

*TO BE A SINNER, HOW BAD MUST ONE BE?*

*By*

Dr. Gordon H. Clark  
Philosophy Dept. of University of Pennsylvania

*and*

Erling C. Olsen  
Director of the Mid-Week Forum

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“Mid-Week Forum Hour”

THIRTY-FIRST MID-WEEK FORUM

MR. OLSEN: It is a pleasure, Dr. Clark, to have you with us again on this program. I remember very well how you told us last Spring of the archaeological discoveries which, from time to time, are confirming the historicity of the Bible. I was particularly pleased with the discoveries that showed that Genesis was historical, for such a large proportion of the vicious, destructive criticism is based on the idea that the early books of the Bible are forgeries of later centuries. Are you going to tell us of more such discoveries tonight, Dr. Clark?

DR. CLARK: No, not tonight, Mr. Olsen. But first let me thank you for so kindly inviting me to participate with you again in this most excellent series of programs, for association with you and your other speakers these Wednesday evenings is a distinct pleasure.

MR. OLSEN: Just a moment. Dr. Clark, before you go any further. This noon, as I entered the restaurant where I was to have lunch, I met a couple of friends - both fine Christian gentlemen. One is a stock broker, and when I suggested that we were having you as our guest speaker this evening and mentioned your association with the University of Pennsylvania, he raised the question: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" As much as it does surprise some people, I assured him there are a few college professors left in this world who do believe the Bible.

DR. CLARK: Thank you. Mr. Olsen. However, as for the subject tonight. I do not wish to speak of archaeology, interesting as it is. For the Bible contains something more important than historical facts. The mere fact that Jesus Christ died, for example, the mere fact, I say, all by itself, is of very little importance. Christianity in its earliest years would never have received a favorable hearing if the apostles told the Gentile world merely that a Man was crucified in Jerusalem. Many men had been crucified; what makes Christ's death so important above all the others is the reason; the explanation which the Bible gives of the historical fact. Christ died is the fact: for our sins is the explanation.

MR. OLSEN: Yes, that is true, but you cannot prove the truth of these explanations, as you call them, the way you prove the bare, historical facts, can you? You cannot dig up some inscription, or some weapon, or artifact to prove this type of thing. Don't you have to argue that archaeology proves the facts true, and then infer that such a trustworthy document must have the explanation right also?

DR. CLARK: There is great force, Mr. Olsen, in showing that a document or a man tells the truth every time he or it can be checked up on, and then inferring that most probably he is truthful the rest of the time. Indeed that is what we do every day. But in addition to this type of inference, there are methods of showing that the Bible is true in matters other than historical fact. These methods perhaps are not as definite as an archaeological discovery. When a prejudiced opponent who is determined never to admit anything in favor of Christianity is confronted with an archaeological discovery he is silenced. But these arguments will presuppose an unprejudiced, sincere person with an average amount of practical wisdom and experience.

MR. OLSEN: Your remarks, Dr. Clark, open up possibilities I should like to investigate. Could you give reasons for accepting, say, the Biblical doctrine of sin? I do not mean that you should prove the existence of evil in the world; everyone admits that. But could you show that men are, as the Bible teaches, inherently evil: governed by an evil principle, called sin, and are in consequence incapable of any spiritual good? In other words, is the Bible true when it says that men are dead in trespasses and sins and are by nature, the children of wrath? This is rather

important, because one's views on this matter necessarily affect his idea of Christ and the whole matter of redemption.

DR. CLARK: Well, Mr. Olsen, since you have mentioned human depravity, let us suppose two boys are shooting dice. The dice which one boy uses, constantly come seven. The suspicion immediately arises, does it not, that those dice have an inherent tendency to come seven? It is no longer a matter of chance, but there is a cause inside the dice to account for the uniform result. Or, the illustration may be a family, whose members for several generations have all died from T. B. People then point to that family and say it has an inherent weakness, an hereditary tendency to tuberculosis. In exactly the same manner, then, when all men do wrong and no man is perfect, we must assume a uniform cause to explain the uniform result. When all men sin, it is no longer a matter of chance, but is to be explained, as the Bible claims, by an inherent weakness, an hereditary depravity.

This argument is strengthened by the fact that it is not necessary to wait for maturity before this evil tendency manifests itself. Children, as soon as they can tell right from wrong, disobey and do wrong. Even when the parents are Christians, and have trained their children well, and have set them good examples, even then, the children are sure to do evil. How, Mr. Olsen, how can this phenomenon be explained, except by an inherent tendency? And as the children grow older, the disposition to evil grows stronger; for while children are often thoughtless and selfish, it is in adults we find the most malice. Even the Christian adult, whom we believe to be restrained from evil by God's special grace, manifests such a powerful tendency to sin that Paul and many others say: "... What I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." If, then, there be no such evil in man; no such inherent and hereditary depravity, why, we ask, why are not all children perfect, and many adults as well?

