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THE SINS OF THE CHURCH

How Sin In and From Christian Churches
Can Harm Everyone and Everything

LESSON FIVE

SOURCES

Texts

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Art

Basil the Great. © IconoGraphics/Theologic Systems.

Clement of Alexandria. *Les Vrais Pourtraits et Vies Des Hommes Illustres Grecz, Latins et Payens*. Paris: 1584.

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“They Committed Abomination...”

This passage from Third Isaiah (Is 58), criticizing the abusive practices of political and religious leaders soon after Judah’s return from exile, can equally be applied to our time. Every day the news is filled with reports of pastors who prey on their members, both sexually and financially, as well as a wide array of other harmful attitudes and behaviors, and an ever-growing wave of people understandably leave Christianity in disgust.

Even sadder is that such scandals have existed throughout Christian history. John Wesley, quoting the fourth-century translator and historian Jerome, says that in becoming a state religion Christianity “lost as much of her virtue as it had gained of wealth and power.” Still earlier, the term *simony*—the buying and selling of positions in the church—comes from Simon Magus, who offered to buy spiritual power from the apostles Peter and John (they refused) (Acts 8:9–24). Abuse and corruption have been present in Christian churches from the very beginning of the movement...and even in ancient Israel itself.

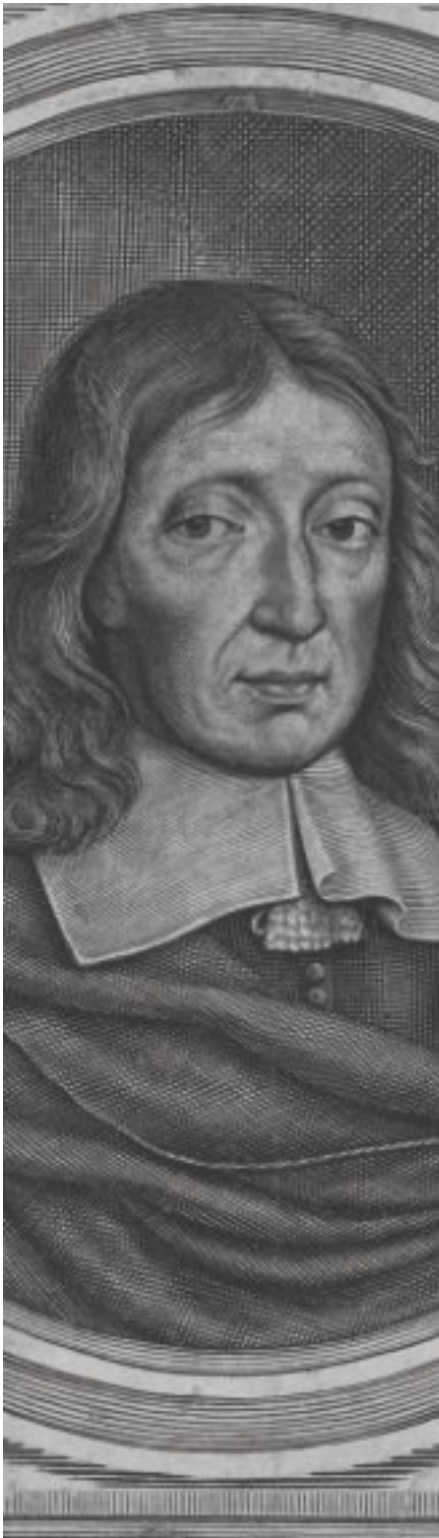
In this booklet we will encounter criticism through the centuries of rigidity, close-mindedness, hatefulness, judgmentalism and greed, and warnings about the damage these things inflict on us and the world around us. In acknowledging and repenting of the ways in which we as Christians pull away from God and betray our world, we open ourselves to the healing and transforming work of God we’ll discuss in our final lesson.

Scripture

The Bible warns against selfishness and abuse, instead encouraging Christians to be loving, supportive and inclusive.

