



**PennState**  
Dickinson Law

**DICKINSON LAW REVIEW**  
PUBLISHED SINCE 1897

---

Volume 33  
Issue 3 *Dickinson Law Review - Volume 33,*  
*Issue 3*

---

3-1-1929

## The Strength of Sin is the Law

Henry A. Fuller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideas.dickinsonlaw.psu.edu/dlra>

---

### Recommended Citation

Henry A. Fuller, *The Strength of Sin is the Law*, 33 DICK. L. REV. 126 (1929).  
Available at: <https://ideas.dickinsonlaw.psu.edu/dlra/vol33/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Reviews at Dickinson Law IDEAS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dickinson Law Review by an authorized editor of Dickinson Law IDEAS. For more information, please contact [lja10@psu.edu](mailto:lja10@psu.edu).

## *The Strength of Sin is the Law\**

In that wonderful 15th Chapter of First Corinthians, part of the 56th Verse, you will find these seven wonderful monosyllables which constitute my text:

"The strength of sin is the law."

What do these words mean?

You might obtain one interpretation by reading the whole verse, with an interpolation, thus,

The verse reads: "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law," which we might read with an interpolation, thus:

"The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin (that is, what makes sin sting at death) is the law of God, which dooms the dying sinner to eternal punishment."

And then there is the interpretation, that inasmuch as sin simply means to break the law, and therefore inasmuch as there could be no sin without a law to break, it follows in a sense that law gives strength to sin.

Then I may refer to an interpretation brought home to us by what is going on in the world, in the social and civic state, through the laws of man. For example, when criminals of clear guilt are either not punished at all, or only punished after long delay, or inadequately punished by reason of technicalities, or appeals, or misplaced mercy; or when the officers of the law, high and low, from Judges to Constables, up or down, according to the point of view, by neglect or connivance or actual complicity, aid law-breakers; or when foolish laws are enacted which make crimes of trivial acts not morally wrong, penalizing a multiplicity of petty things which seem perfectly innocent to the average conscience, inviting invasion, encouraging deception, fostering resentment; when, for illustration, the splendid principle of temperance, embodied in the 18th Amendment, is spoiled and undermined by vicious laws and vicious enforcement of laws supposed to make it effective;

---

\*An address delivered at the Wyoming Seminary.

which defy human nature and the spirit of American freedom, and the basic principle of sound ethics, resistance to temptation; in all these and innumerable like instances it might be said that the strength of sin is the law.

But I will not waste time on any of these interpretations. I have come to preach into your souls, and not just to speak into your minds. I want to drive home to your souls an answer to the question, "What makes sin strong?" and will endeavor to supply the answers under three heads: (1) Sin, (2) Its Strength, (3) The Source of Its Strength.

1. SIN. What is it? We will all admit, I presume, that we are sinners, but have we ever analyzed the nature of the thing which makes us such? I will pass over the Westminster Catechism, "Any want of conformity unto, or transgression of the law of God," which I learned in 1864, a fine definition but too theological and general for the present purpose. I will pass over that limerick, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all," Biblical, but too poetic and throwing more responsibility on Adam than really belongs to him. I will pass over heredity and environment, those high-sounding words which afford so much entertainment to the sociological scientist, but seem to carry too much of an apology for the average individual sinner.

Well, look into yourself for the answer. Sin is a nasty little word, but the thing is the simple resultant of three quite respectable factors: *conscience*, *will*, and *desire*. The matter is just as easy as a, b, c.

Conscience tells you what you ought to do, or not to do; will enables you to do or not to do it if you choose; desire diverts the choice. When desire overcomes conscience and will, you have sin.

Whenever that happens, you are less of a man or a woman than before, and the multiplication of that result, followed each time by subtraction of a little manhood or womanhood, means ultimate reduction to zero. That is the horrible arithmetic of the thing.

Conversely, every defeat of desire is the addition of a little manhood or womanhood, inch by inch, until by pro-

longation of the process you may come into the "image of God."

To be the best man or woman you can be is the summit of endeavor, the supreme end of living, and the limit of your responsibility. Anything said, thought or done, which deteriorates or detracts from manhood or womanhood and so prevents you from being the best possible man or woman, is sin.

We do not need the Catechism, nor Genesis, nor sociology, to know that. A little introspection furnishes the key.

2. ITS STRENGTH. I need not dwell on that. Better than anything else in the world we know that sin is strong, becoming stronger and stronger until it is irresistible, except by a miracle of grace. You know it even in the innocence of youth, and I in the experience, I will not say of age, but of less youth, know it with a painful certainty of realization, through and through.

Do you remember Stevenson's wonderful soul-revealing story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Read it if you want to realize the horrible strength of sin. Dr. Jekyll, a God-like man, mentally, morally, and physically, of noble character and splendid attainments, intent upon doing good with all his heart, and soul, and mind, but like all of our best men, having certain infirmities, weaknesses, and temptations incident to human nature, which however he kept under subjection, had discovered a certain drug which would take away his noble qualities of body and soul, and leave only the bad qualities, a wizened body, and a wicked heart fatally bent on mischief, as personified in his dual self under the name of Mr. Hyde.

When he was ready to resume his noble qualities, another dose of the drug would effect the transformation back to Dr. Jekyll. At first the change from Jekyll to Hyde was slow, difficult, and painful; the change back, quick, easy, and painless. But after using the drug for a time, this became reversed, the change from Jekyll to Hyde, from good to bad, became easy, the converse increasingly hard.

