



## **Week 15 – The Origin and Nature of Sin**

### **The Definition of Sin**

Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature . Sin is here defined in relation to God and his moral law.

Sin includes not only individual acts such as stealing or lying or committing murder, but also attitudes that are contrary to the attitudes God requires of us.

Paul lists attitudes such as jealousy, anger, and selfishness (Gal. 5: 20) as things that are works of the flesh opposed to the desires of the Spirit (Gal. 5: 20).

Therefore a life that is pleasing to God is one that has moral purity not only in its actions, but also in its desires of heart.

Our very nature, the internal character that is the essence of who we are as persons, can also be sinful. Before we were redeemed by Christ, not only did we do sinful acts and have sinful attitudes, we were also sinners by nature.

So Paul can say that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5: 8), or that previously “we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind ” (Eph. 2: 3).

We realize from experience that sin is harmful to our lives, that it brings pain and destructive consequences to us and to others affected by it. But to define sin as failure to conform to the moral law of God, is to say that sin is more than simply painful and destructive— it is also wrong in the deepest sense of the word.

In a universe created by God, sin ought not to be.

Sin is directly opposite to all that is good in the character of God, and just as God necessarily and eternally delights in himself and in all that he is, so God necessarily and eternally hates sin.

## The Origin of Sin

Where did sin come from? How did it come into the universe?

First, we must clearly affirm that God himself did not sin, and God is not to be blamed for sin. It was man who sinned, and it was angels who sinned, and in both cases they did so by willful, voluntary choice.

To blame God for sin would be blasphemy against the character of God. "His work is perfect ; for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he" (Deut. 32: 4).

In fact, it is impossible for God even to desire to do wrong: "God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one" (James 1: 13). Yet, on the other hand, we must guard against an opposite error: it would be wrong for us to say there is an eternally existing evil power in the universe similar to or equal to God himself in power.

To say this would be to affirm what is called an ultimate "dualism" in the universe, the existence of two equally ultimate powers, one good and the other evil.

Also, we must never think that sin surprised God or challenged or overcame his omnipotence or his providential control over the universe.

Even before the disobedience of Adam and Eve, sin was present in the angelic world with the fall of Satan and demons.

But with respect to the human race, the first sin was that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3: 1– 19).

Their eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is in many ways typical of sin generally.

First, their sin struck at the basis for knowledge, for 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 die" (Gen. 3: 4). Eve decided to doubt God's word and conduct an experiment to see whether God spoke truthfully.

Second, their sin gave a different answer to the question "What is right?" God had said that it was morally right for 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 and what would be good for her, rather than allowing God's words to define right and wrong.

Third, their sin gave a different answer to the question, "Who am I?" The correct answer was that Adam and Eve were creatures of God, 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.

The New Testament authors look back on this account and affirm that “sin came into the world through one man” (Rom. 5: 12) and insist that “the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation” (Rom. 5: 16) and that “the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning” (2 Cor. 11: 3; cf. 1 Tim. 2: 14).

Finally, we should note that all sin is ultimately irrational. It really did not make sense for Satan to rebel against God in the expectation of being able to exalt himself above God. Nor did it make sense for Adam and Eve to think that there could be any gain in disobeying the words of their Creator. These were foolish choices.

The persistence of Satan in rebelling against God even today is still a foolish choice, as is the decision on the part of any human being to continue in a state of rebellion against God.

Though people sometimes persuade themselves that they have good reasons for sinning, when examined in the cold light of truth on the last day, it will be seen in every case that sin ultimately just does not make sense.

## **Inherited Sin**

How does the sin of Adam affect us? Scripture teaches that we inherit sin from Adam in two ways.

### **1. Inherited Guilt: We Are Counted Guilty Because of Adam’s Sin.**

*Rom. 5: 12 Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—*

This idea, that “all men sinned” means that God thought of us all as having sinned when Adam disobeyed, is further indicated by the next two verses, where Paul says:

*Rom. 5:13 To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law. 14 Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.*

Here Paul points out that from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, people did not have God’s written laws. Though their sins were “not counted” (as infractions of the law), they still died. The fact that they died is very good proof that God counted people guilty on the basis of Adam’s sin.

The idea that God counted us guilty because of Adam’s sin is further affirmed in:

*Romans 5: 18 Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. 19 For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*

The conclusion to be drawn from these verses is that 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 as well as Adam.

