

Gregory of Nyssa's teaching on sin in the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*

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ABSTRACT

The *homilies on the beatitudes* are believed to be Gregory of Nyssa's earliest existing homilies, dating most probably from the Lenten season of 378. In them, although still in a very primitive stage, we can clearly see his thoughts on the problem of evil in the world and its effects on human nature. Reading the homilies from this angle is possible to point out his original ideas on the introduction of sin in human nature, the state of the man enslaved by sin and its effects on him. The Nyssen also gives some useful and practical suggestions on how sin can be overcome. Even though in later homilies he goes deeper into these themes, and sometimes his thought develops and points to different conclusions, it is here in this first set of homilies that we start seeing his ideas on sin and redemption taking shape.

De Beatitudinibus – Gregory of Nyssa – sin – human nature – evil

[87] GREGORY OF NYSSA'S TEACHING ON SIN IN THE HOMILIES ON THE BEATITUDES*

To our knowledge Gregory of Nyssa's *homilies on the Beatitudes* are the earliest extant detailed commentary on each of the beatitudes. Before him Clement of Alexandria had commented some of the individual beatitudes, and also gave comments on the beatitudes in general¹. Even Origen has given a contribution in this regard in his commentary on Matthew's gospel, but since the volumes of this commentary which treat this part of gospel are lost, we do not know the depth in which the great Alexandrine treated them.

The dating of the Nyssen's homilies is generally accepted as being the latter half of the 370s, but the specific reason why they were preached is unknown². Since other extended series of homilies based on biblical texts, namely the ones on the books of *Ecclesiastes* and *The Song of Songs*, were delivered as Lenten talks, one might be led [88] to think that the homilies in question were the objects of a similar occasion³.

The structure of these homilies is quite simple: the bishop of Nyssa builds a homily on each of the beatitudes, using the biblical text as the starting point and then giving his own interpretation of how this text is to be understood. In many occasions he makes reference to other texts from the Bible, generally quoting or paraphrasing Paul (many times referred to as ὁ Ἀπόστολος) as well as David (considered the author of the Psalms) and others. He compares the progress from one homily to the

* The references following the Greek texts refer to the homily (in Roman numerals), page and verses (in Arabic numerals) of the critical edition of *De Beatitudinibus* made by JOHANNES F. CALLAHAN published by E.J. Brill in 1992 as Volume VII part II in the **Gregorii Nysseni Opera** series (e.g.: II, 90, 3-4).

The references following the English texts refer to the homily (in Roman numerals) and page (in Arabic numerals) of the English version made by STUART GEORGE HALL included in the Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa held in Paderborn between 14th and 18th September 1998, published by Brill in 2000 as volume LII of the **Supplementa to Vigiliae Christianae** series, entitled *Gregory of Nyssa. Homilies on the Beatitudes*, edited by Hubertus Drobner and Albert Viciano (e.g. VII, 72).

¹ For a commentary of Clement's thoughts on the beatitudes: Judith L. Kovacs, *Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa on the Beatitudes*, Leiden 2000, 311-323. The second part of this study presents some comparisons between Clement's and Gregory's interpretations.

² Stuart George Hall, *Gregory of Nyssa, "On the beatitudes". An introduction to the text and translation*, Leiden 2000, 15.

³ Daniélou suggests as much, but he dates the Homilies on the beatitudes as late as 387 (Jean Daniélou, *La chronologie des sermons de Grégoire de Nysse* in *Revue des sciences religieuses* 29 (1955), 372.)

next with going up a ladder, rung after rung⁴, while the sole intention is for the listeners to become more and more perfect. Perfection is achieved, according to the preacher, by purging oneself from the sins and vices that go against each of the beatitudes, becoming thus ever more similar to Christ.

The main teaching about sin that Gregory seeks to pass on in these eight homilies is that sin distorts the excellent beauty⁵ God has put in man by creating him in His own image. Sin is a stain (ρύπος I, 81, 3; VI, 143, 12), a disease (νόσημα I, 84, 1; VI, 145, 6, πάθος I, 85, 2), an infirmity (ἀρρώστια I, 87, 8), a passionate stirring of the soul (ἡ ἐμπαθῆς τῆς ψυχῆς κίνησις II, 96, 13), a tyrant (τύραννος III, 106, 9) and a burden (ἄχθος VIII, 167, 5). In some of the homilies he gives detailed descriptions of how some sins, more than others, effect man in negative manners, turning him into a beast, or into something even worse.

