



GROWING IN GRACE

UNIT 4: WHAT IS OUR DEEPEST PROBLEM?

THE BIG IDEA: SIN

OBJECTIVES

- To see the gravity of sin.
- To understand the multi-dimensional nature of sin and its effects.
- To embrace the fullness of the gospel which addresses all aspects of sin.
- To learn to turn from sin and rely on Jesus alone.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ~ Romans 3:23

If God's goal is to form us ever more into the image of Jesus and thus into true humanity, then we have to ask how we have been malformed? How have we been shaped in ways that distort the image of God in us? This inevitably brings us to the topic of sin, which in turn presents us with a problem of vocabulary. There are many words that have been used in the past to describe the human condition which remain in circulation today, but they have become so thoroughly repurposed that it is difficult to know what they mean anymore.

The author Francis Spufford points to the word "sin" as a prime example of this. He suggests that in our contemporary usage "sin" carries a memory of ancient condemnation, but the memory is now so distant and faint that the word is used primarily to refer to something like a guilty pleasure, often associated with food or sex. He writes, "Everybody knows...that 'sin' basically means 'indulgence' or 'enjoyable naughtiness.' If you were worried, you'd use a different word or phrase. You'd talk about 'eating disorders' or 'addictions'; you'd go to another vocabulary cloud altogether. The result is that when you come across someone trying to use 'sin' in its old sense...it's hard to hear anything except an invocation of a trivially naughty pleasure."

It is not difficult to see how reviving the definition of "sin" will result in an uphill battle given its contemporary usage. Yet nothing else will suffice to describe the seriousness of the problem we face as human beings. When the Bible invokes the word "sin," it seeks to describe a multi-dimensional defect within human nature that simply cannot be eradicated by human means. The word is intended to convey a dire situation.

There are several different dimensions to sin. Internally, we sin against ourselves. Horizontally, we sin against one another. Vertically, we sin against God. But all sins, including those we commit against one another and even against ourselves, are sins against God. This is why King David can say, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51.4) even after committing adultery with Bathsheba and plotting her husband Uriah's death. David is not denying he sinned against fellow human beings. Rather David acknowledges that ultimately it is God's authority that we violate, his design that we ruin, and his love that we scorn whenever we sin. God is invariably the most offended party with respect to any sin.

The Bible uses a variety of different words to communicate the severity of sin and its effects upon humanity. Of course, there is typically overlap in the aspects that are present in any given situation. Sin is sinister and insidious. Its tentacles spread like a disease, and it is possible that all three aspects of sin are at work simultaneously, multiplying their effect. Only God can cut sin off at the root, stop its spread, and remedy our situation.

1. Sin as Transgression (Spiritual Rebellion)

Problem: We rebel against God's authority

Effect(s): We acquire guilt and experience shame

God's Remedy: Forgiveness and restoration

The word *transgression* (Hebrew: *pesha*) means to break away, to commit an offense, or to willfully disobey. It means to rebel. It is the deliberate substitution of our will for God's. On the one hand, this leads us to reject a merely therapeutic view of sin. We cannot simply shrug our shoulders and say, "To err is human" or "No one can help it" – as if we were no more responsible for our sin than we are for catching a common cold. To the contrary, transgression reveals that while sin is universal, God holds us responsible for how we live our lives. We are culpable. On the other hand, sin understood as transgression leads us to reject a merely legal view of sin that regards sin as simply breaking a law. The essence of sin is not a broken law, but a broken relationship. When we sin, we do not violate an arbitrary law, but we violate the authority of the God who made and loves us.

As a result of transgression, sin produces guilt and results in the experience of shame. Fortunately for us, the bible speaks to both. Notice that in the foundational account of humanity's fall in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve are not only guilty of eating the forbidden fruit, but they experience shame. Upon eating the fruit, Adam and Eve "knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3.7) so they made makeshift clothes for themselves and "hid from the presence of the Lord" (Genesis 3.8). Though the word "shame" is not used, it is certainly implied. This is clear when compared to Genesis 2.25 where Adam and Eve are described as being "naked and unashamed."

What is the difference between guilt and shame? Dick Keyes suggests that guilt and shame are related but distinct. To better understand the difference between the two it may be helpful to consider their opposites. The opposite of guilt is innocence, whereas the opposite of shame is honor. Sometimes guilt and shame come together in the same act. I can tell a lie and experience guilt because I know it is wrong, and I can feel shame at the same time because I thought I was the kind of person who would never succumb to telling a lie. Sometimes guilt and shame operate independently. I can do something that I know is morally wrong yet feel unashamed about it. This is not to my credit, but it happens. On the other hand, I can experience shame about something that is morally irrelevant. For example, I could be ashamed of my body even though I haven't done anything wrong. There are also occasions where guilt and shame work at cross purposes. It is possible to feel ashamed for doing the right thing. I may think that identifying myself with Jesus is the right thing to do, and yet I feel ashamed admitting that to my colleagues at work.

How do we account for these differences? One way to think about it is that guilt and innocence have to do with morals, whereas shame and honor have to do with models. We experience guilt when we break a moral standard, but we experience shame when we fail a model person to whom we look up or a mental model of who we should be. In other words, we may sense that we have not lived up to the expectations of a model person or community – or that we have failed to live in accordance with an idealized conception of our selves. The author Brené Brown suggests that part of the reason why shame can often feel more threatening than guilt is because guilt focuses on behavior, whereas shame focuses on the self. To acknowledge one's guilt requires saying: I made a mistake. To acknowledge shame feels like saying: I am a mistake.