God counted Adam's guilt as belonging to us, and since God is the ultimate judge of all things in the universe, and since his thoughts are always true, Adam's guilt does in fact belong to us. God rightly imputed Adam's guilt to us. Sometimes the doctrine of inherited sin from Adam is termed the doctrine of "original sin."

(1) Everyone who protests that this is unfair has also voluntarily committed many actual sins for which God also holds us guilty. These will constitute the primary basis of our judgment on the last day, for God "will render to every man according to his works" (Rom. 2: 6), and "the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done" (Col. 3: 25).

(2) Moreover, some have argued, "If any one of us were in Adam's place, we also would have sinned as he did, and our subsequent rebellion against God demonstrates that." I think this is probably true, but it does not seem to be a conclusive argument, for it assumes too much about what would or would not happen. Such uncertainty may not help very much to lessen someone's sense of unfairness.

(3) The most persuasive answer to the objection is to point out that if we think it is unfair for us to be represented by Adam, then we should also think it is unfair for us to be represented by Christ and to have his righteousness imputed to us by God. For the procedure that God used was just the same, and that is exactly Paul's point in Romans 5: 12– 21: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5: 19).

### **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 inherited sinful nature is sometimes simply called "original sin" and sometimes more precisely called "inherited corruption."

*Psalm 51: Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

Some have mistakenly thought that the sin of David's mother is in view here, but this is incorrect, for the entire context has nothing to do with David's mother. David is confessing his own personal sin throughout this section.

*Psalm 51: 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.*

David is so overwhelmed with the consciousness of his own sin that as he looks back on his life he realizes that he was sinful from the beginning. As far back as he can think of himself, he realizes that he has had a sinful nature.

A similar idea is affirmed in *Psalm 58: 3, "The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies."*

Therefore, our nature includes a disposition to sin so that Paul can affirm that before we were Christians "we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Eph. 2: 3).

Anyone who has raised children can give experiential testimony to the fact that we are all born with a tendency to sin. Children do not have to be taught how to do wrong; they discover that by themselves.

What we have to do as parents is to teach them how to do right, to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6: 4).

In spite of the ability to do good in many senses of that word, our inherited corruption, our tendency to sin, which we received from Adam, means that as far as God is concerned we are not able to do anything that pleases him.

### **In Our Natures We Totally Lack Spiritual Good Before God:**

It is not just that some parts of us are sinful and others are pure. Rather, every part of our being is affected by sin— our intellects, our emotions and desires, our hearts (the center of our desires and decision-making processes), our goals and motives, and even our physical bodies.

Paul says, "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7: 18)

Jeremiah tells us that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17: 9).

Apart from the work of Christ in our lives, we are like all other unbelievers who are "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph. 4: 18).

## **In Our Actions We Are Totally Unable to Do Spiritual Good Before God:**

Paul says that “those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8: 8).

Jesus says, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15: 5).

In fact, unbelievers are not pleasing to God, if for no other reason, simply because their actions do not proceed from faith in God or from love to him, and “without faith it is impossible to please him” (Heb. 11: 6).

When Paul’s readers were unbelievers, he tells them, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Eph. 2: 1– 2).

Unbelievers are in a state of bondage or enslavement to sin, because “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8: 34).

Unbelievers are not even able to understand the things of God correctly, for the “natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned ” (1 Cor. 2: 14 RSV mg.).

We are not able to come to God in our own power, for Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6: 44).

The application to our lives is quite evident: if God gives anyone a desire to repent and trust in Christ, he or she should not delay and should not harden his or her heart (Heb. 3: 7– 8; 12: 17).

“Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb. 3: 15).

## **All People Are Sinful Before God.**

Scripture in many places testifies to the universal sinfulness of mankind .

“They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one” (Ps. 14: 3).

Solomon said, “There is no man who does not sin” (1 Kings 8: 46; cf. Prov. 20: 9).

In the New Testament, Paul wrote: ‘None is righteous, no, not one’ ” (Rom. 3: 9– 10).

He is certain that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3: 23).

John said: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1: 8– 10)

## **Are Infants Guilty Before They Commit Actual Sins?**

Some maintain that Scripture teaches an “age of accountability” before which young children are not held responsible for sin and are not counted guilty before God.