The list of sins mentioned in these eight homilies is truly impressive: pride (ὑπερηφανία I, V), wrath (θυμός II, V; ὀργή VII), arrogance (ὕβρις II), insolence (θράσος III), hatred (μῖσος III, V, VII), rivalry (ἔρις III) pitilessness (ἀνέλεος III), hardheartedness (ἀπῆνεια III, V), envy (φθόνος III, V, VII), flattery (κολακεία III), keeping grudges (μνησικακία III), insensitivity (ἀναλγησία III), gluttony (λαίμαργίας III, λιχνεία IV), intemperance (ἀκολασίας IV), ly-[89]ing (ψεῦδος V), deceit (ἀπάτη V), brutality (θηριῶδες V), adultery (μοιχείας VI), greed (πλεονεξίαν VI) and hypocrisy (ὑπόκρισιν VII). Not all of these are given the same treatment: some are mentioned just as examples to avoid, others are discussed in further detail being presented as the direct opposite of the beatitude being preached.

In the sixth homily he states that there are two kinds of evil one consisting of deeds, the other of thoughts⁶. As we shall see at a later stage while evil of deed is more evident and easily ruins a person's reputation, evil of thought is far more dangerous as it is the root of all kinds of evil and it rots the soul without giving any external signs before it is too late.

The introduction of sin in human nature

When discussing the introduction of sin and evil in human nature, Gregory is unclear on man's share in the blame. What is certain is that man lost his original

⁴ Δοκεῖ μοι βαθμίδων δίκην ἢ τῶν μακαρισμῶν διακεῖσθαι τάξις, εὐεπίβατον τῷ λόγῳ δι' ἀλλήλων ποιούσα τὴν ἄνοδον· (II, 90, 3-4).

⁵ τῷ ἀγαθῷ κάλλει (I, 81, 1).

⁶ εἰς δύο γὰρ διελὼν τὴν κακίαν, τὴν τε διὰ τῶν ἔργων, καὶ τὴν ἐν νοήμασι συνισταμένην (VI, 146, 6-7).

beauty and closeness to God because of his sin. In the third homily the theologian describes the striking difference in the state of man before and after the fall with a series of opposites:

The high has been brought low, that made in the image of the heavenly is turned to earth, that ranked as royal is enslaved, what was created for immortality is destroyed by death, what lived in the luxury of the Garden is banished to this place of disease and toil, what was reared in passionlessness has exchanged it for a life of suffering and mortality, the independent and self-determining is now dominated by such great evils that one could scarcely count our oppressors. (III, 44)

Man's life, therefore, has been completely upset, losing all that was good and eternal to acquire instead that which is undesirable and temporary. God's plan for man was to enjoy the good unmixed with evil, but man, either through his own folly or his own perversity, disobeyed and brought this unwanted mixture in his nature⁷.

[90] At no point in these homilies does Gregory put a shadow of doubt on man's original goodness. This is clearly stated in the sixth homily where the bishop of Nyssa explains what purity of heart means and, along with that, how man can possess God by having such a heart. Since man has been created in the image and likeness of God, then man is naturally capable of drawing towards what is good:

The measure of what is accessible to you is in you, for thus your Maker from the start invested your essential nature with such good. God has imprinted upon your constitution replicas of the good things in his own nature, as though stamping wax with the shape of a design. [...] If you were to wash away once more by scrupulous living the filth that has accumulated upon your heart, the God-like beauty would again light up for you. [...] so also the inner man, which is what the Lord calls 'the heart', once it has wiped off the rusty filth which has spread by evil corrosion over its form, will once again recover its likeness to its archetype and be good. (VI, 70)

A good question to ask at this point is: how, then, has this good creation let evil get in the way? Gregory seeks to give a solution by proposing different facets of the problem evil in human nature; the discussion is spread over several homilies. In the fifth homily he explains that human nature is easily tricked in choosing what *seems* to