Thankfully, by his super-abounding grace, God addresses the problem of both guilt and shame through the gospel. The only way to rectify guilt is through forgiveness. On the cross, Jesus takes our guilt upon himself and dies in our place so that he might forgive us and offer us his righteousness and life. By faith in

Christ, God justifies us, meaning that he acquits us and legally declares us “not guilty” – not on the basis of who we are or what we have done, but on the basis of who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

But how does God address our shame? God restores us to a position of innocence in his eyes through forgiveness, but how does God restore us to a position of honor? The answer is: through personal acceptance. God does not simply forgive us and tell us: “You can go. The past will no longer be held against you, but I don’t want to spend time with you.” Rather God embraces us and tells us: “You can come. Welcome to a renewed relationship with me.” God’s forgiveness covers our guilt, and his acceptance covers our shame. In other words, the gospel is not less than legal pardon, but it involves so much more. By his sheer grace, our loving Father adopts us into his family through Jesus’ work on our behalf. The author of Hebrews declares, “He is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Hebrews 2.11). Jesus is not ashamed of us, but joyfully includes us in his family.

When we experience shame, we tend to go into hiding – as Genesis 3 also suggests. It is not so much that we fear the consequences of our actions, but rather we hate ourselves for what we have done. We do not want to be seen for who we are. For that very reason, it is striking that the first question God asks human beings in the scriptures is: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3.9). From the first pages of scripture, we see that God engages in a search and rescue mission in order to restore lost human beings to himself, culminating in the work of Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus not only dies in our place, but he is also shamed in our place as he hangs naked and humiliated. Jesus bears our guilt as well as our shame so that he might offer us his innocence as well as his honor.

2. Sin as Iniquity (Spiritual Brokenness)

Problem: We rebel against God’s design

Effect(s): Brokenness, inner corruption, enslavement, idolatry

God’s Remedy: Deliverance and healing

The word *iniquity* (Hebrew: *avon*) comes from a word meaning to break or to twist. It means to distort. Just as a dislocated bone will cause significant discomfort, so a life that is not centered on God will lead to great pain. Iniquity shows us that sin cannot be reduced to outward behaviors, but it stems from distorted beliefs and desires that underlie human actions. It points to the ways in which we so easily deceive ourselves and end up living against that which is truly good for us.

When the heart is centered on anything other than God, our beliefs about God, our selves, and reality are distorted. We become “futile in our thinking.” At the same time, our longings and desires become excessive, inordinate, and enslaving. Our hearts are “darkened.” As a result, we end up worshipping some created thing rather than the Creator. Human beings are incurably worshippers. We will either worship God or we will worship something else. It is impossible to worship nothing. This was the insight that David Foster Wallace once offered in a commencement speech:

“In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things -- if they are where you tap real meaning in life -- then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already -- it’s been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up-front in daily

consciousness. Worship power -- you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart -- you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on."

We call this idolatry. An idol is simply a false god that we believe we "must have" to be happy and fulfilled or else life will lose its meaning. Often the object of inordinate longing is a good thing, but when a "good thing" turns into an "ultimate thing" it becomes an idol of the heart. As John Calvin observed,

"Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols. Man's mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a god according to its own capacity; as it sluggishly plods, indeed is overwhelmed, with the crassest ignorance, it conceives an unreality and empty appearance of God."

Our idols can be personal, like romantic love, marriage and family, career success, critical acclaim, wealth, material possessions, power, influence, physical appearance, human approval. We can make an idol of a romantic partner ("If only I were married"), of family ("If only we had children"), or of our children's successes ("If only they get into that school"), or of our parents' expectations ("If only I could make them proud"). These are all good things, but they become idols when they become the most important thing in our lives.

Idols can also take a corporate form when groups of people turn cultural values into absolutes. We can make a corporate idol out of race, gender, or sexuality, a political or economic ideology, or a set of values, (whether "traditional family values" or "progressive liberal values"). If we derive our ultimate worth and value from our identifications ("I know I am valuable because I am this"), associations ("I know who I am because I belong to that group") and affiliations ("I am accepted because I subscribe to this ideology"), rather than deriving our worth and value from being a child of God, then we have turned a good thing into a corporate idol.

When we look to anything other than God to provide us with our ultimate source of significance ("I am important") or security ("I am safe"), then we have begun to bow down to a false god. Idolatry often explains why we do what we do. It is the sin underneath the sin. Why do we lie? Because we have to be in control. Why do we cowardly avoid conflict? Because we have to be accepted. Why do we take what is not ours? Because we have to be comfortable. And yet, no matter how much we serve our gods, they do not have any actual power to help us. The problem with false gods is that by definition they are not real, and therefore they can never deliver on what they promise. They cannot fulfill our deepest longings and they cannot forgive our deepest failures. Yet we sense that we have to have them, which is why, in the end, all idols enslave and destroy.

The irony is that we have entered a point in history where many human beings no longer believe that there is anything sacred or divine "out there" in the universe that we should worship, but we do believe that there is something sacred or divine "in here" within ourselves. We see ourselves as beings with hidden depths. We believe that in order to thrive and flourish as human beings, we need to be "authentic" and to express whatever lies within us. No one else has the right to tell us who we are or how we should live. Therefore, discovering one's identity has become a sacred thing. We have made our identity our god. Our worship zeroes in on the self.

