

## **The Definitions, So It Is Said, Of Coelestius**

Reconstructed By Rev. Daniel R. Jennings

**Synopsis:** *Around 415 AD Augustine was given a short book entitled 'The definitions, so it is said, of Coelestius,' who was an associate of Pelagius. In response he wrote a treatise entitled 'Concerning Man's Perfection in Righteousness' from which these fragments come. Whether Coelestius actually wrote this document is the matter of some debate. Augustine himself felt that he was not the original author based upon the title of the book. One theory, which appears to have never really been investigated is whether this document was actually written by an opponent of Coelestius in order to fully, yet briefly, explain what it was that he taught. Regardless of the author, Augustine maintained, "That these views are, however, his, or those of some associates of his, we, too, can well believe. For the above-mentioned brief definitions, or rather propositions, are by no means at variance with his opinion, such as I have seen it expressed in another work, of which he is the undoubted author." The astute student will keep in mind though, that we are reading these fragments from the writings of a man who was determined to rid the world of Pelagianism.*

### **I. The Definitions Of Coelestius**

1. First of all he must be asked who denies man's ability to live without sin, what: every sort of sin is,-is it such as can be avoided? or is it unavoidable? If it is unavoidable, then it is not sin; if it can be avoided, then a man can live without the sin which can be avoided. No reason or justice permits us to designate as sin what cannot in any way be avoided.
2. We must next ask whether sin comes from will, or from necessity? If from necessity, it is not sin; if from will, it can be avoided.
3. Again we must ask what sin is,-natural? or accidental? If natural, it is not sin; if accidental, it is separable; and if it is separable, it can be avoided; and because it can be avoided, man can be without that which can be avoided.
4. We must ask, again what is sin,-an act, or a thing? If it is a thing, it must have an author; and if it be said to have an author, then another besides God will seem to be introduced as the author of a thing. But if it is impious to say this, we are driven to confess that every sin is an act, not a thing. If therefore it is an act, for this very reason, because it is an act, it can be avoided.
5. We must again inquire whether a man ought to be without sin. Beyond doubt he ought. If he ought, he is able; if he is not able, then he ought not. Now if a man ought not to be without sin, it follows that he ought to be with sin,-and then it ceases to be sin at all, if it is determined that it is owed. Or if it is absurd to say this, we are obliged to confess that man ought to be without sin; and it is clear that his obligation is not more than his ability.
6. Again we have to inquire whether man is commanded to be without sin; for either he is not able, and then he is not commanded; or else because he is commanded, he is able. For why should that be commanded which cannot at all be done?
7. The next question we shall have to propose is, whether God wishes that man be without sin. Beyond doubt God wishes it; and no doubt he has the ability. For who

- is so foolhardy as to hesitate to believe that to be possible, which he has no doubt about God's wishing?
8. Again, this question must be asked, how God wishes man to be,-with sin, or without sin? Beyond doubt, He does not wish him to be with sin. We must reflect how great would be the impious blasphemy for it to be said that man has it in his power to be with sin, which God does not wish; and for it to be denied that he has it in his power to be without sin, which God wishes: just as if God had created any man for such a result as this,-that he should be able to be what He would not have him, and unable to be what He would have him; and that he should lead an existence contrary to His will, rather than one which should be in accordance therewith.
  9. The next question we shall require to be solved is this: By what means is it brought about that man is with sin?-by the necessity of nature, or by the freedom of choice? If it is by the necessity of nature, he is blameless; if by the freedom of choice, then the question arises, from whom he has received this freedom of choice. No doubt, from God. Well, but that which God bestows is certainly good. This cannot be gainsaid. On what principle, then, is a thing proved to be good, if it is more prone to evil than to good? For it is more prone to evil than to good if by means of it man can be with sin and cannot be without sin.
  10. Since God made man good and, besides making him good, further commanded him to do good, how impious it is for us to hold that man is evil, when he was neither made so, nor so commanded; and to deny him the ability of being good, although he was both made so, and commanded to act so!
  11. The next question which must be put is, in how many ways all sin is manifested? In two, if I mistake not: if either those things are done which are forbidden, or those things are not done which are commanded. Now, it is just as certain that all things which are forbidden are able to be avoided, as it is that all things which are commanded are able to be effected. For it is vain either to forbid or to enjoin that which cannot either be guarded against or accomplished. And how shall we deny the possibility of man's being without sin, when we are compelled to admit that he can as well avoid all those things which are forbidden, as do all those which are commanded?
  12. Again the question arises how it is that man is unable to be without sin,-by his will, or by nature? If by nature, it is not sin; if by his will, then will can very easily be changed by will.
  13. The next question we have to ask is this: If man cannot be without sin, whose fault is it,-man's own, or someone else's? If man's own, in what way is it his fault if he is not that which he is unable to be?
  14. Again the question must be asked 'If man's nature is good, as nobody but Marcion or Manichaeus will venture to deny, in what way is it good if it is impossible for it to be free from evil? For that all sin is evil who can gainsay?'
  15. And this, moreover, has to be said: God is certainly righteous; this cannot be denied. But God imputes every sin to man. This too, I suppose, must be allowed, that whatever shall not be imputed as sin is not sin. Now if there is any sin which is unavoidable, how is God said to be righteous, when He is supposed to impute to any man that which cannot be avoided?"