One day, in the personality of Hyde, he committed a horrible murder, and when pursued, expecting to evade the law by resuming the personality of Jekyll, found the drug powerless to effect the transformation, and he was caught like a rat in a trap.

The lesson of the story is that every conquest of desire over conscience and will, makes the next easier, because it makes your manhood or your womanhood less able to resist attack, until by degrees you reach the dreadful stage when cowering helpless against a stone wall, unable to escape, and conscious of your fate, you are doomed; on one side of the fight, the combatant becomes steadily stronger and stronger, on the other side weaker and weaker.

I tell you sin has strength to pull the strongest man from his pedestal, into the mud, and keep him there until, trampled and smothered out of shape, God's image in him is obliterated forever in the slough of eternal death.

Well, what constitutes the strength of anything? Simply its power to do good or evil. And what is power in its last analysis? Simply the use of law in one form or another; the power of wind in a cyclone, of water in a deluge, of fire in a conflagration, of electricity in a storm, all obedient to natural law, doing evil; and the power of that same wind on the sail, of that same water on the turbine, of that same fire in the furnace, of that same electricity on the wire, equally obedient to law, doing good.

What gives strength to those things for good or evil? Law! So sin!

And now I come to the pith of my sermon, what I started to talk about, the exact relation of sin to law.

3. THE SOURCE OF ITS STRENGTH. Law! It is a fine paradox. Sin the outlaw, governed by law. Sin the anarchist, in harmony with the universe. Sin the law-breaker, a law-keeper, lawless yet lawful, outside the law, yet within the law. That is the worst thing about sin. It is worth thinking about. I do not recall, from my reading of Butler's Analogy, or Drummond's Natural Law in the

Spiritual World, that either of them treated the matter in this way. I never heard the theme preached upon. The idea struck me all of a sudden. It scared me, and I want to scare you. I will have nothing to say about the law of heredity and environment, nor will I try to explain by law, the origin of sin. But I want to drive home this idea: that the operation of law begins immediately upon the first sin, that is, upon the first conscious, voluntary surrender of will to desire, against conscience. That sets the moral molecules moving in the wrong direction, subtracts from the power of conscience to perceive, and of will to act, adds to the power of desire to have its own way, and multiplies the chances of defeat in your life struggle to be the best possible man or woman, leads to habit, habit to character, character to destiny.

I will only mention three laws very familiar to those who have even a smattering of natural philosophy: the law of impenetrability, the law of inertia, and the law of gravitation, as they were called in my school days, and if the nomenclature has been changed the nature remains the same.

(1) *Impenetrability.* Two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. One must drive the other out. A bad thought cannot co-exist with a good thought, a bad act with a good act, a bad word with a good word. Vice and virtue cannot be in the same soul at the same time. One will crowd the other out, and the stronger is sure to stay. When one has impure thoughts he cannot think of God. Sensuality excludes worship. Dishonesty banishes charity. Bad is stronger than good. Hyde at last drives Jekyll out so that he can't get back. I tell you this law of impenetrability is a dreadful source of strength in sin.

(2) *Inertia.* When a thing gets moving in one direction it has a tendency to keep right on. When it is at rest it has a tendency not to move at all. The soul's first step towards sin is the impulse of the second. Sin's greatest strength lies in the inability to stop when once started

in the wrong direction, and when once stopped, to start in the right direction, the dreadful law of inertia which sweeps you right along, unable to stop, or holds you fast, unable to start; and with inertia I will couple (3) *Gravitation*, the law which pulls down, terrestrially speaking, and on that I stand with Isaac Newton against Isaac Einstein.

Here we have a disreputable law partnership, inertia pulling on, gravitation down, inertia bringing to the brink and over, gravitation dragging down, down, down, to deepest depths of darkness, degradation, despair, and death.

Take the familiar illustration of a man in a boat at the bank of Niagara River. His will on the oars starts the boat moving, inertia carries to the current, then gravitation takes hold, rather weak at first, leaving still a chance for will and oars, gravitation stronger and stronger, will and oars weaker and weaker, boat and man moving faster and faster, nearer and nearer to the awful chasm, then the brink, the perpendicular plunge, the remorseless rocks below; first the level, then the slope, then the vertical descent, the inevitable crash and crush upon the grinning granite of destruction. In the language of Niagara oratory: "dashing, flashing, crashing into black annihilation!"

Now that I have dropped you on the rocks, just lie there and think about it. In your beds tonight just have a nightmare, dreaming yourself in a boat on the Niagara River, starting to move towards the Falls, still able to save yourself by a slight effort, then moving faster and faster, until you cannot save yourself, but God can save you by suspending the law, a miracle of grace, and then over and down, when even God will not interfere, when law wields its unobstructed strength and the soul dashes unto death. Observe I do not say Hell. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. Death is Hell.

My dear young men and women, do not take my word for it, but think it out for yourselves. Sin gets its strength from law! It is no haphazard thing; and when you reach the frightful realization of that truth, brace yourself against the shock by reflecting that even if sin does get its strength from law, by the same token, from law doth resistance to

sin derive its strength, for every honest and successful effort of your will to stand by conscience against desire, makes the next effort easier, those laws, instead of being enemies, become allies, and in the end you will be able to say with Verse 57, which follows our text: "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory".

HENRY A. FULLER

Wilkes-Barre, Pa.