

## Reading 10

Peter Abaelard\*

From *Ethics, or Know Thyself*

[*What Sin And Vice Consist In*]<sup>1</sup>

[*Morals concerns vices and virtues*]

We consider morals to be the vices or virtues of the mind which make us prone to bad or good works. However, there are vices or goods not only of the mind but also of the body, such as bodily weakness or the fortitude which we call strength, sluggishness or swiftness, limpness or being upright, blindness or vision. Hence to distinguish these, when we said "vices" we added "of the mind." Now these vices, that is of the mind, are contrary to the virtues, as injustice is to justice, sloth to constancy, intemperance to temperance.

[*Of vice of the mind which concerns morals*]

There are also, however, some vices or good things of the mind which are separate from morals and do not make human life worthy of blame or praise, such as dullness of mind or quickness of thinking, forgetfulness or a good memory, ignorance or learning. Since all these befall the wicked and the good alike, they do not in fact belong to the composition of morality nor do they make life base or honourable. Hence rightly when above we presented "vices of the mind" we added, in order to exclude such things, "which make us prone to bad works," that is, incline the will to something which is not

\* *Peter Abelard's Ethics*, trans. D. E. Luscombe, Clarendon, Oxford, 1971, English translation, odd numbered pages, pp. 3-41.

<sup>1</sup> Abaelard's conception of sin and its relation to such things as lust, evil deeds and vices is usefully contrasted with Augustine's account in Reading 10.

at all fitting to be done or to be forsaken.

[*The difference between sin and vice inclining to evil* ]

Mental vice of this kind is not, however, the same as sin nor is sin the same as a bad action. For example, to be irascible, that is, prone or ready for the emotion of anger, is a vice and inclines the mind impetuously or unreasonably to do something which is not at all suitable. However, this vice is in the soul, so that in fact it is ready to be angry even when it is not moved to anger, just as the limpness for which a person is said to be lame is in him even when he is not walking limply, because the vice is present even though the action is not. So too nature itself or the constitution of the body makes many prone to lechery just as it does to anger, yet they do not sin in this because that is how they are, but through this they have the material for a struggle so that triumphing over themselves through the virtue of temperance they may obtain a crown. As Solomon said: "The patient person is better than the valiant: and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh cities."<sup>2</sup> For religion does not consider it base to be beaten by humans but by vice. The former happens in fact to good people too; in the latter we turn away from good things. The Apostle commends this victory to us, saying: "He will not be crowned except he strive lawfully."<sup>3</sup> Strive, I say, in resisting vices rather than people, lest they entice us into wrongful consent; even if people cease, vices do not cease to assault us, and their attack is so much more dangerous for being more constant and victory is so much more brilliant for being more difficult. But however much people prevail over us, they bring no turpitude into our lives unless after the manner of the vices and having, as it were, converted us to vices they submit us to a shameful consent. When they command our bodies, so long as the mind remains free, true freedom is not in peril and we do not fall into an indecent subjection. For it is shameful to serve vice, not people; subjection to vices soils the soul, bodily servitude does not. For whatever is common to good and bad people alike is of no importance to virtue or vice.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 16:32.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy 2:5.

*[What is mental vice and what is properly said to be sin]*

And so vice is that by which we are made prone to sin, that is, are inclined to consent to what is not fitting so that we either do it or forsake it. Now this consent we properly call sin, that is, the fault of the soul by which it earns damnation or is made guilty before God. For what is that consent unless it is contempt of God and an offence against him? For God cannot be offended against through harm but through contempt. He indeed is that supreme power who is not impaired by any harm but who avenges contempt of himself. And so our sin is contempt of the Creator and to sin is to hold the Creator in contempt, that is, to do by no means on his account what we believe we ought to do for him, or not to forsake on his account what we believe we ought to forsake. So, by defining sin negatively, that is to say, as not doing or not forsaking what is fitting, we plainly show there is no substance of sin; it subsists as not being rather than being, just as if in defining darkness we say it is the absence of light where light used to be.

