. Still, let us try and show that God is most worthy of our love, both when he is considered in himself or in his relationship with us.

What could be more lovable than the perfect being considered as such? He possesses in the highest degree all qualities that are worthy of admiration and affection, well-tempered and enhanced by each other. All in him is so excellent that all the peoples have agreed to call divine whatever they want to praise beyond expression. How could it not be obvious that such a being may expect us, if everything is alright with us, to offer him all our veneration, all our devotion, all the love which we are capable of?

But how much more appropriate would it seem to offer him all that when we consider him, not only as what he is in himself but as what he is in his relations to us, as he without whom we would not have anything, and, in fact, without whom we would not exist. Turn your attention to the latter relation, considering it as if it was the only one; in order to feel the need to love God beyond everything else, only think of him as your creator, and of yourself as his creature. Try to perceive something of what it is to create: bring something out of nothing, make us be, we who would not have been otherwise. You cannot get to the bottom of this thought, it is an abyss in which our intelligence is lost. But the little we can understand of it, even the impossibility of understanding it more deeply, will be enough to show you that the relation that unites the creator to his creature is so strong, so intimate, so far-reaching and, if I may say so, so unique that any other relation has to be subordinated to it, any other commitment has to be subjected to your first commitment to God, and any other love has to be preceded, controlled and dominated by the love of God. But there is even more: not only is God supremely worthy of your love, but he alone is worthy of it. Whatever is lovable comes from God, or rather, whatever is lovable is God. Holiness, truth, morality, conscience, happiness, all these things that are honoured and respected by all peoples and which the greatest men of genius have contemplated, these things that thrill the soul of any man in a holy way draw all their authority from him. They are like fragments of God scattered by a mind that is too limited to contemplate them in a glance and all together. Holiness is God's will; truth is his thought; happiness is his state, morality his law, and conscience his representative. And if you go back to the beginnings, you will see that all these different paths that religion and sound philosophy have revealed to man converge more and more when they get closer to their source and finally all lead to God, the common centre from whom they radiate towards the whole universe. As God is your beginning, your centre, your end, your everything, begin to give him all your love, your heart, yourselves entirely. Once you have done so, you may see how to extend your affections to other objects, without taking anything away from this first love, while subordinating everything to it. This is the order. Depart from it, stop loving God above everything else and you will fall into a disorder that is all the more profound as all the secondary relations which unite you with the creatures depend on the fundamental relation which unites you with the creator, so that if the latter is broken, the first will break, too. Let us illustrate this by means of an image. You will understand the state of a man who ceases to love God above everything else if you consider what would happen to a planet, for instance, the earth, which, ceasing to pursue its regular movement around the sun, left its orbit and chose to follow a free and independent path into space. This going astray, this sin of the earth, would break the fundamental law of its being, and with it all the other laws that depend on it. Not only would this disturb its relation with the sun, but also all the relations to its moon and all the other planets. Imagine the confusion in which these changes would result: the seasons that are defined by its movements: day and night, summer and winter, would no longer succeed each other; ebb and flow of the seas would be deprived of their regularity and restraint; the life of plants, animals and men would come to an end; and to

put an end to my predictions, disorders would generate further disorders until a terrible chaos would be reached, in which, if by chance our globe would keep some of its first glory and beauty, it would only serve to increase the shame of its disorder. This is the inner disorder of man if he abandons the principle of his being and puts his first love on something that is not God.

Thus reason fully agrees with this assertion of the Scriptures, that man, if he wants to remain within [God's] order, must love God more than everything else. It also agrees with the other assertion of the Scriptures, that man in his natural state loves something else more than God.

Indeed, you who have not experienced a conversion so far, and who, as a consequence, are still in your natural state, examine in good faith whether the feeling you have for God may be called a dominant love. Love is not something that is hidden in the heart. It is apparent on the outside, by certain visible marks. “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of”, and the eyes look, the hand works, the whole person acts accordingly. So tell me – does your life show the marks of a dominant love for God? Please judge yourselves. I will assume for now that they who listen to me have this love. I will draw an ideal picture of their life, so that you can compare it to your real life in order to find out whether my assumption was correct or not.