MR. OLSEN: You have put your argument very forcefully, Dr. Clark, but I fear you have left yourself fatally vulnerable in one spot. Do you not see that if evil deeds prove an evil tendency, good deeds prove a good tendency. In fact, though there are crimes aplenty, men's good deeds far outnumber their evil deeds. Even the desperate criminal does not rob and kill every day, and in the case of ordinary folk, their good is obviously greater than their evil. The very fact that ordinary folk rebel at crime, and want laws against crime enforced, shows that by nature they are pretty good after all. In this case the Bible has presented a distorted picture of human nature, and is to that extent untrue - at least on the basis of your argument.

DR. CLARK: Mr. Olsen, I regret I am forced to say that your objection is an example of that clever type of sophistry which substitutes an irrelevant question for the main point.

MR. OLSEN: Woof, that hit the mark!

DR. CLARK: The real question is not the proportion of good deeds to evil - this can be discussed in a moment. The real question is: Does man tend in his heart to innocence and favor with God, or does human nature invariably lead him to sin? Now, innocence and favor with God depends on perfect obedience to His commands. A man either obeys or he does not. He is either perfect or a sinner: There is no middle term. For God, being God, cannot require less than His requirements. The proportion of good to evil is beside the point. Consider a ship crossing the Atlantic. It is a slow ship and would take two weeks if it completed its journey. But, unfortunately, this ship is destined to sink. Now then, although sure to sink; would you call it a good ship merely because it goes more than half the journey? It sails very well for ten days: it uses only one day to sink. The proportion, therefore, between its good and evil days is ten to one.

But, is it a good ship? Of course not, and human nature is likewise evil, regardless of proportions.

MR. OLSEN: Yes, you are clearly right about the ship, but doesn't the idea of proportion have some weight in human nature?

DR. CLARK: If you want to take proportion into account, Mr. Olsen, I am sure you would want to figure it correctly. To do so, we must remember that sin includes not only doing what God tells us not to do; it includes as well, not doing what God tells us to do. Now, I should like to substantiate the Biblical doctrine without recourse to the Bible itself, but it seems to me that even a non-Christian, if not prejudiced against all religion, would admit the validity of Christ's command: "... Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: ... and thy neighbour as thyself." But, let me ask, who does, and what proportion of the time does he do it? Obviously, nobody ever does. What then becomes of the idea that men's good deeds outnumber their evil deeds? Or, put it this way - If an acquaintance does us some slight injury, we can get terribly angry about it. Now, contrast this lively anger about a slight injury, with a good man's slight love for God Who in Himself is so excellent. It is out of all proportion. How can we explain this incongruity, except by a peculiar kink in our nature, an inherent tendency, an hereditary depravity?

MR. OLSEN: When you refer to man's relation to God, it seems to me that anyone who sincerely faces the situation will admit that we do not honor Him as we should; moreover, when you look at it that way, the argument about proportion is all in your favor. But still, I am not sure it proves your main point. You wished to prove an inherent, hereditary depravity. Now, cannot the evil actions of men be explained by the fact that they follow bad examples? The non-Christian may no longer assert that human nature is absolutely good; he may say it is good enough, but weak in spots, and succumbs to the powerful influence of bad example.

DR. CLARK: Mr. Olsen, there is no question about the existence of bad examples, nor is there any doubt as to their power. But, all through this argument it is the existence of bad examples we have been trying to explain. We have asked, why do men do wrong, and this last reply of yours is that some men do wrong because other men do wrong. This is no reply at all. The universality of bad examples is exactly what needs to be explained. The Bible explains it by asserting that human nature is perverted: the non-Christian cannot explain it simply by reasserting its existence.

And as for the powerful influence which these people say bad examples exert on men, how is this explained? If human nature were positively good, as some say, bad examples should have no influence at all: and if human nature is at worst, weak, then at least some men should escape this influence. The non-Christian who relies on bad example, to avoid admitting the doctrine of human depravity, argues that men are pretty good after all. Then why do not good examples have as much effect as bad examples. For instance, Noah was undoubtedly a good man and set his children a good example. Moreover, his children had experienced the flood, which both showed them the punishment due the wicked and at the same time removed the bad examples from their midst. Yet, Noah's family rapidly became wicked, in spite of these advantages. Or, if you think this is defending the Bible by appealing to it, substitute for Noah any good parent, and see if his constant good example is more, or less, powerful than the sporadic bad examples children meet on the street.

MR. OLSEN: Dr. Clark, how anyone could question the fact of sin, after the manner in which you have handled it this evening, is almost beyond me. I have argued with you, as I have observed other men have argued in refusing to receive the Bible's estimate of human nature, when it insists there lies in the breast of every man that inherent tendency to degeneration. But, before we close this discussion, may I suggest that you take a moment to give the Bible's answer to this matter of sin.

DR. CLARK: To give an answer in just a moment of time, I can best quote the words of Toplady's immortal hymn, "Rock of Ages."

I

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee:  
Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy wounded side which flowed,  
Be of sin-the double cure:  
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

II

"Not the labour of my hands.  
Can fulfill the law's demands.  
Could my zeal no respite know.  
Could my tears forever flow.  
All for sin could not atone,  
Thou must save and Thou alone.

III

"Nothing in my hand I bring.  
Simply to Thy Cross I cling.  
Naked, come to Thee for dress.  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace,  
Foul, I to the Fountain fly.  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die."