But perhaps you will say that the will to do a bad deed is also sin and makes us guilty before God, even as the will to do a good deed makes us just, so that just as virtue consists in a good will, so sin consists in a bad will and not only in not being but also, and like virtue, in being. For just as we please God by willing to do what we believe to please him, so we displease him by willing to do what we believe to displease him and we seem to offend him or hold him in contempt. But I say that if we consider this more carefully, our conclusion should be very different from what it seems. For since we sometimes sin without any bad will and since that bad will when restrained but not extinguished procures a prize for those who resist it and brings the material for a struggle and a crown of glory,<sup>4</sup> it ought not to be called sin so much as a weakness which is now necessary. For consider: there is an innocent man whose cruel lord is so burning with rage against him that with a naked sword he chases him for his life. For long that man flees and as far as he can he avoids his own murder; in the end and unwillingly he is forced to kill him lest he be killed by him. Tell me, whoever you are, what bad will he had in doing this. If he wanted to escape death, he wanted to save his

<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 5:4.

own life. But surely this was not a bad will? You say: not this, I think, but the will he had to kill the lord who was chasing him. I reply: that is well and cleverly said if you can show a will in what you claim. But, as has already been said, he did this unwillingly and under compulsion; as far as he could- he deferred injury to life; he was also aware that by this killing he would put his own life in danger. So how did he do willingly what he committed with danger to his own life as well?

If you reply that that too was done out of will, since it is agreed that he was led to this out of a will to avoid death, not to kill his lord, we do not confute that at all but, as has already been said, that will is in no way to be derided as bad through which he, as you say, wanted to evade death, not to kill the lord. And yet although he was constrained by fear of death, he did do wrong in consenting to an unjust killing which he should have undergone rather than have inflicted. In fact he took the sword himself; no power had handed it to him. Whence Truth says: "All that take the sword shall perish by the sword." "He who takes the sword," he says, by presumption, not he to whom it has been granted for the purpose of administering vengeance, "shall perish by the sword," that is, he incurs by this rashness damnation and the killing of his own soul. And so he wanted, as has been said, to avoid death, not to kill the lord. But because he consented to a killing to which he ought not to have consented, this unjust consent of his which preceded the killing was a sin.

If perhaps someone says that he wanted to kill his lord for the sake of avoiding death, he cannot therefore simply infer that he wanted to kill him. For example, if I were to say to someone: "I want you to have my cap for this reason, that you give me five solidi" or "I gladly want it to become yours at that price," I do not therefore concede that I want it to be yours. Moreover if anyone held in prison wants to put his son there in his place so that he may seek his own ransom, surely we do not therefore simply concede that he wants to put his own son in prison - something which he is driven to endure with floods of tears and with many sighs? At any rate such a will which consists in great grief of mind is not, I would say, to be called will but rather suffering. That he wills this on account of that is the equivalent of saying that he endures what he does not will on account of the other things which he desires. Thus the sick man is said to want a cauterization or an operation in order to be healed and martyrs to suffer in order to

come to Christ or Christ himself in order that we may be saved by his suffering. Yet we are not therefore compelled to concede simply that they want this. On no occasion can there be suffering except where something is done against will nor does anyone suffer where he fulfils his will and gains delight in doing so. Certainly the Apostle who says :<sup>5</sup> "I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ," that is, to die for the purpose of coming to him, himself observes elsewhere: "We would not be unclothed but rather clothed, that that which is mortal may be swallowed up by life." The blessed Augustine also remembers this thought which the Lord expressed when he said to Peter:<sup>6</sup>, "Thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee and lead thee whither thou wouldest not." In the weakness which he had assumed of human nature the Lord also said to the Father:<sup>7</sup> "If it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt." His soul naturally dreaded the great suffering of death and what he knew to be painful could not be voluntary for him. Although it is written of him elsewhere:<sup>8</sup> "He was offered because it was his own will," this is either to be understood according to the nature of the divinity in whose will it was that the assumed man should suffer, or 'it was his will' means 'it was his plan' as it does when the Psalmist says:<sup>9</sup> "He hath done all things whatsoever he would." So it is evident that sometimes sin is committed entirely without bad will; it is therefore clear from this that what is sin is not to be called will.

Certainly, you will say, that is so where we sin under constraint, but not where we do so willingly, as for instance if we want to commit something which we know should not be done by us at all. There indeed that bad will and the sin seem to be the same. For example, someone sees a woman and falls into concupiscence and his mind is affected by the pleasure of the flesh, so that he is incited to the baseness of sexual intercourse. Therefore, you say, what else is this will and base desire than sin?