To love God above everything else is the natural tendency of their heart, and when I tell them that first of all they have to live for him, each one understands me, each one had anticipated what I said. As soon as they wake up in the morning, God is their first thought; they do not have to direct their mind to this thought, because it comes to them by itself. They find it everywhere, inside and outside, in themselves and in what surrounds them, in their heart, in the light of day and in the air they breathe. In the evening, the very same thought follows them until the end, it survives all other memories in their mind, it is the last thought to disappear when they fall asleep, and sometimes it even appears in the dreams of the night, just as it appears in the mind during those moments of the day when the mind lets itself be carried away by its own instinctive movements, without any specific intent. Every day God is the very centre of all their actions; their sole ambition is to love and obey him. Compelled to devote themselves to material activities, they would suffer from thus being distracted from serving him if they did not find a way to serve him through these activities, via the mindset in which they perform these tasks. What they find most difficult in this world is that their heavy body and their limited capacities hinder them from freely contemplating his attributes and blessings. They see the love of their family and their friends as a reflection of the love of God, and when they love somebody other than God, it is still God whom they love in this person. When they read, God is the favourite object of their reading – they love a book to the extent to which it tells them something about God. But above all it is his Word that attracts them more than any other book, and they study it with assiduity, not so much because it is a duty but because they delight in it. When they speak, God is still the most common object of their conversation; his name appears most naturally on their lips. His goodness, how to please him, the sadness of offending him fill all their conversations. They mention the matters of life and what the world is interested in only to the extent that is indispensable, and whenever the conversation is filled with themes from which God is absent, they feel a vacuum that alerts them that it is time to return to him. Finally, whatever they do, whether they eat or drink, they do it in view of God¹⁹; there is nothing more constant, more vivid and more stimulating than the feeling he arouses in them. All of their life shows that they have offered him their first love, effortlessly and by natural inclination.

¹⁹ 1 Co 10.31

Beloved brothers, far be it from me to speak with irony. This picture of what your life would be if you loved God above everything else was only intended to make you realise, at a glance, how far you are from loving him in this way. Each one of you has been able to compare this imaginary life with his real life, and each one of you has felt how much they differ in all respects. It is not true that each one of you has understood me, that each one would have anticipated me when I said that we had to live first of all for God. Quite to the contrary, when you encounter some vivid expression of love for God or devotion to him, you are tempted to see it as something new or exaggerated, or mystic. It is not true that to love God is the natural tendency of your heart. In order to arouse this love in you, you have to be excited, shaken; and the moment after it disappears like a spark which shoots up in the air and then is extinguished. It is not true that you find it most difficult to be hindered by your heavy and clumsy body from contemplating God and serving him; you hardly perceive the misery of your body except when afflicted by material needs or physical pain. It is not true that when you love somebody, it is God you love in him; your feelings for your family and friends are only vivid in what is human in them and if you sometimes allow God to intervene, it is only as a protector and not as the first object of your love. It is not true that the readings that attract you most are those who make you think of God, and, above all, his Word. You read religious texts because you feel you have to, you read your Bible for the sake of your conscience, it is a task to be accomplished in order to be able to fall asleep in a mood of complacency. But you keep your taste, your curiosity, your ardour for books full of worldly things, or even worldly lusts. Above all, it is not true that God is the usual and favourite content of your conversations. Alas, everything finds a place there, except him. The well-being and the good health of those who belong to you, what has to be done to enhance your career, the prosperity of your country, the news of the day, the small events of domestic life, perhaps the most indifferent and frivolous things will in turn fill and stimulate your conversations, but the name of God will be absent from them, or will be used with a timid reserve, or even with a profane lightness. Should anybody consider to speak of God with vivacity, then some pious shame will hinder him from doing so; he would not dare, it would seem strange, one might think he is preaching, it is not the time, it is not the place ... as if true love was not appropriate at all times and in all places! as if true love would be able to skilfully comply with what is considered appropriate and obediently bow down to the appearance of indifference! as if you could lay off and put on, show or hide true love, as one pleases, depending on the day of the week, the hour of the day, the atmosphere of a place. Oh, I have to say of your love for God precisely the opposite of what I just said: there is nothing living, nothing stimulating, nothing loving in this love. The feeling you have for God – and what I will say is not something that slips out in the heat of the moment, it is an exact and thought-out expression), considering your life, the feeling you have for God is nothing but a *cold esteem* – something that a father, a mother, a brother, a husband, a friend would not content themselves with, but which they would consider as an insult. Certainly, even in the eye of reason itself, natural man does not love God above everything else; natural man has gone astray, he is a sinner.

Having seen that you do not love God with a dominant love, let us go further, and each one of you will find something that you love with a dominant love, as you should love God. This object is not the same for all; all are sinners, but not all are sinners in the same way.

For most people, and almost all people in their natural state, the object of their first love is the world. By “world” I mean the outward and visible things which contribute to our personal well-being and to our social standing: fortune, rank, credit, science, talent. It is among these things that most of you will find the object of their first love – not a cold esteem, as the one you have for God, but an arduous and passionate feeling. For some of you, your first love is your fortune. It is not a cold esteem that you have for money and gold, it is an

arduous and passionate desire. You seek it as your supreme good, you identify it with yourself, it is your life, your blood, your everything. For others, the object of your first love is rank and credit. It is not a cold esteem that you have for worldly distinctions, it is an arduous and passionate ambition. You sacrifice your time, your rest, your health, your taste, your pride in order to get to the top. For others, your first love is science and talent. It is not a cold esteem that you have for insight and genius, it is an arduous and passionate admiration. And look at the fervour with which you desire them for yourselves! And the intensity with which you celebrate it in others! For most of you, your first love is the world, and the things of this world. These things fill your heart, preoccupy your minds, stimulate your conversations. You are always ready to think about them, you deal with them, you speak of them, you write about them, you feed on them, you live off them. The first class of sinners, and the most numerous, those who prefer the world to God: the *worldly sinners*.