⁷Ἐοικε γάρ, ἐπειδὴ τῆς ἀγαθῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ περὶ τὸν ἄνθρωπον οἰκονομίας ἀπέστησεν ἡμᾶς ἡ ἀβουλία, μᾶλλον δὲ ἡ κακοβουλία τοῦ γὰρ Θεοῦ ἀμιγῆς τοῦ κακοῦ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἐν τῇ ἀπολαύσει ἡμῶν νομοθετήσαντος, καὶ καταμιγνύναι τῷ καλῷ τὴν τοῦ κακοῦ πείραν ἀπαγορεύσαντος, ἐπειδὴ ἡμεῖς ὑπὸ λαιμαργίας ἐκουσίως τοῦ ἐναντίου ἐνεφορήθημεν (λέγω δὲ τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ Λόγου παρακοῆς ἀπογευσάμενοι) · διὰ τοῦτο χρὴ πάντως ἐν ἀμφοτέροις γενέσθαι τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν (III, 108, 20-28)

be good rather than what actually is. He explains that since man is by nature inclined to what is good, he would never turn towards evil if this presents itself starkly as it is⁸. This, then, would mean that the serpent tricked Adam and Eve by presenting disobedience to God's law as a good thing, and as thus they followed his counsel.

In this same homily Gregory delves deeper in the subject and introduces the concept of autonomy in ruling oneself (ἡ αὐτοκρατίς⁹) which gives man freedom of choice. At this point however, the theologian seems to be commenting on how evil enters in the life of each [91] individual, not about its introduction to human nature in general. Gregory is convinced that evil on its own does not exist; it comes into being only when man freely chooses it:

the inclination to wrong [...] comes into existence by no compulsion of external necessity, but evil exists as soon as it is chosen, present in being the moment we choose it. By itself with its own proper being apart from free will, evil is never found to exist. (V, 61)

This would mean, then, that man is the creator of the evil there is in his own nature. Here he specifies that evil does not come into existence by compulsion of external necessity¹⁰. This fits well with the theory of trickery that he proposed before: our forefathers did not feel the need to eat the forbidden fruit, but freely chose to do so, thus obeying the serpent, in the hope of acquiring a better status than the good one they were enjoying. The part that evil on its own does not exist¹¹ remains unclear, because if man was tricked into choosing evil veiled as good, something external to him must have necessarily moved him to make the choice, unless it was something evil from within – this however should be ruled out since according to Gregory man was created removed from evil, having in him God's own image¹².

In the following homily the theologian gives an explanation on how, after the fall, sin and evil mixed to human nature and thus are passed on from generation to generation:

⁸ Εἰ γὰρ γυμνὴ προέκειτο ἡ κακία τῷ βίῳ, καὶ μὴ τι καλοῦ φαντασία προσκεχρωσμένη, οὐκ ἂν ἠῆτομόλῃσεν πρὸς αὐτὴν τὸ ἀνθρώπινον. (V, 125, 14-16)

⁹ V, 129, 23.

¹⁰ ἢ πρὸς τὸ χεῖρον ῥοπή, μηδεμιᾶς ἔξωθεν βιαζομένης ἀνάγκης ἐγγίνεται (V, 129, 18-19).

¹¹ αὐτὸ δὲ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ κατ' ἰδίαν ὑπόστασιν ἔξω προαιρέσεως, οὐδαμοῦ τὸ κακὸν εὐρίσκεται κείμενον (V, 129, 21-22).

¹² Daniélou discusses in detail this perfect state in which man was created, concluding that the divine image in man is nothing less than a real participation in all of God's attributes, including "l'éloignement de tout mal" (Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, Paris 1944, 53). This excludes any possibility of man having some kind of evil within his being.

At the outset it is from passion that we get our origin, with passion our growth proceeds, and into passion our life declines; evil is mixed with our nature through those who from the first allowed passion in, those who by disobedience gave house-room to the disease. Just as with each kind of animal the species continues along with the succession of the [92] new generation, so that what is born is, following a natural design, the same as those from which it is born, so from man man is generated, from passionate passionate, from sinful its like. Thus in a sense sin arises together with those who come into existence, brought to birth with them, growing with them, and at life's end ceasing with them. (VI, 71)

Therefore the forefathers of the human race are responsible for letting sin come into existence in their own nature¹³, and since all humans were generated from them, sin was passed on to all their descendants like an unavoidable and incurable genetic disorder. This clarifies what he had said in the previous homily, namely that sin is not the product of an external need but that it comes into existence the moment man chooses it.