I answer that if that will is restrained by the virtue of temperance but is not extinguished, it remains for a fight and persists in struggling and does not give up even

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 1:23

<sup>6</sup> John 21:18.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 26:39.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 53:7.

<sup>9</sup> Psalms 113:3.

when overcome. For where is the fight if the material for fighting is lacking? Or whence comes the great reward if what we endure is not hard? When the struggle is over, it no longer remains to fight but to receive the reward. Here, however, we strive by fighting, so that elsewhere as winners of the struggle we may receive a crown. But in order that there be a fight, it is evident that there must be an enemy who resists, not one who actually gives up. This surely is our bad will, over which we triumph when we subdue it to the divine will, but we do not really extinguish it, so that we always have it to fight against.

Indeed, what great thing do we for God if we support nothing against our will but rather discharge what we will? And who has thanks for us if in what we say we are doing for him we fulfil our own will? But what, you will say, do we gain before God out of what we do whether willingly or unwillingly? I reply: nothing, certainly, since he considers the mind rather than the action when it comes to a reward, and an action adds nothing to merit whether it proceeds from a good or a bad will, as we shall later show. But when we put his will before our own so as to follow his rather than ours, we obtain great merit with him according to that perfectness of Truth:<sup>10</sup> "I came not to do my own will but the will of him that sent me." Exhorting us to this he says:<sup>11</sup> "If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother, yea and his own life also, he is not worthy of me," that is, if he does not renounce their suggestions or his own will and subject himself completely to my precepts. If therefore we are ordered to hate but not to destroy a father, so too our will; we are not to follow it but neither are we to destroy it completely. For he who said:<sup>12</sup> "Go not after thy lusts: but turn away from thy own will," taught us not to fulfil our lusts, but not to be entirely without them. The former is vicious, but the latter is not possible for our weakness. So sin is not lusting for a woman but consenting to lust; the consent of the will is damnable, but not the will for intercourse.

What we have said with respect to lechery, let us consider with respect also to gluttony. Someone passes through another man's garden and seeing delightful fruits he

<sup>10</sup> John 6:98.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 14:26.

<sup>12</sup> Ecclesiastes 18:30.

falls into longing for them; however, he does not consent to his longing so as to remove something from there by theft or robbery, even though his mind has been incited to great desire by the pleasure of food. But where desire is, there undoubtedly is will. And so he desires to eat of that fruit in which he is certain there is pleasure. In fact by the very nature of his infirmity he is compelled to desire what he is not allowed to take without the knowledge or the permission of the lord. He represses his desire; he does not extinguish it, but because he is not drawn to consent, he does not incur sin.

Now where does this lead us? It shows, in short, that in such things also the will itself or the desire to do what is unlawful is by no means to be called sin, but rather, as we have stated, the consent itself. The time when we consent to what is unlawful is in fact when we in no way draw back from its accomplishment and are inwardly ready, if given the chance, to do it. Anyone who is found in this disposition incurs the fullness of guilt; the addition of the performance of the deed adds nothing to increase the sin. On the contrary, before God the person who to the extent of his power endeavours to achieve this is as guilty as the person who as far as he is able does achieve it - just as if, so the blessed Augustine reminds us, he too had also been caught in the act.

Now, although will is not sin and, as we have said, we sometimes commit sins unwillingly, yet some say that every sin is voluntary, and they find a certain difference between sin and will, since will is said to be one thing and what is voluntary is said to be something different, that is, will is one thing but what is committed through the will is another. But if we call sin what we have previously said is properly called sin, that is, contempt of God or consent to that which we believe should be forsaken on God's account, how do we say that sin is voluntary, that is, our own willing to offer the contempt of God which is sin or to become worse or to be made worthy of damnation? For although we may want to do that which we know ought to be punished or for which we may deserve to be punished, we do not, however, want to be punished. Obviously we are wicked in this, that we want to do what is wicked, yet we do not want to submit to the fairness of a just punishment. The punishment which is just is displeasing; the action which is unjust is pleasing. Moreover, it often happens that when we want to lie with a woman whom we know to be married and whose looks have enticed us, yet we by no means want to be adulterous with her - we would prefer that

she was unmarried. There are, on the other hand, many men who for their own renown desire the wives of the mighty more keenly because they are married to such men than they would if they were unmarried; they want to commit adultery rather than fornication, that is, to transgress by more rather than by less. There are people who are wholly ashamed to be drawn into consent to lust or into a bad will and are forced out of the weakness of the flesh to want what they by no means want to want. Therefore I certainly do not see how this consent which we do not want to have may be called voluntary with the result, as has been said, that we should, according to some, call every sin voluntary, unless we understand voluntary to exclude the element of necessity, since clearly no sin is unavoidable, or unless we call voluntary that which proceeds from will. For even if he who killed his lord under constraint did not have the will to kill, yet he did it out of will, since in fact he wanted to avoid or to defer death.