But let us be fair: not all are characterised by this worldliness of thought. Some have a more tender soul, and more generous attachments. They do not give their heart to outward things; they offer it to family and friendship. The object of their first love is a father, or a mother, a husband or a wife, a child or a friend to whose happiness they devote their projects, their plans, all they do and all they have; for whom they appear to exist as much as and even more than for themselves, and without whom they would not care to live. I certainly would not want to confuse them with the worldly sinners because their feelings are as much superior to the latter's as the human soul is superior to the visible things. I would even agree to say that there is something touching and commendable behind this powerful affection. But after all, a beautiful idol is still an idol. Having set their supreme love on a higher category of created things, it is not less true that they still prefer the creature to the Creator. They direct to man the first love they owe to God; they sin. The second class of sinners, those who prefer the object of their affections to God: the *affectionate sinners*.

Finally, there may be some who do not direct their first love to the world or to the affections of the heart, but to what they consider to be their duty. They lead their lives according to their conscience, without seeking the will of God, and do all they can to become perfect, not so much in order to please God but in order to please themselves. Certainly, such people are superior to worldly sinners, and even to affectionate sinners, and I am pleased to see that the miserable human nature is still capable of such noble aspirations. But once we have said everything that can be said in their favour, with fairness and respect, we must still acknowledge that they are also in a condition of disorder. They are centred in themselves. They make a god of their conscience, and by doing so, they unconsciously have demoralised their conscience itself. For the conscience relates to God in the same way the moon relates to the sun: it can offer us some auxiliary light, but only to the extent that God remains our principal light. As soon as it does not declare any more "God wills" but "I will", conscience itself is rebellious and sins. And then it happens to him who gives it his first love what Jesus Christ has predicted: "If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" This is why these natural slaves of duty, these worshippers of conscience, may be virtuous men, but they are not saints; they may be free from vice, but not from sin. The third class of sinners, those who prefer their conscience to God: the *virtuous sinners*.

Subtract these three classes of sinners. Subtract the multitude of worldly sinners. Subtract the great number of affectionate sinners. Subtract the small family of virtuous sinners. What remains for you, my God? How many have kept this first love, which all owe you, for you? "None, not even one:" We all have abandoned the Creator for the creature, we have all gone astray, we are all sinners.

Dear brothers, if this discourse has found your soul receptive, if it has arisen some conviction, or at least some suspicion of the misery of your nature, let me urge you: do not stifle that impression. You will succeed in stunning yourself, if you want to. All you need to say is, when you leave this church: “This doctrine is exaggerated!”. Many around you will agree; you will be persuaded because you want to. You will succeed in setting aside the unwelcome truth I have shown to you – but it will be to your own hurt. It is not because you have set aside the truth that it will no longer be the truth. It is not because you have closed the Bible that it will no longer be the Word of God. It is not because you put your hand on your wound that it will be less serious and the only effect will be that you hide it from the physician, until it may have become fatal. Please accept to be troubled in your perilous security! May this first glimpse of your misery which we have offered you, make you search the Word of God for more authoritative statements. All I wanted to do is to refer you to this authority, knowing that all that arguments can do is prepare the hearts, but that God has reserved it to his Spirit and to his Word to *convince of sin*²⁰. There you will hear this voice which will make you say, on every page: “*This is the voice of a god, not of a man*”²¹, and it will reveal to you, little by little, the unspeakable disorder of your affections, and teach you to see yourselves as God sees you. You will discover that certain mistakes which you believe to be of little importance are indeed offences against God’s majesty that all your blood cannot atone for; that certain thoughts that you believe to be innocent are profoundly evil ; that certain actions that your conscience approves are in fact disguised sins. Then, finally, you will not contemplate yourself in your natural darkness but in the pure light of God, and not only will you not doubt that you are sinners, but you will have difficulties in believing that there was a time in your life when you ignored this fact.

Do not fear the severity with which the Gospel judges you. When the Gospel condemns your present state, which suits the world, it shows you that you were intended to develop – and that it can bring you back to – a greatness that the world cannot even imagine. It declares you to be so sinful because it wants you to become so holy. It finds you to be so poor because it has so much to offer you; and the condemnation which it pronounces on you is a token of the liberation which it has in reserve and which can be summarised by mentioning your name, o Jesus! that is, o Saviour!

Oh yes, great God! who humiliates in order to restore; who disturbs in order to calm; who troubles in order to strengthen, we accept the sentence of our condemnation. We accept it with repentance and pain, but also with thankfulness and with hope, as a token of our liberation. Please reveal all our disorders to us! Shed your full and living light on our souls, so that we may see ourselves as we are. May this sight provoke an outcry of surprise and anguish in this assembly, which rends the atmosphere of indifference that surrounds us, which reaches you and which moves your fatherly heart! so that, giving up all our self-righteousness, humbled, and only humbled, believing, and only believing, we may abandon ourselves unreservedly to your love, in order to leave the abyss of our misery and delve into the depths of your mercy!

Amen.

²⁰ Jn 16.8

²¹ Ac 12.22