As a result, everyone ends up trying to save themselves. We may not use that actual language, but that is what we are doing. Religious people try to save themselves by following all the rules and by living a good life because they believe that if they are "good enough" then God is obligated to bless them, accept them, and make their life go well. But non-religious people are also trying to save themselves by discover-

ing their identity. They believe that if they do not express their “authentic self” and whatever makes them unique, then they will miss the whole point of their lives.

The world around us tells us to believe in ourselves, to follow our dreams, and to create our own futures. But more often than not, despite our best efforts, we are unable to accomplish all that we hope to achieve, leaving us feeling hopelessly dissatisfied. Or perhaps we fully realize all our highest aspirations, but no sooner do we close our fingers around the prize than we discover that it feels like nothing at all. You finally get the corner office – and then what? The achievement fails to deliver what was promised.

Christianity is the only religion in the world that tells us: You can’t save yourself. Christianity does not tell us what we need to do in order to climb our way up to God. Rather Christianity tells us that God has come down to us in Christ to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Only God can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, and only God can heal our wounds from broken, empty promises. That is why Paul praised the Thessalonians for embracing the gospel. They “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” There is no true meaning, purpose, or value that can be found apart from him.

2. Sin as Falling Short (Spiritual Failure)

Problem: We rebel against God’s love

Effect(s): Fractured relationships and alienation

God’s Remedy: Reconciliation

The word translated as *falling short* (Hebrew: *chata*) means to miss the mark, to go wrong, or to be unclean. To fall short means to fail. It reveals that sin involves both acts of commission as well as omission. God not only calls us to avoid certain attitudes and behaviors, but also to live lives of love, generosity, contentment, and service. You might outwardly “keep all the rules,” and yet still fail to be the kind of person God calls you to be. So we cannot think of sin in completely negative terms as simply the violation of God’s prohibitions. We must also view sin in terms of a failure to live up to God’s positive vision of peace or shalom – understood as the weaving together of God, humans and creation in wholeness, harmony, and delight. God seeks our full flourishing as human beings, but we fall short.

Human beings are fundamentally lovers. You are what you love. It’s not primarily what you do, or what you think, but what you love that determines how you live your life. ***The problem with human nature is fundamentally a problem of disordered love.*** As Augustine writes in his Confessions, “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” We were made to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love others as ourselves and to love them “in God.” Only then would we find the identity, meaning, joy, and hope we were created for. Thus our hearts are restless and disquieted within us until we learn to love God above all else. The fundamental problem with human nature is that we either love the wrong things or we love the right things in the wrong order. Our loves are all mixed up.

This is how Augustine described a person with rightly ordered love in his classic work, On Christian Doctrine:

“He neither loves what he ought not to love, nor fails to love what he ought to love, nor loves that more which ought to be loved less, nor loves that equally which ought to be loved either less or more, nor loves that less or more which ought to be loved equally. No sinner is to be loved as a sinner; and every man is to be loved as a man for God’s sake; but God is to be loved for his own sake. And if God is to be loved more than any man, each man ought to love God more than himself.”

The problem with human beings is that we fail to realize we owe God a debt of love. Al Stewart illustrates the human predicament as follows. Imagine a woman whose husband dies, leaving her with nothing. She has a son and raises him well. She tells him to become the kind of person who always tells the truth, works hard, and gives back to the community. This mother doesn't have much money, but she works two jobs and scrapes enough funds together to send her son to college. He graduates, gets a good job, and becomes everything his mother had hoped. He is honest, hard-working, and generous. He is a pillar within his community. There's just one problem. He hardly ever speaks to his mother. He might send her a card on her birthday if he remembers to do so. But he doesn't return her phone calls or ever bother to visit. An outsider might say, this man is a "good person." He has not broken any laws. Yet everything within us cries out, "This is wrong." This man owes his mother a debt of love. Everything he has is the result of his mother's love. He would be nothing without her.

We are that son. Everything we are, and everything we have is a gift of God's love. We would be nothing without him. Yet we live as if he doesn't exist. We may be good people who live good lives, but we have missed the most important thing there is: to love God first. Our disordered love is exacerbated by the individualism, self-absorption, and hedonism of our society that encourages us to put ourselves first and to pursue our own goals and desires ahead of everything else. As a result, we have wracked up an insurmountable debt against God because we have scorned God's love and failed to give him the honor and respect we deserves. Like the people whom Paul addressed in Lystra or Athens, we have taken advantage of God's life blessings but refused to acknowledge him (Acts 14.15-17; Acts 17.22-31). We have dishonored God, and we realize all this to our shame.

Yet the wonder of the gospel is that despite our failure to love God, he has canceled "the record of debt that stood against us" and set it aside by "nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2.14). Despite our rebellion against him, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5.8). Where there was once hostility, God has brought peace. Though we were once God's enemies, we have been "reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5.10). God's radical, unconditional love for us despite all our sin, evokes our love for him in return. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4.19). God in his grace has done all that is necessary to set us free from sin and self in order to live for God and others.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How has our culture cheapened the word "sin," and why must we recapture its old meaning for the sake of the kingdom?

