

Week 9: Sin¹

I. Introduction: The Fact of Sin

There is something terribly wrong with the world. Read CNN and you see the following: “ISIS kills dozens in Afghanistan.” “Several reported dead and wounded in attack in Munich.” “Man lying down with hands up shot by police by accident.” “Not enough protection for rape victims in India.” Police killed in Dallas and Baton Rouge. Terrorism in Nice, France. Violence in Turkey.

What’s the problem with our world? You watch the news, read the papers, talk to classmates or co-workers? What do they say? Some say the issue is *economic*. There wouldn’t be so much unrest and violent uprisings if there were vibrant, growing economies. Some say the issue is more *judicial*. Courts are corrupt, or incapable of handling cases. Some say the issue is *political*. Congress bickers while ordinary people suffer. Some say the issue is the *family*. Too many single-parents, no stable role-models in the home. Some say the issue is *education*. People are basically good, but they’re a blank slate and so need to receive knowledge and moral enlightenment or they’ll follow negative role models.

There may be a grain of truth in many of these explanations, but all these assessments share one common theme. It’s this: the greatest problems we face, are *structural*. Our most pressing problems are *outside us*. Like a car that’s out of alignment, or a bone that’s been broken - our world merely needs some fine-tuning, some structural repairs, and we’ll be good as new.

And this is where the Bible steps up to the mic and silences the cacophony of cultural voices. Our most pressing problem isn’t *structural*, but *moral*. It’s not out *there*, but in *here*. Our most pressing problem is sin, which means falling short of God’s standard and rebelling against his laws. Sin is what has messed us all up, and that in turn is what has messed up the structures of society.

II. The Problem of Sin: There is a Standard

But that creates another problem, doesn’t it. I mean, sin? Seriously? Sin is so passé. So *Scarlet Letter*. So repressive and negative. We live in a culture where sin no longer makes sense. Sin has vanished from our moral imagination, because God has vanished. But if you misunderstand the disease, you’ll never arrive at a cure.

Assembly Introduction: Are people basically good? If so, why is the world filled with so much that’s hurtful and wrong? Christianity teaches that our basic problem is far worse than we might think, but there’s a solution that’s far better than we could ever imagine. To appreciate that solution, we need to study what the Bible says about that offensive three letter word: sin. That’s what we’ll do this morning in our Systematic Theology class, right here in the Main Hall.

And this is the problem of sin. Sin suggests a standard. We can call ISIS evil for its brutal beheadings. We can call the child pornographer evil for how he preys upon and exploits children. This is the convenient thing about evil: it expresses moral revulsion without setting it against any standard. The difference between calling something evil and sinful is this: whereas both are used to describe what is horrific and heinous, only sin understands what's evil in relationship to God.

Our world lives with this uneasy contradiction. We're moral agents, and yet we're seeking to live with thinly defined and highly subjective moral standards. Our culture defines something as wrong mainly if it hurts someone else, which makes the standard for morality another person's claim to have been harmed. The secular West, in a quest for freedom from the eye of God, has traded a perfect divine standard for the shifting standards of what makes any person feel hurt – which, ironically, leads not to liberty but anarchy.

In contrast, Christianity teaches that sin is the only way to make sense of this messed up world we live in. And to assert the existence of sin is to say that God has a standard.

III. Sin in the Biblical Story

And we see the evident nature of this standard because sin is a central aspect of the grand Biblical story. How do we go from everything being good in Gen 1-2, to expulsion from the promised land in Gen 3, murder in Gen 4, the refrain in Gen 5 “and they died...”, the flood in Gen 6-9, Babel in Gen 11? The sin of Gen 3 is the answer.

In fact, sin is such a dominant concern in the Old Testament, there are several words used in Hebrew to try to capture what it means.

The most common word for sin in Hebrew [חטא *ht'*] occurs about 600 times. It carries the sense of missing the target, failing, falling short of the goal.