By stating that human nature is essentially good because God created it thus, Gregory does not imply that the nature of every human being is identical in its degree of seeking what is good. In the fourth homily he does, in fact, seem to hint that in seeking the 'food of the soul' (τῆς ψυχῆς τροφή¹⁴) some are inclined more toward what is spiritually unhealthy, while others seek what is best for them:

In the same way, where food of the soul is concerned, not all desires tend in the same direction. Some want honour or wealth or worldly show, others have a ceaseless desire for the table, yet others take up spite enthusiastically as a sort of poisonous food. There are also those who have an appetite for what is by its nature good [...] (IV, 48)

Therefore Gregory does not rule out the possibility that some people are more inclined (ρέπουσιν¹⁵) towards the good than others. This he explains as a sort of appetite or tendency (ὄρεξις¹⁶), hence it is not something that man can create for himself, but is part of his nature. The role of free choice, as explained before, is in this case fundamental: man may be inclined towards what is not good for him, but in the end he is free whether to follow this inclination or to reject it. Therefore [93]

¹³ ἀνακέκραταί πως τὸ κακὸν πρὸς τὴν φύσιν, διὰ τῶν ἐξ ἀρχῆς παραδεξαμένων τὸ πάθος, τῶν διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς εἰσοικισαμένων τὴν νόσον (VI, 145, 3-6).

¹⁴ IV, 111, 12.

¹⁵ IV, 111, 12.

¹⁶ IV, 111, 15.

while all men are free, Gregory seems to imply that for some it is easier to avoid sin than it is for others, or, to put it differently, some people are less susceptible to be tricked by what seems good when in reality it is not.

The sinner's state

Along the homilies Gregory even gives short comments regarding the state of the sinner's life. First of all he describes the sinner as he who prefers to seek the treasures which the Lord forbids, for these are "bound up with the deceitfulness of perceptible things"¹⁷, as opposed to the real wealth of the soul which should be sought. Therefore the starting point in a sinner's life is his choice to prefer earthly rather than heavenly possessions. This is the foundational erroneous choice which eventually leads the person to make further choices in the way of evil.

In the final homily on the beatitudes, Gregory warns his listeners that it is dangerously easy to pave the way for evil by letting the soul become exceedingly attached to the sweet things of life brought to it by the senses¹⁸. The theologian does not say or even imply that these are in themselves evil, but he sees in them a threat for the soul since the fear of loss of these things might lead it to seek them in a disproportionate manner:

The soul in that condition is as a result easily caught by its pursuers, readily surrendering to the threat of confiscation or loss of any of the other things desired in this present life, and becoming submissive to the persecutor. (VIII, 88)

In short: the person who is too attached to his senses, even in good or morally neutral things, is softened to the extent that he easily yields to sin once one of these is threatened. Having paved the way – even if [94] done involuntarily – advancing in it is very easy¹⁹. The sad result is that the person falls into the pit²⁰, a biblical image that

¹⁷ I, 26.

¹⁸ Ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν συμφύεται πως ἡ ψυχὴ διὰ τῶν σωματικῶν αἰσθήσεων πρὸς τὰ ἡδέα τοῦ βίου, καὶ τῇ εὐχροίᾳ τῆς ὕλης διὰ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἐπιτέρπεται, καὶ τῇ ἀκοῇ πρὸς τὰ ἡδέα τῶν ἀκροσμάτων τὴν ῥοπήν ἔχει, τῇ τε ὀσφρήσει καὶ τῇ γεύσει καὶ τῇ ἀφῆι, καθὼ πέφυκεν οἰκείως ἔχειν ἐκάστη συνδιατίθεται. Διὰ τοῦτο οἶόν τινι ἦλω πρὸς τὰ ἡδέα τοῦ βίου τῇ αἰσθητικῇ δυνάμει προσκολλημένη, δυσασπάστως ἔχει τούτων, οἷς συνεφύη προσκολληθεῖσα (VIII, 166, 15-23).