## 2. A Dialogue Between Coelestius And An Examiner

**Examiner:** "Show me the man who is without sin."

**Coelestius:** "I show you one who is able to be without sin."

**Examiner:** "And who is he?"

**Coelestius:** "You are the man. But if you were to say, 'I, at any rate, cannot be without sin,' then you must answer me, 'Whose fault is that?' If you then were to say, 'My own fault,' you must be further asked, 'And how is it your fault, if you cannot be without sin?'"

**Examiner:** "Are you yourself without sin, who say that a man can be without sin?"

**Coelestius:** "Whose fault is it that I am not without sin? But if he had said in reply, 'The fault is your own;' then the answer would be, 'How my fault, when I am unable to be without sin?'"

## 3. Passages Which Clearly Show That Man Is Commanded To (And Able To) Live Above Sin

1. There are passages which prove that man is commanded to be without sin. In Deuteronomy, 'Thou shalt be perfect before the Lord thy God.' Again, in the same book, 'There shall be not an imperfect man among the sons of Israel.' In like manner the Savior says in the Gospel, 'Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' So the apostle, in his second Epistle to the Corinthians, says: 'Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect.' Again, to the Colossians he writes: 'Warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ.' And so to the Philippians: 'Do all things without murmurings and disputings, that ye may be blameless, and harmless, as the immaculate sons of God.' In like manner to the Ephesians he writes: 'Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ; according as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.' Then again to the Colossians he says in another passage: 'And you, that were sometime alienated, and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death; present yourselves holy and unblameable and unreprouable in His sight.' In the same strain, he says to the Ephesians: 'That He might present to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing but that it should be holy and without blemish.' So in his first Epistle to the Corinthians he says 'Be ye sober, and righteous, and sin not.' So again in the Epistle of St. Peter it is written 'Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end, for the grace that is offered to you . . . as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as He who hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.' Whence blessed David likewise says: 'O Lord, who shall sojourn in Thy tabernacle, or who shall rest on Thy holy mountain? He that walketh without blame, and worketh righteousness.' And in another passage: 'I shall be blameless

with Him.' And yet again: 'Blessed are the blameless in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.' To the same effect it is written in Solomon: 'The Lord loveth holy hearts, and all they that are blameless are acceptable unto Him.'

2. Because God's commandments are not only not impossible, but they are not even grievous. In Deuteronomy: 'The Lord thy God will again turn and rejoice over thee for good, as He rejoiced over thy fathers, if ye shall hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments, and His ordinances, and His judgments, written in the book of this law; if thou turn to the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and With all thy soul. For this command, which I give thee this day, is not grievous, neither is it far from thee: it is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who will ascend into heaven, and obtain it for us, that we may hear and do it? neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who will cross over the sea, and obtain it for us, that we may hear and do it? The word is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thine heart, and in thine hands to do it.' In the Gospel likewise the Lord says: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' So also in the Epistle of Saint John it is written: 'This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous.'