The second most common term for sin [עוון *'awôn*], translated “iniquity” in older translations and “wickedness” or ‘perversion’ in more modern translations, has a root meaning of ‘bending’ or ‘twisting.’ Here, the image is one of distortion. Sin is a perversion.

A third term for sin [פשע *psb'*] is usually rendered, ‘transgression,’ ‘revolt’ or ‘rebellion.’ ‘Crime’ may be the best equivalent here. Sin is criminal behavior against God's law.

I could keep going: the also Bible speaks of sin as unrighteousness, ungodliness, a debt to be paid. And sin is what makes us unfit for God's presence. Isa 59.2: “*Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.*” Sin, in short, is elevating the self to the self the place that only God should have. All of this lay in embryo in the first temptation, “*you will be like God.*” Gen 3:5

And the solution to the problem of sin is Jesus Christ. When John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he proclaimed: “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). That was the reason he was named “Jesus,” Matthew 1:21: “*You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*” That's the solution, but to appreciate the salvation Christ came to bring, we need to go back to the beginning: we turn to

IV. The Fall: The Essence of Sin

Turn with me to Gen 3. God has made the world and everything in it. And it was “good.” He made man and woman to express dominion over all he has made, to rule the earth and subdue it.

We get to Gen 3:1-7: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” 2 And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’ ” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

This chapter describes how sin tragically entered into the human condition. It gives an explanation for the universality of our sinful condition. And it prepares us for how the God of creation will show himself also to be the God of redemption. This first sin, the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, teaches us three things about all sin generally.

1. **First, notice how their sin sought to redefine the basis for knowledge: it gave a different answer to the question: “What is true?”** Whereas God had said that Adam and Eve would die if they ate from the tree (Gen. 2:17), the serpent said, “*you will not surely die*” (Gen. 3:4). Eve decided to disbelieve God’s word and conduct an experiment to see whether God spoke truthfully. Part of the way sin works is to convince us that God’s word isn’t trustworthy. Sin says, “you can’t follow God’s word; it will lead you astray.” Sin begins with believing a lie and disbelieving God.
2. **Their sin sought to redefine at the basis for moral standards: it gave a different answer to the question “What is right?”** God had said that it was morally right of Adam and Eve not to eat from the fruit of that one tree (Gen. 2:17). But the serpent suggested that it would be right to eat of the fruit, and that in eating it Adam and Eve would become “like God” (Gen. 3:5). Eve trusted her own evaluation of what was right rather than allowing God’s words to define right and wrong. Beware a self-made morality.
3. **Their sin sought to redefine the basis for identity: it gave a different answer to the question, “Who am I?”** The correct answer was that Adam and Eve were God’s creatures, dependent on him and always to be subordinate to him as their Creator and Lord. But Eve, and then Adam, succumbed to the temptation to “be like God” (Gen. 3:5), thus attempting to put themselves in the place of God.

We see here the pride that lies at the heart of sin. Sin is forsaking God in order to find in yourself what you were meant to find in God.

So Genesis 3 teaches that God created humankind good – not flawed. But Adam and Eve chose to disobey. As a consequence of their sin, God curses mankind and the creation with the sentence of death. Suffering, sickness, disease, natural disasters – they did not exist before this moment, but are the results of the fall.

V. The Origin of Sin

This raises a challenging question, though: when and how did sin originate? We see in Genesis 3 the first *human* sin, but we also see the serpent wickedly tempting Adam and Eve. Surely the serpent was sinning in doing this.

First, we must insist that sin *doesn't* originate in God. Sin and evil, in biblical theology, are totally alien to God: his 'eyes are too pure to look on evil' (Hab. 1:13). He 'is light; in him there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5). 'God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone' (Jas. 1:13). Deut. 32:4 declares that God's "works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he."