¹⁹ πλατείαν δὲ καὶ κατάντη καὶ ἐπίδρομον, τὴν [ὁδὸν] διὰ κακίας τὸν βίον ἐπὶ τὴν ἀπώλειαν ἄγουσαν (VI, 145, 17-18).

²⁰ [...] ἐν μεθορίῳ κεῖται τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ τοῦ χείρονος ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη ζωὴ, [...] ὁ τῆς ἀγαθῆς τε καὶ ὑψηλῆς ἐλπίδος ἀπολισθήσας, ἐν τῷ βαράθρῳ γίνεται [...] (VIII, 164, 16-18).

represents the place of death²¹. Sin, in fact, strips man of life²², not the physical life, but the spiritual one, which includes even fruits of true happiness sought in earthly life. The theologian says that if the sinner were aware of his pitiful state he would bewail his own misery, but – yet another effect of sin – he suffers a sort of mental block which stops him from seeing his state as it truly is:

Yet the reason we do not pity ourselves is that we are unaware of the evils, rather as happens to those deranged by mental disease, for whom the extremity of their plight also takes away the awareness of what they suffer. (V, 63)

Keeping in mind the Platonic tradition to which Gregory of Nyssa adhered – which stated that God is the Perfect Intellect – this comparison between sin and mental insanity (*μανία*²³) further shows the extent to which the divine image has been ruined in man. Man, being the only earthly creation endowed with reason, loses it when he gives himself over to sin, becoming thus no better than other irrational creatures. Lack of reason necessarily leads to lack of control, and therefore passions take over the human mind and soul disfiguring the good qualities placed therein by God into instruments of evil:

Each of the passions in us, when it takes control, becomes master of the person enslaved, and like an oppressive tyrant, having seized the citadel of the soul, it uses our own subordinates to maltreat its victim, employing our own mental processes as agents for its purpose. So anger, so fear, cowardice, insolence, the sensations of pain and pleasure, hatred, contentiousness, pitiless unkindness, malice, flattery, grudges and insensitivity, and all the passions in us which are reckoned [95] negative, make up a list of tyrants and masters who to win power reduce the soul to slavery like a captive of war. (III, 44)

The final step is for man to remove completely the divine image in him, abandoning the life of virtue, and, by letting sin be his master, takes upon a diabolic image:

those with a defiled mind are surely wretched, for they look into the face of the Adversary. If the very shape of the Divinity is stamped upon the life of virtue, it is plain that the life of vice takes on the form and visage of the Adversary. (VI, 73)

²¹ Psalms 30, 10; 40, 3; 88, 4-6; 130, 1.

²² μετὰ τὴν παρακοὴν τῆς ζωῆς γυμνωθέντες (VIII, 161, 22-23)

²³ V, 133, 6.

A very vivid description of a sinner's life is that of the 'leaky jar' (πίθος τετρημένος²⁴), found in the fourth homily, wherein the theologian explains how the sinner is never satiated from his greed, is always searching for more and therefore can never reach fulfilment and happiness:

Those who make these things their aim are shown up as always vigorously filling up this jar with insatiable and unprofitable labour, forever pouring something into desire's deep bottom and adding to the flow of pleasure, but never bringing their desire to full satisfaction. Is there any known limit to financial greed which is reached when the greedy get what they aim at? What glory-maniac desists when he achieves his aim? The person who fulfils his desire for pleasure with sounds or spectacles or with the madness and frenzy of dining and what follows dining, what lasting gain does he get out of this enjoyment? Does not every kind of pleasure which is achieved by the body fly away as soon as it comes near, without staying even for a moment with those who grasp it? (IV, 54)

The theme of insatiability is reprised in the following homily, giving a darker image, linking it to the other aspect mentioned above wherein the theologian says that the sinner takes on himself a diabolic likeness:

What excess of harshness does the tyranny of greed omit? Having enslaved the wretched soul, it always drives it to fulfil its insatiable desires, forever receiving and never filled, like a many-headed beast with a thousand mouths passing on food to its insatiable stomach, which never has enough of getting, but what it constantly takes in serves to fuel and inflame the desire for more. (V, 63)

[96] A consequence of the evil fundamental choice mentioned before is therefore the fact that man, in his misguided desire to find happiness ends up never achieving it. This in itself is already a punishment.