2. Read Psalm 51.1-12 and Psalm 32.1-2. How does David use the words "transgression," "iniquity," and "sin" to describe his condition? How does David ask God to resolve the issue of his multi-faceted sin?

3. If sin can be understood as transgression (spiritual rebellion), iniquity (spiritual brokenness), and falling short (spiritual failure), where do you see traces of each of these different aspects of sin in your own heart?

4. Describe the difference between guilt and shame.

5. In what ways have you experienced the gospel's remedy to both guilt and shame?

6. What would you say are the biggest idols in your life? Have you seen ways in which idols fail to deliver what they promise?

7. What lesser loves and loyalties compete for the allegiance of your heart? What would need to change in order to give God first place in your life?

8. How is simply "living a good life" insufficient if God has made us for himself? Why is it important to see that we owe God a debt of love?

SCRIPTURE STUDY: ROMANS 3:9-18

⁹What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

¹²*All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;*

no one does good,

not even one.”

¹³*“Their throat is an open grave;*

they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

¹⁴*“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”*

¹⁵*“Their feet are swift to shed blood;*

¹⁶in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷and the way of peace they have not known.”

¹⁸*“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

The Radical Nature of the Problem

From Paul’s point of view in the 1st century, there were essentially two major classes of people: the Jews like himself – and everybody else, whom he refers to as “Greeks.” If we were to ask: What is the fundamental problem with the human condition? – Paul responds in this letter to the Romans by asserting that all people without distinction – Jews and Greeks alike – experience the same plight because we are all “under sin.” There are only two options from the standpoint of the gospel. You are either “under sin” or you are “under grace.” You are either living under the dominion and power of sin or you are living under the freedom and power of grace. Paul reveals the radical nature of the problem. The issue is not “sins” in the plural with a lower case “s,” but rather “Sin” in the singular with a capital “S.” Paul teaches us that Sin is a power that holds us captive and from which we must be freed.

Martin Luther came to understand this through a surprising experience, which you could call the failure of the confessional. The Catholic Church of Luther’s day taught that sins could be forgiven if they were confessed. Desiring to be a good monk, Luther set out to search his soul, to ransack his memory, to probe his motives in order to confess all his sins so that he could be forgiven. As a result, he confessed frequently and often daily. On one occasion he confessed his sins for more than 6 hours to his confessor, Johann von Staupitz, who was understandably exhausted by the experience. In a moment of exasperation, Staupitz once told Luther, “God is not angry with you. If you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive – such as killing one’s parents, public blasphemy, despising God, adultery. These are the real sins. You need to have a list with real sins listed, if Christ is to help you. Don’t deal with such junk and puppet sins, and don’t make a sin out of every fart.” (It’s nice to know that a monk can have a sense of humor! But you can see that Luther was on to something.)

Luther realized that there is something much more drastically wrong with us human beings than merely a list of offenses. At times Luther would feel proud and think to himself, “I haven’t done anything wrong today.” But then misgivings would set in, and he would begin to ask himself, have I fasted enough? or am I poor enough? And what would ever be “enough”? If sins must be remembered and recognized in order to be

confessed and forgiven, then how do we know if we have ever remembered, and recognized, and confessed enough? Luther knew from experience that our memory can trick us in order to protect ourselves, and sometimes we are simply unaware of our faults and therefore cannot confess them.

The failure to be able to confess sins “enough” led Luther to a deeper understanding of sin. He saw that the problem is much more radical, meaning it affects us at the “radix” – at the very root of our being. ***Sin is much more than individual and isolated acts of wrong, but rather it is a condition or a state of being.*** He saw that just as a doctor does not need to examine each and every blister in order to determine whether a patient is suffering from small pox, so we do not need to turn over every single instance of wrongdoing to determine whether there is something wrong with us spiritually. It is not that human beings do wrong things, but rather the whole person is corrupted and needs to be changed. It is true that we commit individual and isolated acts of wrong, but the reason why we sin is because we are sinners. ***Apart from God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we are all “under Sin.”***

Paul points to the radical nature of the problem by piling up quotations from the psalms in verses 10-12: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” At first glance, this sounds a bit overblown. What does Paul mean? Take the first word, “righteous.” “Righteous” is the opposite of “sinful.” It is a positional word. In one sense of the word, it means to be upright, blameless, or right standing. With respect to one’s position, you are either in right standing with God or you are not. You can’t be just a little bit righteous.

Paul shows us that sin is first and foremost spiritual not moral. It is more about who you are, not what you do. It primarily concerns your nature, not your behavior. Your actions are simply symptomatic of your nature. There is an essential “godward direction” to sin. ***The basic position of human beings towards God is one of enmity and hostility.*** Paul refers to us in our natural state as “enemies of God” (Romans 5.10). Apart from God’s grace, our minds are “hostile to God” and therefore we “cannot please God” (Romans 8.7-8).

It is important to be clear upon this point. People say all the time, “I don’t identify with the language of being called a ‘sinner.’ I don’t need the gospel. I may not be perfect, but I have not done anything that bad. I’m a good, moral, decent person. If there is a God, I am sure he would accept me for who I am and for how I have lived my life.” But that’s not the question. The issue is not whether you are a good, moral, decent person compared to the person next to you. The issue is where you stand in relation to God. Ultimately, there are only two ways to live. You can live for yourself and for your own glory. Or you can live for God and his glory. You can’t have it both ways. The fundamental problem with human beings which Paul seeks to elucidate is that ***the natural self does not love God, but hates God because the essence of sin is pride.*** We resent the idea of worshipping another. We prefer to answer to no one but ourselves. Moreover, we do not even recognize our hatred toward God because sin blinds us to our true attitude.