Rather, there are hints in scripture that prior to this moment in the garden, there had been a "fall" among some of the angels. Not much is said about what happened, or why it happened. The closest we get may be Jude v. 6, "and the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day." 2 Pet 2:4, "God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell." Similar to what happened with Adam and Eve, it seems these angels were not satisfied with their place, but desired a higher position. Pride and conceit bred rebellion. Now, don't misunderstand: Satan isn't some second deity warring against God. Christianity isn't dualistic in that sense. There is only one God. Satan is a fallen creature, a sinful angel.

This means that Satan's fall, and Adam and Eve's fall after it – which is the fall that the Bible is mainly concerned to explain, because it is what has affected us all – both occurred according to the sovereign plan of God. Let's think carefully about this, though. The Bible insists God is sovereign, so sovereign that nothing that takes place in the universe can escape the outermost boundary of his control – Rom 11:36, from him are all things – yet the Bible insists that God is the very standard of goodness. Thus theologians have suggested that God stands behind good and evil asymmetrically. He stands behind good in such a way that the good can ultimately be credited to him; he stands behind evil in such a way that what is evil is inevitably credited to secondary agents. In the story of Job, Satan has no power over Job without God's sanction; yet God is never the one who does evil. He is never the author of sin. He governs all that happens, yet he has never done wrong.

We must say this is a mystery; while we know that the existence of evil and God's goodness and sovereignty are compatible truths, Scripture doesn't reveal to us how they are compatible. It would be presumptuous to claim that we do know these secret things of God. As we just saw, the very first human sin involved trying to know hidden things and thus be like God. We are the creatures, he is the Creator. Much more could be said about the existence of evil but we've covered that in other classes.

Comments, questions?

So, there you have something of the nature of sin and the beginnings of sin. Now, let's put together everything else the Bible says about sin, particularly about how sin has affected us.

VI. A Theology of Sin: Seven Statements

1. Inherited Guilt: We are counted guilty because of Adam's sin.

Look at Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..." Paul is teaching here that when Adam sinned, God reckoned the guilt of his sin to all people that would descend from him. Though we didn't yet exist, God, looking into the future and knowing that we would exist, counted us as those who were guilty like Adam. Look down at verses 18-19:

"Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience **many were made sinners**, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19).

What Paul means is that Adam functioned uniquely as our representative head. All members of the human race were represented by Adam in the time of testing in the Garden of Eden. As our representative, Adam sinned, and God counted us guilty "in Adam," in the sense that Adam represented the whole human race.

Some thinkers have pushed back at this idea of representation. But if you think it's unfair for us to be represented by Adam, then you should also think it's unfair for us to be represented by Christ and to have his righteousness imputed to us by God. That's exactly Paul's point in Romans 5:12-21: God deals with us either as represented by Adam (and thus guilty) or represented by Christ (and thus covered by Christ's righteousness). Again, verse 19: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." (v. 19). This is often referred to as Federal Theology, from the Latin *foedus* for covenant or treaty; God deals covenantally with humanity based on which figure represents us, either Adam or Christ.

2. Inherited Corruption: We have a sinful nature because of Adam's sin.

In addition to the legal guilt that God imputes to us because of Adam's sin, we also inherit a sinful nature because of Adam's sin. This means that we are born corrupted and because of that all of us commit actual sins. We thus confirm the guilty sentence we've inherited from Adam.

Psalms 51:5: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." David is so overwhelmed with the consequences of his own sin that as he looks back on his life he realizes that he was sinful from the beginning.

Or Psalm 58:3, "The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies."

The inherited tendency to sin does not mean that human beings are all as bad as they could be. The constraints of civil law, the good gifts of family and government, the conviction of conscience (as we see in Romans 2) – all of these flow from God’s common grace to all people, and they provide restraining influences on man’s sinful tendencies. We don’t sin every single moment of every day – but we sure do sin a lot every day.