The effects of sin on man

We mentioned above that some sins are discussed in more detail than others; this is done by describing the psychosomatic effects of particular sins on man, vividly depicting his degradation from a rational being into a beast.

²⁴ IV, 119, 18-19.

Of all the sins mentioned and discussed anger is foremost, as it is dealt with in more detail than others, namely in the second and in the seventh homily. Uncontrolled wrath is the best means by which to show what happens to man if irrationality is let loose:

When some disagreeable word or action or suspicion stirs up this kind of disease, when the blood boils up round the heart and the soul rises up to react, just as fairy-tales make magic potions turn our nature into animal forms, so you may suddenly see a man turned by anger into a pig or dog or leopard or some other such beast. (II, 37)

In the other instance where wrathful behaviour is treated, Gregory goes a step further comparing a furious man to a person possessed by the devil²⁵: "Do you see how the symptoms of demon-possession are manifested in those in the grip of rage? Compare with each other the effects of a demon and those of rage, and what the difference is between them."²⁶

The somatic descriptions given in both cases prove how true it is that an irate man becomes like a beast or like a possessed. Gregory would have used such descriptions not only to shock his audience, but also to make them think of the sorry state every person might fall into if he lets his passions run out of control²⁷.

[97] Even though the behaviour is similar in the two cases presented in the second and the seventh homilies, Gregory states that it is far more wretched to be a victim of rage rather than a victim of demonic possession, because whilst the latter is an affliction imposed on persons without their own consent, the former is a condition brought about voluntarily by the doer on himself. Two further faults which anger does not share with demonic-possession is that it is easily contagious leading others to do the same or even worse²⁸, and that its end is directed at physically harming others:

That is when the hands may be seen set in violent motion by the disease, and the feet likewise. It is however no longer the random movement of these limbs, as happens in the case of the demon-possessed, but to hurt those who because of the disease are fighting each other; the first targets for those trying to hit each

²⁵ The symptoms described by Gregory might in actual fact refer to some mental illness such as epilepsy rather than a proper demonic possession.

²⁶ VII, 79.

²⁷ Detailed descriptions of the fearsome behaviour of uncontrolled rage and demonic possession can be found in II, 96, 24-97, 5 and VII, 155, 10-156, 10.

²⁸ Καὶ τὴν μὲν ἐκ δαίμονος νόσον ὁ ἰδὼν πάντως ἠλέησεν τὴν δὲ ἐκ θυμοῦ παραφορὰν, ὁμοῦ τε εἶδε καὶ ἐμιμήσατο, ζημίαν κρίνων τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαλλέσθαι τῷ καθ' ἑαυτὸν πάθει τὸν προνοσήσαντα. (VII, 155, 20-23)

other are the vital organs of perception. If in the course of the fight the mouth should come near the body, the teeth do not remain idle, but are stuck in like an animal's to whatever they can reach. Who could possibly recount one by one all the evils which originate in rage? (VII, 80)

In short we can say that anger brings out the worst in man.

Another sin given more prominence than others is hatred. This is discussed in the seventh homily while talking about peacemakers. Hate is the opposite of love, whose fruit is peace. Gregory brings forward an analogy between the serenity enjoyed by people where peace is dominant and the restless state of people who nurture hate in their hearts:

Each one of you is capable of working out for himself what life is for those who hold each other in suspicion and hatred, whose meetings with each other are disagreeable, who find everything about each other horrible; their mouths have no words, their eyes are averted, their ears are barricaded against the voice of the hated hater. Everything which is disliked by the one is liked by the other, and conversely everything which his adversary's heart is set upon is hostile and offensive. (VII, 79)

[98] Hatred, then, uproots the joy of living because life is turned into a programme of counter-effect in regard to anything the hated person likes or does. The hater loses the freedom of living as he likes.