Now if it is true that the basic position of human beings towards God is one of enmity and hostility, then we see the radical nature of the problem. In order to be right with God, making a few behavioral modifications will never suffice. ***We do not simply need a change of behavior, we need a change of nature.*** But how can human nature be changed?

The Pervasive Extent of the Problem

First, Paul reveals the radical nature of the problem with the human condition. Second, he shows us the pervasive extent of the problem. Sin not only runs down to the core of who we are intensively, but it also runs out through the whole of who we are extensively. Sin affects us from root to branches. The effects of our sinful condition are not merely isolated to one or two areas. The truth is that there is no part of our being

that is not affected by sin's presence. If sin were the color "blue," then every aspect of our being would carry at least a tinge of blue – mind, heart, conscience, will, and body.

In verses 11-18, Paul explores the pervasive effects of sin. It darkens the mind – "No one understands." It warps the affections – "No one seeks for God." It blinds the conscience – "All have turned aside." It thwarts the will – "No one does good." It afflicts the body – throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet. In other words, there is nothing you can do, nothing you can say, nothing you can think, nothing you can choose that is unaffected by sin's presence. This is serious.

But notice what Paul is not saying. Paul is not suggesting that human beings are as bad as they could possibly be. He is not saying that every human being is as flawed as another. He is not saying that we cannot tell right from wrong or that we cannot do anything noble, praiseworthy, virtuous, generous, or self-sacrificial.

Why is that important? Many people say they do not accept what the bible says about human sinfulness because it sounds too dark, too negative, too pessimistic. We prefer to think that human beings are basically good, whereas Paul sounds as if he is saying that human beings are basically worthless.

It is critical that you hear the bible rightly on this point. The opening pages of the scriptures make clear that God created human beings in his own image. Though God's image has been defaced as a result of human sin, it can never be erased. That is why Psalm 8 provides us with a rather high and exalted as well as a rather low and humble view of human nature at one and the same time. The psalmist reveals that human beings are complex and nuanced creatures. On the one hand, the psalmist asks, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" Compared to God in all his glory, human beings are nothing but a speck of dust. Why should God care anything about us at all? And yet at the very same time, the psalmist proclaims that God has crowned each and every human being with glory and honor. Every human being therefore is imbued with inestimable dignity, value, and worth no matter who they are, no matter what they believe, no matter what they have done or failed to do. Though sin has corrupted and twisted human nature, every human being retains their God-given creational goodness, and every human being deserves to be treated in accordance with their intrinsic worth.

But admittedly, verse 12 is challenging. Here Paul quotes Psalm 53.3 where the psalmist writes, "Together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." It is imperative that we keep the context in mind. Paul is describing where human beings stand in relationship to God. Of course, human beings are capable of doing all kinds of good things all the time. But that's not what Paul is talking about. He is saying that there is nothing that human beings can do – no matter how good – that can rectify our relationship with God. ***In other words, there is nothing "savingly good" that we can do to reconcile ourselves to God.*** Isaiah 64.6 says much the same thing: "All our righteous deeds are like filthy rags." Our motives are never pure. Even our noblest acts are tinged with pride, self-love, and selfish desire.

Certainly, we should always strive to do the good that we can in every circumstance. But if we rely on those good deeds to try to make ourselves acceptable in God's eyes or to try to get leverage over God, then – in Luther's colorful words – we turn those deeds into "foolish, idle, damnable sins." This is what separates a merely religious person from a Christian. The difference lies not in how you view your sins, but how you view your goodness. Both moralists and Christians acknowledge that their evil deeds are tainted by sin, but only a Christian acknowledges that their good deeds are tainted by sin. ***A religious person will repent of their sins, but only a Christian will repent of their sins as well as their "damnable good works," which they falsely think will obligate God to give them what they really want.***

The Only Solution to the Problem

If sin is radical and pervasive, if it affects us intensively to the root and extensively to the branches, then what is the solution? Most people, including many who call themselves Christians, fall into the same trap. They assume that if they manage the ledger and ensure that their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds, then God (if he exists) will accept them because they have lived a good life. But this is all just a form of self-salvation. Effectively, we say to ourselves, “If I am good enough, if I am moral enough, if I am ethical enough – or failing that – if I am contrite enough, if I am sincere enough, if I am remorseful enough – then I can save myself. But if that is what you think, “you have not yet considered the great weight of sin” (Anselm). The crucial question is: What would ever be enough?

If the problem of sin is this radical and pervasive, then we are irretrievably lost. The only way we can be reunited in relationship to God is if he shows us grace beyond all our merits. Thank God, that is what he has done in and through the person of Jesus Christ.

This is why everyone needs the gospel. The gospel is not merely for the so-called “bad people” out there who have made a mess of their lives. Everyone needs the gospel – from the best to the worst, from the nicest to the meanest. ***It is only against the dark backdrop of human sin that we see the shining glory of the gospel.*** It is only those who understand the shocking seriousness of sin who can appreciate the shocking beauty of grace. ***The goal of the gospel is not to make us nice, but to make us new.*** The goal is not to transform you into a better you, but to save you from the guilt and power of sin. It is to take you out from under the dominion of sin and bring you into the freedom of grace.