#### **4. An Examination Of Scripture Passages Presented In Argument Against The Views Of The Pelagians And Scripture Passages Presented In Counter-Argument**

1. For there are passages of Scripture which are in opposition to those who ignorantly suppose that they are able to destroy the liberty of the will, or the possibility of not sinning, by the authority of Scripture. For they are in the habit of quoting against us what holy Job said: 'Who is pure from uncleanness? Not one; even if he be an infant of only one day upon the earth.'" [These people need to keep in mind that Job himself also referred to himself as an innocent man without sin when he said] 'For although I am a righteous and blameless man, I have become a subject for mockery,' and 'Behold, I am very near my judgment, and I know that I shall be found righteous.' Now this is the judgment of which it is said in another scripture: 'And He shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday.'
2. [Remember that Job has also said] 'For many bruises hath He inflicted upon me without a cause', 'For I have kept His ways, and have not turned aside from His commandments, nor will I depart from them', and 'My heart shall not reproach me in all my life'.
3. They (our opponents) are in the habit of next quoting, the passage: 'Every man is a liar.' We tell them in answer, how in the book of Numbers it is said, 'Man is true.' While of holy Job this eulogy is read: 'There was a certain man in the land of Ausis, whose name was Job; that man was true, blameless, righteous, and godly, abstaining from every evil thing.'

4. Moreover, in Job himself it is said: 'And he maintained the miracle of a true man.' Again we read in Solomon, touching wisdom: 'Men that are liars cannot remember her, but men of truth shall be found in her.' Again in the Apocalypse: 'And in their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault.'
5. [Our opponents quote to us that] 'There is none that doeth good, no, not one.' [But this is a generalized statement for in Scripture we see that there are men who certainly do do good.] Holy David indeed says, 'Hope thou in the Lord and be doing good.' Holy Tobit also said, 'Fear not, my son, that we have to endure poverty; we shall have many blessings if we fear God, and depart from all sin, and do that which is good.'
6. They (our opponents) likewise quote what the Saviour says: 'Why callest thou me good? There is none good save one, that is, God?' We must answer this text with another, in which the same Lord says, 'A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth good things.' And again: 'He maketh His sun to rise on the good and on the evil.' Then in another passage it is written, 'For the good things are created from the beginning.' and yet again, 'They that are good shall dwell in the land.'
7. This is another text of theirs: 'Who will boast that he has a pure heart?' The Savior in the gospel declares, 'Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God.' David also says, 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in His holy place? He that is innocent in his hands, and pure in his heart;' and again in another passage, 'Do good, O Lord, unto those that be good and upright in heart.' So also in Solomon: 'Riches are good unto him that hath no sin on his conscience;' and again in the same book, 'Leave off from sin, and order thine hands aright, and cleanse thy heart from wickedness.' So in the Epistle of John, 'If our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God; and whatsoever we ask, we shall receive of Him.'
8. [This is another text that they quote:] 'For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.' [To this we would answer how] the Lord says concerning holy Job, 'Hast thou considered my servant Job? For there is none like him upon earth, a man who is blameless, true, a worshipper of God, and abstaining from every evil thing.'
9. They also quote the text: 'For in thy sight shall no man living be justified.' We must confront them with this answer, from the testimony of the evangelist concerning holy Zacharias and Elisabeth, when he says, 'And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.' And the blessed apostle says, 'That we should be holy, and without blame before Him.'
10. They also quote this passage, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' The same St. John in this very epistle says, 'This, however, brethren, I say, that ye sin not. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin.' Also elsewhere: 'Whosoever is born of God sinneth not; because his being born of God preserveth him, and the evil one toucheth him not.' And again in another passage, when speaking of the Savior, he says: 'Since He was manifested to take away sins,

whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him.' And yet again: 'Beloved, now are we the sons of God; and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope towards Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.'

11. This passage, too, is quoted by them: 'It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.' [To this we answer with another of the same apostle's words when he says] 'Let him do what he will.' and 'Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel. But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.' Likewise, in Deuteronomy: 'Life and death hath He set before thee, and good and evil . . . choose thou life, that thou mayest live.' So in the book of Solomon: 'God from the beginning made man, and left him in the hand of His counsel; and He added for him commandments and precepts: if thou wilt-to perform acceptable faithfulness for the time to come, they shall save thee. He hath set fire and water before thee: stretch forth thine hand unto whether thou wilt. Before man are good and evil, and life and death; poverty and honour are from the Lord God.' So again in Isaiah we read: 'If ye be willing, and hearken unto me, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye be not willing, and hearken not to me, the sword shall devour you: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken this.'
12. If any one say, 'May it possibly be that a man sin not even in word?' then the answer, which must be given is, 'Quite possible, if God so will; and God does so will, therefore it is possible.'