The final sin treated in detail is that which Gregory defines as the worst of all: envy, especially when this is twinned with hypocrisy. Even though these two do not lead the person to behave in a beastly or madly manner, they are to be feared more because these are hidden evils. The envious are described as having the fire of hatred smouldering secretly in the depth of their hearts²⁹, while their outside appearance tricks others in believing they are their friends. The theologian explains that this mockery cannot endure for too long as surely at some point some external sign is given revealing what is being baked on the inside:

envy devours the heart within like a fire, as if it were a heaped-up pile of chaff: it may hide the disease out of shame, yet it is not able to conceal itself indefinitely, but like a pungent smoke the bitterness of envy shows through in the features of the outward appearance; and should some misfortune fall upon

²⁹ οἷς ἔνδοθεν μὲν ἐν τῷ βάθει τῆς καρδίας τὸ μίσος, οἷόν τι πῦρ κατὰ τὸ λεληθὸς ὑποτρέφεται (VII, 157, 9-10).

the object of envy, then it makes the disease apparent, and takes the injury to him as a cause of rejoicing and pleasure. (VII, 81)

Even when carefully concealed, envy has its own side-effects on the body, deteriorating even the outward physical beauty God put into it from the beginning:

The secret sickness is evidenced, even while it appears to be hidden, by manifest signs about the face. The deadly effects of the things denied often become the marks of one shrivelled up by reason of envy: eyes withered, sunk in the hollow of shrunken eyelids, knitted eyebrows, the shape of bones showing through the flesh. (VII, 81)

Added on to this, the envious person is stopped by this same disease from appreciating and enjoying the good things that he has in his own life:

You slap your hands together, you knot your fingers, your thoughts are in turmoil, you utter deep groans of pain, you get no pleasure from enjoying the things you presently have, meals are sour, home [99] and hearth a misery, the ear always open to slander against the one who has done well; and if someone says something favourable, your ear is deaf to his words. (VII, 81-82)

Envy, then, has a double effect: it covets harm for the envied, while it also slowly corrupts the envious and at some point gives him away. However, as Gregory points out, the abomination of envy is that it is caused by the prosperity of another³⁰, not for some harm done to him who is at the mercy of this disease.

Overcoming sin

While speaking at length about sin and its effects on human nature, the bishop of Nyssa does not stop short of suggesting various ways of overcoming sin, or even how to avoid it. One of the first counsels is found in the third homily. While discussing the positive aspects of sorrow, he points out that the best of these is grief over sin. When the sinner is enlightened by God's grace and feels sorrow for his transgressions, he repents from his sins and the result would be his own salvation³¹. In this case grief operates on the soul like a medicine works on an injured part of the body.

³⁰ Ἡ δὲ αἰτία τῆς νόσου τίς; Τὸ ἐν εὐθυμία ζῆν ἀδελφὸν, ἢ οἰκεῖον, ἢ γείτονα (VII, 158, 5-6).

³¹ καὶ τῆς μὲν κοσμικῆς λύπης, θάνατον εἶναι τὸ ἔργον· τὴν δὲ ἑτέραν, σωτηρίαν ἐκ μετανοίας τοῖς λυποῦμένοις ἐργάζεσθαι (III, 100, 7-8).

As in the case of ancient medical practices this entails a certain degree of pain for the soul. The theme of pain is discussed in further detail in the final homily; this time however it is the pain of the body that is exalted as an antidote to sin. The setting for this discussion is the last beatitude³². The persecutor in this case is the devil who uses as weapons the pleasures of life. The virtuous man who seeks not these but the heavenly reward

readily accepts every kind of torture as an impulse and contribution to the expected joy; fire he accepts willingly as purifier of matter, the sword as cutting away material and carnal things from their close bond with the mind, every imaginable suffering and pain as being the antidote [100] for the malignant poison of pleasure [...] one in pain cannot enjoy pleasure. (VIII, 88)

At this point Gregory makes a striking statement: "Since it was by pleasure that sin came in, it will surely be expelled by its opposite"³³. Freedom from sin cannot be attained without a degree of suffering, be it physical or spiritual. It seems that the theologian implies that the former is the better of the two, since spiritual suffering usually comes after the sin is committed, while bodily affliction prevents the person from falling into sin.