However, the passages noted above indicate that even before birth children have a guilty standing before God and a sinful nature that not only gives them a tendency to sin but also causes God to view them as “sinners.

”“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51: 5).

But then what do we say about infants who die before they are old enough to understand and believe the gospel? Can they be saved?

Here we must say that if such infants are saved, it cannot be on their own merits, or on the basis of their own righteousness or innocence, but it must be entirely on the basis of Christ’s redemptive work and regeneration by the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

“There is one God , and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2: 5). “Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3: 3). Yet it certainly is possible for God to bring regeneration (that is, new spiritual life) to an infant even before he or she is born.

This was true of John the Baptist, for the angel Gabriel, before John was born, said, “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1: 15).

David says, “Since my mother bore me you have been my God.” It is clear, therefore, that God is able to save infants in an unusual way, apart from their hearing and understanding the gospel, by bringing regeneration to them very early, sometimes even before birth.

This regeneration is probably also followed at once by a nascent, intuitive awareness of God and trust in him at an extremely early age, but this is something we simply cannot understand.

We must , however, affirm very clearly that this is not the usual way for God to save people.

Salvation usually occurs when someone hears and understands the gospel and then places trust in Christ.

Regarding the children of unbelievers who die at a very early age Scripture is silent.

We simply must leave that matter in the hands of God and trust him to be both just and merciful.

If they are saved, it will not be on the basis of any merit of their own or any innocence that we might presume that they have.

If they are saved, it will be on the basis of Christ’s redeeming work; and their regeneration, like that of John the Baptist before he was born, will be by God’s mercy and grace. Salvation is always because of his mercy, not because of our merits (see Rom. 9: 14– 18). Scripture does not allow us to say more than that.

## **Are There Degrees of Sin?**

Are some sins worse than others?

The question may be answered either yes or no, depending on the sense in which it is intended.

### **Legal Guilt:**

In terms of our legal standing before God, any one sin, even what may seem to be a very small one, makes us legally guilty before God and therefore worthy of eternal punishment.

Adam and Eve learned this in the Garden of Eden , where God told them that one act of disobedience would result in the penalty of death (Gen. 2: 17).

And Paul affirms that “the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation” (Rom. 5: 16).

“Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them” (Gal. 3: 10).

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

Therefore, in terms of legal guilt, all sins are equally bad because they make us legally guilty before God and constitute us as sinners.

### **Results in Life and in Relationship With God:**

On the other hand, some sins are worse than others in that they have more harmful consequences in our lives and in the lives of others, and, in terms of our personal relationship to God as Father, they arouse his displeasure more and bring more serious disruption to our fellowship with him.

Scripture sometimes speaks of degrees of seriousness of sin.

When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, he said, “he who delivered me to you has the greater sin” (John 19: 11).

When God showed Ezekiel visions of sins in the temple of Jerusalem, he first showed Ezekiel certain things, then said, “But you will see still greater abominations” (Ezek. 8: 6).

Jesus says, “Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5: 19), he implies that there are lesser and greater commandments.

In general, we may say that some sins have more harmful consequences than others if they bring more dishonor to God or if they cause more harm to ourselves, to others, or to the church.



Moreover, those sins that are done willfully, repeatedly, and knowingly, with a calloused heart, are more displeasing to God than those that are done out of ignorance.

If I were to covet my neighbor's car, that would be sin before God. But if my coveting led me to actually steal the car, that would be more serious sin.

If in the course of stealing the car I also fought with my neighbor and injured him or recklessly injured someone else as I drove the car, that would be even more serious sin.

Those in leadership positions are held to a higher standard of accountability by God: "We who teach shall be judged with greater strictness" (James 3: 1; cf. Luke 12: 48).

Our conclusion, then, is that in terms of results and in terms of the degree of God's displeasure, some sins are certainly worse than others.

## **What Happens When a Christian Sins?**

### **Our Legal Standing Before God Is Unchanged:**

He or she is still forgiven, for "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8: 1).

Salvation is not based on our merits but is a free gift of God (Rom. 6: 23), and Christ's death certainly paid for all our sins— past, present, and future— Christ died "for our sins" (1 Cor. 15: 3), without distinction. In theological terms, we still keep our "justification."

Moreover, we are still children of God and we still retain our membership in God's family.

In the same epistle in which John says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1: 8), he also reminds his readers, "Beloved, we are God's children now" (1 John 3: 2).