There are people who may be considerably disturbed when they hear us say that the doing of sin adds nothing to guilt or to damnation before God. They object that in the action of sin a certain pleasure may follow which increases the sin, as in sexual intercourse, or in that eating which we mentioned. They would not in fact say this absurdly if they were to prove that carnal pleasure of this sort is sin and that such a thing cannot be committed except by sinning. If they really admit this, it is definitely not lawful for anyone to have this fleshly Pleasure. Therefore, spouses are not immune from sin when they unite in this carnal pleasure allowed to them, nor is he who enjoys the pleasurable consumption of his own fruit. Also, all invalids would be at fault who relish sweeter foods to refresh themselves and to recover from illness; they certainly do not take these without pleasure or if they did so, they would not benefit. And lastly the Lord, the creator of foods as well as of bodies, would not be beyond fault if, he put into them such flavours as would necessarily compel to sin those who eat them with pleasure. For how would he produce such things for our eating or allow their eating if it were impossible for us to eat them without sin? And how can sin be said to be committed in that which is allowed? For what were at one time unlawful and prohibited acts, if they are later allowed and thus become lawful, are now committed wholly without sin, for example the eating of swine's flesh and many other things formerly forbidden to Jews but now permitted to us. And so when we see Jews



converted to Christ also freely eating foods of this sort which the Law had forbidden, how do we defend them from blame if not by our claim that this is now granted to them by God? So if in such eating once forbidden but now conceded to them the concession itself excuses sin and removes the contempt of God, who will say that anyone sins in that which a divine concession has made lawful to him? If therefore to lie with a wife or even to eat delicious food has been allowed to us since the first day of our creation which was lived in Paradise without sin, who will accuse us of sin in this if we do not exceed the limit of the concession?

Yet again they say that marital intercourse and the eating of delicious food are in fact conceded in such a way that the pleasure itself is not conceded; they should be performed wholly without pleasure. But assuredly if this is so, they are allowed to be done in a way in which they cannot be done at all and it was an unreasonable permission which allowed them to be done in a way in which it is certain that they cannot be done. Besides, by what reason did the law once prescribe marriage so that everyone should leave his seed in Israel or the Apostle urge spouses to pay their debt to one another,<sup>13</sup> if these cannot be done at all without sin? In what way does he speak here of debt where now necessarily there is sin? Or how is one to be compelled to do what in sinning will offend God? It is clear, I think, from all this that no natural pleasure of the flesh should be imputed to sin nor should it be considered a fault for us to have pleasure in something in which when it has happened the feeling of pleasure is unavoidable. For example, if someone compels a religious who is bound in chains to lie between women and if he is brought to pleasure, not to consent, by the softness of the bed and through the contact of the women beside him, who may presume to call this pleasure, made necessary by nature, a fault?

But if you object that, as it seems to some, carnal pleasure in legitimate intercourse is also to be considered a sin, since David says:<sup>14</sup> "For, behold, I was conceived in iniquities," and since the Apostle when he said:<sup>15</sup> "Return together again, lest Satan

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:6.