3. Total Depravity: In our natural state we lack spiritual good before God.

We have no worthiness in ourselves and are morally bankrupt. Again, this doesn’t mean people are as bad as they could be or that we’ve lost the image of God. We still bear his image, and people are capable of doing deeds that on one level are good and kind. But because we are enemies of God, even these good deeds do not please him, because we don’t do them to honor Him. Robert Reymond summarizes this doctrine well: “Man in his raw, natural state as he comes from the womb is morally and spiritually corrupt in disposition and character. Every part of his being – his mind, his will, his emotions, his affections his conscience, his body – has been affected by sin (this is what is meant by the doctrine of total depravity). His understanding is darkened, his mind is at enmity with God, his will to act is slave to his darkened understanding and rebellious mind, his heart is corrupt, his emotions are perverted, his affections naturally gravitate to that which is evil and ungodly, his conscience is untrustworthy, and his body is subject to mortality.”² We see this all through the Bible:

Genesis 6:5-6: “The Lord saw that... every intention of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil continually.”

Psalms 14:2-3: “The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who after seek God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.”

Isaiah 64:6: “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

Ephesians 2:1-3: (Paul telling Christians what their nature was before being regenerated by the holy spirit) “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air.”

4. Total Inability: In our actions we are unable to do spiritual good before God.

Someone once explained the gospel to me this way: we’re drowning in the ocean and God throws us a life raft which we then have to grab on to and he pulls us out of the waves. Sounds nice, but biblically speaking, we can’t grab on to the life raft at all. We’re incapable of approaching God or doing what he requires. We’re not fighting at the top of the ocean, we’re dead and sunk all the way down to the bottom. Again, Robert Reymond: “Because man is totally or pervasively corrupt, he is incapable of changing his character or of acting in a way that is distinct from his corruption. He is unable to discern, to love, or to choose the things

² Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 450.

that are pleasing to God. As Jeremiah says, ‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil’” (Jer 13:23).³

A few more verses on this: Romans 8:7-8: “The mind that is set on the flesh... does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

I Corinthians 2:14: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

II Corinthians 4:4: “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

5. All are sinful before God.

Scripture testifies to the universal sinfulness of mankind. No one is exempt. No one is above this description. David says, “No one living is righteous before you” (Ps. 143:2). And Solomon says, “There is no one who does not sin” (1 Kings 8:46). Paul says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

6. A single sin makes us legally guilty before God.

As we saw earlier, sin is personal opposition to God. It is not the greatness of the law that makes sin worthy of punishment, but the greatness of the Lawgiver. Paul affirms that “the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation” (Romans 5:16).

James declares, “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (2:10-11).

7. We deserve God’s eternal wrath because of our sin.

Eph 2:3: “We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Or John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

Sin is not only unjust, reprehensible, filthy, and disgusting to God. It rightly deserves God’s good and perfect punishment. God disapproves of sin and rightly pours out wrath on his enemies who have scorned, refused, and disobeyed him. Why will God definitely punish sin? John Murray explains: God will not be false to his own character.

“To be complacent towards that which is the contradiction of this own holiness would be a denial of himself. So that is the correlate of his holiness. And this is just saying that the justice of God demands that sin receive its retribution. The question is not at all: How can God,

³ Ibid., 453.

being what he is, send men to hell? The question is, How can God, being what he is, save them from hell?”⁴

Conclusion

That question is a good place to end. It points us forward to what we’ll study next week. The cacophonous and ugly sounds of our shameful sin should lead us to despair of our own righteousness and tremble before God’s wrath. But there was one man who never sinned, who was a new Adam. Adam disobeyed the Father in the Garden of Eden, but Jesus obeyed the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was exiled from God’s presence on the cross, draining the cup of God’s wrath to the full, absorbing the fullness of our shame and guilt and transferring his righteousness to all who believe. If we fail to see sin as our biggest problem, then Christ’s sacrifice just seems odd. But when we rightly mourn our sin, then we can rightly delight in the Savior. That’s what we’ll do next week as we study the person of Christ – our beautiful, sinless, matchless, gracious King.

⁴ John Murray, “The Nature of Sin,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 2:81-82, quoted in *ibid.*, 457.