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood, from the riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure, save me from its guilt and power.*

*Not the labor of my hands, can fulfill thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow.
All for sin could not atone, thou must save, and thou alone.*

*Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress, helpless look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me, Savior, or I die.*

*While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne,
Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.*

~ Augustus Toplady

There is no amount of work we can do, no amount of zeal we can show, no amount of tears we can shed. All for sin could not atone. We are talking about the total inability of human beings to put themselves in right relationship with God. ***The only solution to the problem of the human condition is God himself.*** Thou must save, and thou alone. And that is precisely what God has done in and through the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf through his life, death, and resurrection.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is it important to see that the problem of sin is fundamentally spiritual rather than moral?
2. Why is it important to see that human beings require a change of nature rather than merely a change of behavior? What does it mean to say, “We sin because we are sinners,” rather than “We are sinners because we sin”?
3. In what areas of life do you resist or resent God’s authority?
4. The bible does not teach that human beings are as bad as they could possibly be. Rather it teaches that there is no aspect of the human person (mind, heart, conscience, will, body, etc.) that is unaffected by sin’s presence. Why is it critical that we see the difference between these two perspectives?
5. What is the difference between a Christian and a mere moralist? How do they differ in the way they view their sins as well as their own goodness?
6. If sin affects us intensively to the root and pervasively to the branches, then we are totally unable to rectify our situation. How does this truth, though bleak, put the spotlight entirely on God’s grace in salvation? What is lost if we minimize the problem of sin?
7. What do you need to do today in order to turn away from sin and rely on Jesus alone?

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE: ISAIAH 64:6

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

PRAYER PROMPTS

- Pray that you might come to a deeper understanding of the radical and pervasive problem of sin.
- Pray that you might more fully appreciate God's grace to you in Jesus Christ.
- Pray that God might enable you to experience joy as you confess your sins, perhaps by praying Psalm 51 throughout the week.
- Pray this for one another.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: ROMANS 1:18-25

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

1. In verses 18-21, Paul reveals the source of human sin, which is described as “the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” Why does Paul say that all human beings are “without excuse” if they do not seek or serve God?
2. What is made plain to us about God – and what is not (verses 19-20)? In what ways do we suppress the truth we can know about God (verse 18)?
3. What causes our minds to become “futile” and our hearts “darkened” (verse 21)?

4. In verses 22-25, Paul explains that when human beings reject God, they worship and serve created things. In other words, if you do not worship God, you will worship something else. We may not bow down to images representing mortal men, birds, animals or reptiles, but what good created things do we worship and serve?

5. In verses 24-25, Paul describes the consequences of idolatry in our lives. Paul suggests that our inordinate desires (“the lusts of their hearts”) can become so strong that we can be “given over to them.” What begins as a choice becomes a compulsion. How do the idols of our hearts become enslaving?

6. Even though a Christian is set free from the dominion and power of sin, the idols of our hearts continue to exert a pull on us. We need the Holy Spirit to continually renew our hearts and minds so that we might live out the freedom we have in Christ. Where do you feel the lingering effects of sin’s influence in your life?

7. When we worship a created thing rather than the Creator, we “exchange the truth about God for a lie” (verse 25). What are some of the lies we tell ourselves about where true joy, significance, and security can be found?

8. In what ways do we love the gifts we have received from God more than the Giver?

9. If God’s wrath is God’s settled opposition to the “ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,” then why is it even more spectacularly remarkable that God came to our rescue in and through Jesus Christ despite our spiritual rebellion, brokenness, and failure? How does a deeper understanding of God’s wrath help us more fully appreciate his grace?

FURTHER READING: CORNELIUS PLANTINGA, JR, *SIN: NOT THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE*

Lots of North Americans use the word sin only on dessert menus and when telling an inside joke. If they hear the word used seriously, they might conclude that they are in the presence of a Puritan. There are few contexts left in which the word is said and heard straight. A certain number of churches do have a part of the service in which there is confession of sin and assurance of pardon, but in many churches, even preachers mumble when it comes to sin. Such a downer, they think. How can you keep the customers happy if you talk about depressing topics?

So what to do? My purpose in this essay is to describe sin and to do so (mostly) seriously. Once we get into the topic, I think you'll accept that there is such a thing as sin. After all, it's hard to deny that bad things happen in the world and that people are sometimes to blame for causing them. If the word "sin" puts you off as a way of naming these bad things, I invite you to find another word ("wrongdoing," say, or "offense" or "what Wormtail and Voldemort do") and make the mental substitution as I write about sin.

In any case, the great writing prophets of the Bible were unafraid to diagnose sin as the oldest and deepest human problem. They talked about it all the time, often in contexts in which they protested injustice in the land. The prophets knew that sin has a thousand faces. They knew how many ways human life can go wrong because they knew how many ways human life can go right. (You need the concept of a straight line to tell when one is crooked.) These prophets kept dreaming of a time when God would put things right again.

They dreamed of a new age in which human crookedness would straighten out. The foolish would be made wise, and the wise made humble. They dreamed of a time when the deserts would bloom, the mountains would run with wine, people would stop weeping and be able to sleep without a weapon under their pillow. People would work in peace and work to fruitful effect. A lamb could lie down with a wolf because the wolf had lost its appetite. All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder. All humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, lean toward God, and delight in God. Shouts of joy and recognition would well up from women in streets and from men at sea.