<sup>14</sup> Psalms 1:7.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:5.

tempt you for your incontinency" adds:<sup>16</sup> "But I speak this by indulgence, not by commandment," the pressure upon us to say that this carnal pleasure itself is sin seems to come from authority rather than from reason. For it is known that David had been conceived not in fornication but in matrimony and, as they say, indulgence, that is, pardon, does not occur where fault is wholly absent. In my view, however, David's statement that he had been conceived in iniquities or in sins - he did not add whose they were - represents the general curse of original sin by which everyone is subjected to damnation because of the fault of their parents, in accordance with what is written elsewhere: "No one is free from uncleanness nor is the one-day-old child if he is alive upon earth." For as the blessed Jerome has mentioned, and as manifest reason holds, as long as the soul exists in the age of infancy it lacks sin. If therefore it is clean from sin, how is it soiled with the uncleanness of sin unless the former is to be understood with respect to fault, the latter with respect to punishment? One who does not yet see through reason what he should do has no fault arising from contempt of God, but he is not free of the stain of earlier parents and thence he already contracts punishment, but not fault, and he sustains in his punishment what they committed in their fault. So when David says he was conceived in iniquities or in sins, he saw that he was subjected to a general sentence of damnation by virtue of the fault of his own parents and he referred these crimes back less to his immediate parents than to earlier ones.

However, what the Apostle calls indulgence is not to be interpreted, as they want, as if he had meant this indulgence of permission to be the pardon of a sin. In fact what he says, "by indulgence, not by commandment," means "by, permission, not by compulsion." For if spouses want and have decided with equal consent, they can abstain altogether from carnal relations and they should not be driven into them by authority. But if they have not taken this decision, they have the indulgence, that is, the permission to turn aside from the more perfect life into the practice of a laxer life. In this place, therefore, the Apostle did not mean by indulgence pardon for sin but permission for a laxer life for the sake of avoiding fornication, so that a lower life might prevent a magnitude of sin and one might be smaller in merits lest one become greater in sins.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 7:6.

Now we have mentioned this lest anyone, wishing perhaps every carnal pleasure to be sin, should say that sin itself is increased by action when one carries the consent given by the mind into the commission of an act and is polluted not only by shameful consent but also by the blemishes of an action, as if an exterior and corporeal act could contaminate the soul. The doing of deeds has no bearing upon an increase of sin and nothing pollutes the soul except what is of the soul, that is, the consent which alone we have called sin, not the will which precedes it nor the doing of the deed which follows. For even though we will or do what is not fitting, we do not therefore sin, since these things often happen without sin, just as conversely consent occurs without them. This we have already partly shown for the will which lacks consent, in the case of the man who fell into longing for a woman he had seen or for fruit which did not belong to him and yet is not brought to consent, and for evil consent without evil will, in the case of him who killed his lord unwillingly.

Moreover, I think everyone knows how often things that should not be done are done without sin, when, that is, they are committed under coercion or through ignorance, as for example if a woman is forced to lie with another woman's husband or if a man who has been tricked in some way or other sleeps with a woman whom he thought to be his wife or kills in error a man whom he believed he, as a judge, should kill. And so it is not a sin to lust after another's wife or to lie with her but rather to consent to this lust or action. This consent to covetousness the Law calls covetousness when it says:<sup>17</sup> "Thou shall not covet." In fact, what had to be forbidden was not the coveting of what we cannot avoid or in which, as has been said, we do not sin, but the assenting to that. What the Lord said has similarly to be understood:<sup>18</sup> "Whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her," that is, whosoever shall look in such a way as to fall into consent to lust, "hath already committed adultery in his heart," although he has not committed the deed of adultery, that is, he is already guilty of sin although he is still without its outcome.

If we carefully consider also all the occasions where actions seem to come under a

<sup>17</sup> Deuteronomy 5:21

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 5:28

commandment or a prohibition, these must be taken to refer to the will or to consent to actions rather than to the actions themselves, otherwise nothing relating to merit would be put under a commandment and what is less within our power is less worthy of being commanded. There are in fact many things by which we are restrained from action yet we always have dominion over our will and consent. Behold, the Lord says:<sup>19</sup> "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not bear false witness." If, following the sound of the words, we take these to refer only to the deed, guilt is by no means forbidden nor is fault thereby, but the action of a fault is prohibited. Truly, it is not a sin to kill a man nor to lie with another's wife; these sometimes can be committed without sin. If a prohibition of this kind is understood, according to the sound of the words, to refer to the deed, he who wants to bear false witness or even consents to speaking it, as long as he does not speak it, whatever the reason for his silence, does not become guilty according to the Law. For it was not said that we should not want to bear false witness or that we should not consent to speaking it, but only that we should not speak it. The Law forbids us to marry our sisters or to have sexual intercourse with them, but there is no one who can keep this ordinance, since one is often unable to recognize one's sisters - no one, I mean, if the prohibition refers to the act rather than to consent. And so when it happens that someone through ignorance marries his sister, he is not surely the transgressor of an ordinance because he does what the Law has forbidden him to do? He is not a transgressor, you will say, because in acting ignorantly he did not consent to transgression. Therefore, just as he is not to be called a transgressor who does what is forbidden, but he who consents to that which it is evident has been prohibited, so the prohibition is not to be applied to the deed but to the consent, so that when it is said "do not do this or that" the meaning is "do not consent to do this or that," just as if it were said "do not venture this knowingly."