Another helpful antidote, somewhat useful for those who are not so courageous, is that of fear of hell. This is proposed on two occasions: first in the third homily after the section on grief, then in the sixth homily. In the first case Gregory speaks of the 'fearsome warnings of impending judgement' (λέγω τῶν σκυθρωπῶν τῆς μελλούσης κρίσεως ἀπειλῶν³⁴). The fear of the future is used as a medicine to enlighten the soul into forsaking its evil ways and bringing it back to its senses. In the other case, fear is not used as a medicine but as a preservative from sin: "the one who hears about Gehenna will no longer avoid the pleasures of sin by toil and effort, but fear aroused in his mind will be quite enough to banish passions"³⁵. The setting in this case is the new teaching given by Jesus: whereas the ancient law punished the sins of deed, the new law of Christ considers the other type of sin, that of thoughts. Hence, following the new law does not entail taking reprisals for the wicked act, "but planning a way to prevent the evil arising in the first place"³⁶.

³² "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for justice's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens" (Mt 5,10).

³³ VIII, 88.

³⁴ III, 100, 24-25.

³⁵ VI, 73.

³⁶ VI, 72.

The best solution, then, would be to eradicate sin from its very roots. Earthly passions are to be shaken off from the shoulders as if they were a burden fastened to the soul³⁷. First among these to be uprooted is anger, since anger without cause is the source of practically every evil thought and deed: “Whereas in almost all life the disease of anger [101] is an immediate threat, he [the Lord] begins with the cure for the most pressing disease, stipulating in the first place no anger.”³⁸ Eliminating this would give the person a gentle heart, and thus evil scheming is cut short.

The result of wiping sin out of his own nature would be that man regains the original beauty God created in him:

When the mind in you is unmixed with any evil, free from passion, and far away from any stain, you are blessed for your sharp-sightedness, for by becoming pure you have perceived what is invisible to those not purified, and, with the materialistic fog removed from the eye of the soul, in the pure shining of the heart you see clearly the blessed sight. (VI, 70-71)

Apart from these instructions to avoid evil, I believe it is important to keep in mind the message Gregory intended to impart when he delivered these homilies, which may be found in the introduction to these homilies: first of all a meditation on God’s word, and secondly an invitation climb the spiritual mountain with Christ³⁹. Hence apart from taking measures to keep evil at bay, the Christian has also follow Christ in his spiritual journey through contemplation, longing, therefore, for that which is truly good, being attracted by it, freely choosing it and following it.

Conclusion

In way of conclusion we can say that in this set of homilies we can quite easily trace the bishop of Nyssa’s theology of sin. Man was created sinless in the image of God and endowed with free will. Due to the Adversary’s trickery man freely chose to go against God’s will thinking to find a better good and as a consequence he stained his nature with sin. All the descendants of the first couple are born with this stain since they draw their being from their forefathers, hence all are subject to sin and inclined towards it by their own nature. This evil grafted in human nature not only ruins God’s image in man, but also turns man into a beast if it is uncontrolled. He who

³⁷ καθάπερ τι ἄχθος τῆ ψυχῆ συνδεδεμένον τὰς κοσμικὰς ἡδονὰς, οἷόν τις δρομεὺς τῶν ὄμων ἀποσεισάμενος (VIII, 167, 5-7).

³⁸ VI, 72.

³⁹ I, 77, 4-7.

sins ultimately becomes a slave of sin, losing his natural freedom which should help him choose good from evil. Christ's teaching and example, however, are a means of [102] grace by which man can once again learn to choose what is good and thus detach himself from evil and sin. It is noteworthy to point out that at no point in these homilies does Gregory present the passion and resurrection of Christ as the means of redemption for everyone; he seems to imply that man can obtain salvation by putting into practice the teaching imparted by Christ and by following his example in the way of uprightness. Gregory does not believe in predestination because, as we can clearly read in the fifth homily, man gets what struggles for: "hJ dikaiva tou= Qeou= krivsiç tai`ç hJmetevraiç diaqevsesin ejxomoiou=tai, oi|av per a]n taV par' hJmw`n h\/, toiau=ta hJmi`n ejk tw`n ijdivwn parevcousa" (V, 130, 13-14). Man's choices in this life pave the way for his eternal state.

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