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on; but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who, as that story goes of the *Ægyptian Typhon* with his conspirators how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hew'd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds...The light which we have gain'd, was giv'n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge...There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims. 'Tis their own pride and ignorance which causes the disturbing, who neither will hear with meeknes nor can convince; yet all must be suppress which is not found in their *Syntagma*. They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and permit not others to unite those dissever'd peeces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth. To be still searching what we know not by what we know, still closing up truth to truth as we find it (for all her body is *homogeneal*, and proportional!), this is the golden rule in *Theology* as well as in Arithmetick, and makes up the best harmony in a Church, not the forc't and outward union of cold and neutrall and inwardly divided minds.





Do Not Stop Searching for Truth

John Milton

(1644)

Milton, protesting a law giving Parliament power to censor the press, argues that searching for truth is the golden rule in theology.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more! Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow (Is 1:12-17, NRSVUE).

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Cor 13:1-3, NRSVUE).

My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality...Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the courts? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you (Jm 2:1, 5-7, NRSVUE)?

Beware Corrupt Leaders

Desiderius Erasmus
(1503)

In *The Manual of the Christian Knight*, the great humanist criticizes preachers and teachers whose hypocrisy, rigidity and hatred create a false religion.

The form of the world is due to the wisdom of the supreme Artificer; matter came to the Creator from without; and thus the world results from a double origin. It has received from outside its matter and its essence, and from God its form and figure... Here below arts are subsequent to matter—introduced into life by the indispensable need of them. Wool existed before weaving made it supply one of nature's imperfections. Wood existed before carpentering took possession of it, and transformed it each day to supply new wants, and made us see all the advantages derived from it, giving the oar to the sailor, the winnowing fan to the labourer, the lance to the soldier. But God, before all those things which now attract our notice existed, after casting about in His mind and determining to bring into being time which had no being, imagined the world such as it ought to be, and created matter in harmony with the form which He wished to give it. He assigned to the heavens the nature adapted for the heavens, and gave to the earth an essence in accordance with its form. He formed, as He wished, fire, air and water, and gave to each the essence which the object of its existence required. Finally, He welded all the diverse parts of the universe by links of indissoluble attachment and established between them so perfect a fellowship and harmony that the most distant, in spite of their distance, appeared united in one universal sympathy...

...for the proper and natural adornment of the earth is its completion: grain waving in the valleys—meadows green with grass and rich with many colored flowers—fertile glades and hill-tops shaded by forests.



Support the Harmony of the Universe

Basil the Great

(378)

Our place in the uni-
verse involves working
with creation, and not
exploiting it.

They begin, O good Lord, with what gravity, with how great authority, to correct other men's lives, after the rule of fools and indiscreet persons (as saith Terence), so that they think nothing well done but that they do themselves. But for all that when they be waxen old sires in their manner of living thou shalt see that as yet they savour or taste of Christ nothing at all: but to be beastly swimming in certain churlish vices in their living and pastime froward, and scarce can suffer and forbear their own self: in charity cold: in wrath fervent: in hate as tough as white leather: in their tongues venomous and full of poison: in exercising and putting forth of their malice conquerors and not able to be overcome: ready to strive for every little trifle: and so far from the perfection of Christ, that they be not once endued with these common virtues, which the very ethnics or heathen men have learned, either by reason given to them of nature, or by use of living, or by the precepts of philosophers. Thou shalt also see them in spiritual things clean without capacity, fierce that no man shall know how to entreat or handle them, full of strife and contention, greedy upon voluptuous pleasure, at the word of God ready to spue, kind to no man, misdeeming other men, flattering their own selves.



God Does Not Dwell With Unloving Christians

Cyprian of Carthage
(c. 250s)

Responding to a schism in the Carthaginian church in 251, Cyprian says Christians must be loving and forgiving.