The blessed Augustine carefully considered this and reduced every commandment or prohibition to charity or cupidity rather than to deeds, saying: "The Law ordains nothing except charity and prohibits nothing except cupidity."<sup>20</sup> Hence also the Apostle

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 5:17,20.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *de Doctrina Christiana*, iii, 10, n. 15.

says<sup>21</sup> "All the Law is fulfilled in one word: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." And again:<sup>22</sup> "Love is the fulfilling of the Law." It does not in fact matter to merit whether you give alms to the needy; charity may make you ready to give and the will may be there when the opportunity is missing and you no longer remain able to do so, -whatever the cause preventing you.

It is indeed obvious that works which it is or is not at all fitting to do may be performed as much by good as by bad men who are 'separated by their intention alone. In fact, as the same Doctor has observed, in the same deed in which we see God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ we also see Judas the betrayer. The giving up of the Son was certainly done by God the Father; and it was done by the Son and it was done by that betrayer, since both the Father delivered up the Son and the Son delivered up himself, as the Apostle observed, and Judas delivered up the Master. So the betrayer did what God also did, but surely he did not do it well? For although what was done was good, it certainly was not well done nor should it have benefited him. For God thinks not of what is done but in what mind it may be done, and the merit or glory of the doer lies in the intention, not in the deed. In fact the same thing is often done by different people, justly by one and wickedly by another, as for example if two men hang a convict, that one out of zeal for justice, this one out of a hatred arising from an old enmity, and although it is the same act of hanging and although they certainly do what it is good to do and what justice requires, yet, through the diversity of their intention, the same thing is done by diverse men, by one badly, by the other well.

Who, finally, may be unaware that the devil himself does nothing except what he is allowed by God to do, when either he punishes a wicked person for his faults or is allowed to strike a just person in order to purge him or to provide an example of patience? But because on the prompting of his own wickedness he does what, God allows him to do, so his power is said to be good or even just, while his will is always unjust. For he receives the former from God; the latter he holds of himself.

Moreover, in respect of works, who among the elect can be compared with

<sup>21</sup> Galatians 5:14.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 13:10.

hypocrites? Who endures or does out of love of God as much as they do out of greed for human praise? Who lastly may not know that what God forbids to be done is sometimes rightly performed or should be done, just as conversely he sometimes ordains some things which, however, it is not at all fitting to do? For consider, we know of some miracles of his that when by them he healed illnesses, he forbade that they should be revealed, as an example, that is, of humility, lest someone who had a similar grace granted to him should perhaps seek prestige. None the less they who had received those benefits did not stop publicizing them in honour, of course, of him who had both worked them and had prohibited their revelation. Of such it was written:<sup>23</sup> "The more he charged them that they should not tell, so much the more did they publish it," etc. Surely you will not judge such men guilty of transgression for acting contrary to the command which they had received and for even doing this knowingly? What will excuse them from transgression if not the fact that they did nothing through contempt of him who commanded; they decided to do this in honour of him. Tell me, I ask you, if Christ ordained what should not have been ordained or if they repudiated what should have been kept? What was good to be commanded was not good to be done. You at any rate will reproach the Lord in the case of Abraham, whom at first he commanded to sacrifice his son and later checked from doing so. Surely God did not command well a deed which it was not good to do? For if it was good, how was it later forbidden? If, moreover, the same thing was both good to be commanded and good to be prohibited — for God allows nothing to be done without reasonable cause nor yet consents to do it — you see that the intention of the command alone, not the execution of the deed, excuses God, since he did well to command what is not a good thing to be done. For God did not urge or command this to be done in order that Abraham should sacrifice his son but in order that out of this his obedience and the constancy of his faith or love for him should be very greatly tested and remain to us as an example. And this indeed the Lord himself subsequently avowed openly when he said:<sup>24</sup> "Now I know that thou fearest the Lord," as if he were saying expressly: the reason why I instructed you to do what you showed you were ready to do was so that I should make known to others what I myself had known of you before the ages. This intention of God was right in an act