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. In English we call it peace, but it means far more than just peace of mind or ceasefire between enemies. In the Bible shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as the creator and savior opens doors and speaks welcome to the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be..

Because God is at the pinnacle of shalom ("the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight") Christians usually define sin with reference to God. It's a religious concept, not just a moral one. All sin has first and finally a Godward force. We could therefore draft a definition like this: a sin is any act—any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed—or its particular absence, that displeases God and deserves blame. Then sin (no article) is the tendency to commit sins.

But once we possess the concept of shalom, we are in position to specify our understanding of sin. God is, after all, not arbitrarily offended. God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. (In fact, that is why God has laws against a good deal of sin.) God is enthusiastically for shalom and therefore against sin. Let's say that evil is any spoiling of shalom, whether physically (by cancer, say), morally, spiritually, or otherwise. Moral and spiritual evil are agential evil, that is, evil that, roughly speaking, only persons can do or have: agential evil thus comprises evil acts and dispositions. Sin is, then, any agential

evil for which some person (or group of persons) is to blame. In short, sin is culpable shalom-breaking...

Shalom naturally includes not only a healthy relation of people to people and of people to nature and of nature to God, but also the proper relation of people to God. In the Christian view, human beings ought to love and obey God as children properly love and obey their parents. Human beings ought to be in awe of God at least as much as, say, a middle school basketball player is in awe of Kobe Bryant. They ought to marvel at God's greatness and praise God's goodness. In the Christian view, failure to do these things—let alone indulging in outright scorn of God—is sinful because it runs counter to the way things are supposed to be. Godlessness is anti-shalom. Godlessness spoils the proper relation between human beings and their maker and savior. The great North African Christian thinker St. Augustine famously stated the relation like this: "O Lord," prayed Augustine, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Let me add that sin offends God not only because it bereaves or assaults God directly, as in impiety or blasphemy, but also because it bereaves and assaults what God has made. Sexists and racists, for example, show contempt both for various human persons and also for the mind of God. God loves not only humankind, but also human kinds. In the cramped precincts of their little worlds, sexists and racists disdain such differences in kinds.

In sum, shalom is God's designed plan for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and, therefore, an affront to their architect and builder...

Human life is not the way it's supposed to be. And so the world's great thinkers often diagnose the human predicament and prescribe various remedies for it. They diagnose ignorance and prescribe education. They diagnose oppression and prescribe justice. They diagnose the conformism of "bad faith" and prescribe the freedom of authentic choice. A few look at the world, fall into a depression, and put their prescription pad away.

Christians think that the usual diagnoses and prescriptions catch part of the truth but that they do not get to the bottom of it. The human problem isn't just ignorance; it's also stubborn pride. It's not just oppression; it's also corruption. That's why newly liberated victims of oppression often end up oppressing others. The human problem isn't just that we timidly conform to prevailing modes of life; it's also that nothing human can jolt us out of our slump. Even a move to a pristine backwoods in British Columbia won't save us because we carry our trouble with us.

The real human predicament, as Scripture reveals, is that inexplicably, irrationally, we all keep living our lives against what's good for us. In what can only be called the mystery of iniquity, human beings from nearly the beginning have so often chosen to live against God, against each other, and against God's world. We live even against ourselves. An addict, for example, partakes of a substance or practice that he knows might kill him. For a time he does so freely. He has a choice. He freely starts a "conversion unto death," and for reasons he can't fully explain, he doesn't stop until he crashes. He starts out with a choice. He ends up with a habit. And the habit slowly converts to a kind of slavery that can be broken only by God or, as they say in the twelve-step literature, "a higher power..."

According to Genesis 3 and Romans 5, our whole race "has a habit" where sin is concerned. Near the beginning of our history, we human beings broke the harmony of paradise and began to live against our ultimate good. As Genesis 3-4 reveal, from nearly the beginning we have rebelled against God and then fled from God. We once had a choice. We now have a near-compulsion—at least that's what we have without the grace of God to set us free. Over the centuries we humans have ironed in this near-compulsion with the result that

each new generation enters a world that had long ago lost its Eden, a world that is now half-ruined by the billions of bad choices and millions of old habits congealed into thousands of cultures across all the ages. In this world even saints discover, in exasperation, that whenever they want to do right “evil lies close at hand” (Romans 7:21). We are “conceived and born in sin.” This is a way of stating the doctrine of original sin, that is, that the corruption and guilt of our first parents have run right down the generations, tainting us all...

Measuring the damage of the fall, the Belgic Confession states that by our original sin we human beings have “separated ourselves from God, who is our true life” and have “corrupted our entire nature” (article 14). The Confession means to tie all of us in with Adam, Eve, Cain, and Lamech as their descendants. The first sin of Adam and Eve has spread and congealed into original sin—a tendency of the whole race, for which we bear collective guilt. All of us are now bent toward sin. We have in the world not just sins, but sin; not just wrong acts, but also wrong tendencies, habits, practices, patterns that break down the integrity of persons, families, and whole cultures.