Give to every one that asks you.” For truly such is God’s delight in giving. And this saying is above all divinity—not to wait to be asked, but to inquire oneself who deserves to receive kindness...How then does man give these things? For I will give not only to friends, but to the friends of friends. And who is it that is the friend of God? Do not you judge who is worthy or who is unworthy. For it is possible you may be mistaken in your opinion. As in the uncertainty of ignorance it is better to do good to the undeserving for the sake of the deserving, than by guarding against those that are less good to fail to meet in with the good. For though sparing, and aiming at testing, who will receive meritoriously or not, it is possible for you to neglect some that are loved by God; the penalty for which is the punishment of eternal fire. But by offering to all in turn that need, you must of necessity by all means find some one of those who have power with God to save. “Judge not, then, that you be not judged. With what measure you measure, it shall be measured to you again; good measure, pressed and shaken, and running over, shall be given to you.” Open your compassion to all who are enrolled the disciples of God; not looking contemptuously to personal appearance, nor carelessly disposed to any period of life. Nor if one appears penniless, or ragged, or ugly, or feeble, do you fret in soul at this and turn away. This form is cast around us from without, the occasion of our entrance into this world, that we may be able to enter into this common school. But within dwells the hidden Father, and His Son, who died for us and rose with us.



Do Not Judge When Giving

Clement of
Alexandria

(Late 2nd Century)

Clement, referring to 1 Corinthians 13, tells Christians to give generously and refrain from judging those in need.

Christ gave us peace; He bade us be in agreement, and of one mind. He charged the bonds of love and charity to be kept uncorrupted and inviolate; he cannot show himself a martyr who has not maintained brotherly love. Paul the apostle teaches this, and testifies, saying, "And though I have faith, so that I can remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profits me nothing. Charity is magnanimous; charity is kind; charity envies not; charity acts not vainly, is not puffed up, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil; loves all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Charity never fails." "Charity, says he, never fails." For she will ever be in the kingdom, she will endure for ever in the unity of a brotherhood linked to herself. Discord cannot attain to the kingdom of heaven; to the rewards of Christ, who said, "This is my commandment that you love one another even as I have loved you:" he cannot attain who has violated the love of Christ by faithless dissension. He who has not charity has not God. The word of the blessed Apostle John is: "God," says he, "is love; and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God dwells in him." They cannot dwell with God who would not be of one mind in God's Church.



Judging and Hypocrisy

John Chrysostom
(c. 390–397)

Preaching on Matthew 7, Chrysostom warns against hypocritically judging others.



Why do you behold the mote that is in your brother's eye?" Yea, for many now do this; if they see but a monk wearing an unnecessary garment, they produce against him the law of our Lord, while they themselves are extorting without end, and defrauding men every day. If they see him but partaking rather largely of food, they become bitter accusers, while they themselves are daily drinking to excess and surfeiting; not knowing, that besides their own sins, they do hereby gather up for themselves a greater flame, and deprive themselves of every plea. For on this point, that your own doings must be strictly inquired into, you yourself hast first made the law, by thus sentencing those of your neighbor. Account it not then to be a grievous thing, if you are also yourself to undergo the same kind of trial.

"Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of your own eye." Here His will is to signify the great wrath, which He has against them that do such things. For so, wheresoever He would indicate that the sin is great, and the punishment and wrath in store for it grievous, He begins with a reproach. As then unto him that was exacting the hundred pence, He said in His deep displeasure, "Thou wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt;" even so here also, "Thou hypocrite." For not of protecting care comes such a judgment, but of ill will to man; and while a man puts forward a mask of benevolence, he is doing a work of the utmost wickedness, causing reproaches without ground, and accusations, to cleave unto his neighbors, and usurping a teacher's rank, when he is not worthy to be so much as a disciple. On account of this He called him "hypocrite." For thou, who in other men's doings art so bitter, as to see even the little things; how have you become so remiss in your own, as that even the great things are hurried over by you?