<sup>23</sup> Mark 7:36.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:13.

which was not right, and similarly, in the things which we mentioned, his prohibition was right which prohibited for this reason, not so that the prohibition should be upheld but so that examples might be given to us weaklings of avoiding vainglory. And so God enjoined what was not good to be done, just as conversely he prohibited what was good to be done; and just as the intention excuses him in the one case, so too in this case it excuses those who have not fulfilled the command in practice. They knew indeed that he had not made the command on this account, that it should be observed, but so that the example that has been mentioned should be set forth. While not violating the will of him who commands, they did not offer contempt to him to whose will they understood that they were not opposed. If therefore we think of deeds rather than the intention, we shall not only see that sometimes there is a will to do something against God's commandment but also that it is done and knowingly so without any guilt of sin. So, when the intention of him to whom the command is made does not differ from the will of the commander, one should not speak of an evil will or an evil action simply because God's commandment is not kept in a deed. Just as intention excuses the commander who commands to be done what is however not at all fitting to be done, so also the intention of charity excuses him to whom the command is made.

To bring the above together in a brief conclusion, there are four things which we have put forward in order carefully to distinguish them from each other, namely the vice of the mind which makes us prone to sinning and then the sin itself which we fixed in consent to evil or contempt of God, next the will for evil, and [finally] the doing of evil.

Just as, indeed, to will and to fulfil the will are not the same, so to sin and to perform the sin are not the same. We should understand the former to relate to the consent of the mind by which we sin, the latter to the performance of the action when we fulfil in a deed what we have previously consented to. When we say that sin or temptation occurs in three ways, namely in suggestion, pleasure, and consent, it should be understood in this sense, that we are often led through these three to the doing of sin. This was the case with our first parents. Persuasion by the devil came first, when he promised immortality for tasting the forbidden tree. Pleasure followed, when the woman, seeing the beautiful fruit and understanding it to be sweet to eat, was seized

with what she believed would be the pleasure of the food and kindled a longing for it. Since she ought to have checked her longing in order to keep the command, in consenting she was drawn into sin. And although she ought to have corrected the sin through repentance in order to deserve pardon, she finally completed it in deed.

And so she proceeded to carry through the sin in three stages. Likewise we also frequently arrive by these same steps not at sinning but at the carrying through of sin, namely by suggestion, that is, by the encouragement of someone who incites us externally to do something which is not fitting. And if we know that doing this is pleasurable, even before the deed our mind is seized with the pleasure of the deed itself and in the very thought we are tempted through pleasure. When in fact we assent to this pleasure through consent, we sin. By these three we come at last to the execution of the sin.

There are those who would like carnal suggestion to be included in the term suggestion, even if there is no person making a suggestion, for instance, if someone on seeing a woman falls into lust for her. But this suggestion, it seems, should really be called nothing other than pleasure. Indeed this pleasure, which has become almost necessary, and others of its kind which, we observed above, are not sin, are called by the Apostle human temptation when he says:<sup>25</sup> "Let no temptation take hold on you, but such as is human. And God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able; but will also make issue with temptation, that you may be able to bear it." Now, temptation is generally said to be any inclination of the mind, whether a will or consent, to do something which is not fitting. But human temptation, such as carnal concupiscence or the desire for delicious food, is said to be that without which human infirmity can now scarcely or can never survive. He asked to be set free from these who said:<sup>26</sup> "Deliver me from my necessities, O Lord," that is, from these lustful temptations which have now become almost natural and necessary, lest they lead to consent; alternatively, let me really be free of them at the end of this life full of temptations. So, what the Apostle says, "Let no temptation take hold on you, but such

<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:13.