What are the ingredients in corruption? First, a corrupted person turns God’s gifts away from their intended purpose. She perverts these gifts. For example, she might use her excellent mind and first-class education not to extend the reach of God’s kingdom, but just to get rich. She wants to get rich not in order to support terrific projects in the world, but just to move up the social ladder. We ordinarily think of a prostitute as someone who rents her body. But a person can also rent her mind for a high hourly rate, and she perverts it if she rents it because she wants to feel superior to the people who bag her groceries and park her car.

Second, a corrupted person joins together what God has put asunder. He pollutes his relationships with foreign elements that don’t belong in them. We all know that it’s possible to pollute a river by dumping toxic waste into it. But it’s also possible to pollute our minds with things that debase them. It’s possible to pollute worship by bringing into it unredeemed elements from Vegas lounge shows (the special music is done by a Christian performing artist lying on top of the piano). It’s possible to pollute friendships with social ambition and college sports with taunting. A father who sexually abuses his daughter pollutes his relationship by adding sex to it. Good things have a kind of integrity, a kind of oneness or “this-ness.” A polluted event or relationship is one that has been compromised by introducing into it something that doesn’t belong there. Now the event or relationship isn’t just “this,” but “this and that.”

Take the case of idolatry. Like an adulterer, an idolater corrupts a relationship by introducing a third party into it. (In Scripture, idolatry and adultery are often paired up as emblems of each other.) So idolatry isn’t just an act of craving fame, for example, instead of God. Idolatry is also the act of putting fame alongside God and trying to serve them both. Your god, said Luther, is “whatever your heart clings to,” and that often means we’ve got more than one god. We are like an adulterous husband who, right through his affair, “still loves his wife.” He loves two women—or so he thinks. Similarly, a Christian who wants to be God’s child but also wants to be famous and admired in the world is a person with two loves: God and fame, fame and God. He loves them both. He “wants it all.”

In Scripture, God warns against double-mindedness of this kind not only because it is disloyal, not only because it is staggeringly ungrateful to our maker and Savior, but also because it is so foolish. Idols can’t take the weight we put on them; they’re false gods. Worldly fame can occasionally be used to gain a hearing for the gospel, but it cannot forgive us. It can’t cure us.

Despite rumors, it can’t secure us. And the untamed desire for it can split a person. Divided worship splits worshipers. Divided love splits lovers. The truth is we have to choose. Like a sailor with one foot on a dock and another on a departing catamaran, we have to choose.

The Bible's account of the human predicament is that from the start we've been choosing wrong. We've kept on perverting and polluting God's gifts. It's not just that each of us commits individual sins—telling lies, for example, or plagiarizing a paper. The situation is much more serious than this. By sinning we not only grieve God and our neighbor; we also wreck our own integrity. We are like people whose abuse of alcohol ruins not only their liver, but also their judgment and their will, the things that might have kept them from further abuse of alcohol. The same pattern holds for everybody. We now sin because we are sinners, because we have a habit, and because the habit has damaged our judgment and will...

Despite certain modern assumptions, life with God isn't mainly a matter of knuckling under to our superior—the image modernity so much detests. In the Christian view, we human beings do have to trust and obey God and express our devotion to God, but not merely because God is stronger than we are and surely not because God wants to bully us into submission. We must trust and obey because these responses are fitting: after all, we know something of God's goodness and greatness; we know that God made and rescued us. Some of us know that God graced us so that we are forgiven, accepted, renewed as slowly and arduously as an addict. Indeed, only inside the cradle of grace can we even see the true depth and stubbornness of our sin.

This knowledge of God and ourselves opens us up to a whole range of opportunities and duties—to worship God, to try to please him, to beg his pardon when we fail, to receive God's renewing grace, and out of gratitude to use our lives to weave a whole pattern of friendship, service, and moral beauty.

Christians describe our human situation like this: we must trust and obey in order to rise to the full stature of sons and daughters, to mature into the image of God, to grow into adult roles in the drama of redeeming the world. God has in mind not just what we should be, but also what, one day, we could be. God wants not slaves, but intelligent children; not numb obedience, but devoted freedom, creativity, and energy. That's what the grace of God is for—not simply to balance a ledger, but to stimulate the spurts of growth in zeal, in enthusiasm for shalom, in good hard work, in sheer, delicious gratitude for the gift of life in all its pain and all its wonder.

In short, we are to become responsible beings: ones to whom God may entrust deep and worthy assignments, expecting us to make something significant of them—expecting us to make something significant of our lives themselves. No one of our lives is an accident. None of us simply finds herself here in the world. We have been expected, awaited, equipped, and assigned. We have been called to undertake the stewardship of a good creation, to live within sturdy and buoyant families that pulse with the glad give-and-take of the generations. We are expected to show hospitality to strangers and to express gratitude to friends and teachers. We have been assigned to seek justice for our neighbors and, wherever we can, to relieve them from the tyranny of their suffering. Some Christians have been called, in imitation of Christ, to bear unusual suffering of their own.

But we have also been called and graced to delight in our lives, to feel their irony and angularity, to make something sturdy and even lovely of them. For such undertakings, we have to find emotional and spiritual funding from the very God who assigns them, turning our faces toward God's light so that we may be drawn to it, warmed by it, bathed in it, revitalized by it. Then we have to find our role within God's big project, the one that stretches across the border from this life into the next. To be a responsible person is to find one's role in the building of shalom, the re-webbing of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment, and delight. To be a responsible person is to find one's own role and then, funded by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, to fill this role and to delight in it.