<sup>26</sup> Psalm 24:17.



as is human," is as an opinion very like saying: "If the mind is inclined by pleasure which is, as we have said, human temptation, let it not lead as far as consent, in which sin consists." He says, as if someone were asking by what virtue of ours we can resist those lusts: "God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted," that is as if to say: "Rather than rely on ourselves we should trust in him who, promising help for us, is true in all his promises," that is, he is faithful, so in everything faith should clearly be put in him. Then indeed he does not allow us to be tempted above that which we are able, since he moderates this human temptation with his mercy, so that it does not press us into sin by more than we are able to bear in resisting it. However, he then in addition turns this very temptation to our advantage when he trains us by it, so that eventually when it occurs it can bother us less and so that we should now have less fear of the attack of an enemy over whom we have already triumphed and whom we know how to manage. Every struggle which we have not hitherto experienced is borne more severely and is dreaded more. But when it comes regularly to the victorious, its power and its dread alike vanish.

*[Of the suggestions of demons]*

Suggestions are made not only by men but also by demons, because they too sometimes incite us to sin, less by words than by deeds. By their subtle talent as much as by their long experience they are certainly experts in the nature of things and for this are called demons, that is, knowledgeable; they know the natural powers of things by which human weakness may easily be stirred to lust or to other impulses. Sometimes by God's leave they send some into languor and then provide the remedies for those who beseech them, and when they cease to afflict they are often thought to cure. In Egypt they were in the end allowed through the magicians to do many things marvellously against Moses, in reality by the natural power of things which they knew. They should not be called creators of what they have made so much as compositors; for instance, if anyone, following the example in Virgil, having pounded the flesh of a bull should by his labour bring about from this the making of bees, he should be called not so much a creator of bees as a preparer of nature. And so, by this expertise which they have with the natures of things, demons provoke us to lust or to other passions of the mind, bringing them by every possible stratagem while we are unawares, whether setting

them in taste or in bed or placing them by no matter what means inside or outside us. There are certainly many forces in herbs or seeds or in the natures of trees as much as of stones which are suitable for provoking or soothing our minds; those who carefully learn to know them can easily do this.

[*Why works of sin are punished rather than sin itself*]

There are also those who are considerably troubled, when they hear us say that a work of sin is not properly called sin or that it does not add anything to increase a sin, as to why a heavier satisfaction is imposed on penitents for doing a deed than for being guilty of a fault. To these I answer first: why do they not chiefly wonder about the fact that sometimes a large penalty of satisfaction is instituted where no fault has occurred? And why ought we sometimes to punish those whom we know to be innocent? For, consider, some poor woman has a suckling baby and lacks clothing adequate to provide for the little one in the cradle and for herself. And so, stirred by pity for the baby she takes him to herself to keep him warm with her own rags, and finally in her weakness overcome by the force of nature, she unavoidably smothers the one she clasps with the utmost love. "Have charity," says Augustine, "and do whatever you wish."<sup>27</sup> However, when she comes before the bishop for satisfaction, a heavy punishment is imposed upon her, not for the fault which she committed but so that subsequently she or other women should be rendered more cautious in providing for such things. Occasionally also it happens that someone is accused by his enemies before a judge, and that a certain imputation is made about him by which the judge knows he is innocent. However, because they insist and demand a hearing at a trial, they commence the suit on the appointed day, produce witnesses, albeit false ones, to convict him whom they accuse. Since the judge can in no way rebut these witnesses with plain reasons, he is compelled by law to recognize them and, having accepted their proof, he punishes the innocent man. Thus he ought to punish him who ought not to be punished. He ought at any rate because he transacts justly according to law what that other man has not deserved.

It is clear from these examples that sometimes a punishment is reasonably inflicted on a person in whom no fault went before. So what is surprising if, where a fault has

<sup>27</sup> Augustine *In Epistolam ad Parthos* Tract. VII, c. 8.

preceded, the subsequent action increases the punishment with people in this life, not with God in the future? For people do not judge the hidden but the apparent, nor do they consider the guilt of a fault so much as the performance of a deed. Indeed God alone, who considers not so much what is done as in what mind it may be done, truly considers the guilt in our intention and examines the fault in a true trial. Whence he is said to be both the prover of the heart and the reins [i. e. kidneys]<sup>28</sup> and to see in the dark.<sup>29</sup> For he particularly sees there see but the deed which we know. Whence often we punish the innocent or absolve the culpable through error or, as we have said, through the compulsion of the law. God is said to be the prover and the judge of the heart and the reins, that is, of all the intentions which come from an affection of the soul or from a weakness or a pleasure of the flesh.



<sup>28</sup> Jeremiah 20:12

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 6:4