The fact that we have sin remaining in our lives does not mean that we lose our status as God's children. In theological terms, we keep our "adoption."

### **Our Fellowship With God Is Disrupted and Our Christian Life Is Damaged:**

When we sin, even though God does not cease to love us, he is displeased with us. (Even among human beings, it is possible to love someone and be displeased with that person at the same time, as any parent will attest, or any wife, or any husband.)

Paul tells us that it is possible for Christians to "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4: 30); when we sin, we cause him sorrow and he is displeased with us.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that “the Lord disciplines him whom he loves” (Heb. 12: 6, quoting Prov. 3: 11– 12), and that “the Father of spirits . . . disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12: 9– 10).

When we disobey, God the Father is grieved, much as an earthly father is grieved with his children’s disobedience, and he disciplines us.

In Revelation 3, where the risen Christ speaks from heaven to the church of Laodicea, saying, “Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3: 19).

Here again love and reproof of sin are connected in the same statement. Thus, the New Testament attests to the displeasure of all three members of the Trinity when Christians sin.

Hebrews 12, together with many historical examples in Scripture, shows that God’s fatherly displeasure often leads to discipline in our Christian lives: “He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12: 10).

Regarding the need for regular confession and repentance of sin, Jesus reminds us that we are to pray each day, “Forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us” (Matt. 6: 12).

When we sin as Christians, it is not only our personal relationship with God that is disrupted. Our Christian life and fruitfulness in ministry are also damaged.

Jesus warns us, “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (John 15: 4).

When we stray from fellowship with Christ because of sin in our lives, we diminish the degree to which we are abiding in Christ.

Paul says that if Christians yield themselves to sin, they increasingly become “slaves” of sin (Rom. 6: 16), whereas God wants Christians to progress upward on a path of ever-increasing righteousness in life.

Peter says that sinful desires that remain in our hearts “wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2: 11)— the military language correctly translates Peter’s expression and conveys the imagery that sinful desires within us are like soldiers in a battle and their target is our spiritual well-being.

To give in to such sinful desires, to nurture and cherish them in our hearts, is to give food, shelter, and welcome to the enemy’s troops.

If we yield to the desires that “wage war” against our souls, we will inevitably feel some loss of spiritual strength, some diminution of spiritual power, some loss of effectiveness in the work of God’s kingdom.

## **The Danger of “Unconverted Evangelicals”:**

While a genuine Christian who sins does not lose his or her justification or adoption before God, there needs to be a clear warning that mere association with an evangelical church and outward conformity to accepted “Christian” patterns of behavior does not guarantee salvation.

Particularly in societies and cultures where it is easy (or even expected) for people to profess to be Christians, there is a real possibility that some will associate with the church who are not genuinely born again.

If such people then become more and more disobedient to Christ in their pattern of life, they should not be lulled into complacency by assurances that they still have justification or adoption in God’s family.

A consistent pattern of disobedience to Christ coupled with a lack of the elements of the fruit of the Holy Spirit such as love, joy, peace, and so forth (see Gal. 5: 22– 23) is a warning signal that the person is probably not a true Christian inwardly, that there probably has been no genuine heart-faith from the beginning and no regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus warns that he will say to some who have prophesied, cast out demons, and done many mighty works in his name, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers” (Matt. 7: 23 ).

And John tells us that “he who says ‘I know him’ but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2: 4; here John speaks of a persistent pattern of life).

## **What Is the Unpardonable Sin?**

Several passages of Scripture speak about a sin that will not be forgiven.

Jesus says: Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matt. 12: 31– 32)

Hebrews 6 says: For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away (commit apostasy), since they crucify the son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. (Heb. 6: 4– 6)

Several different views of this sin have been taken.

1. Some have thought that it was a sin that could only be committed while Christ was on earth. But Jesus’ statement that “every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men” (Matt. 12: 31) is so general that it seems unwarranted to say it is only referring to something that could only happen during his lifetime— the texts in question do not specify such a restriction.

Moreover, Hebrews 6: 4– 6 is speaking of apostasy that has occurred a number of years after Jesus returned to heaven.

2. Some have held that the sin is unbelief that continues until the time of death; therefore, everyone who dies in unbelief (or at least everyone who has heard of Christ and then dies in unbelief) has committed this sin.

The idea that this sin is unbelief that persists until death does not fit well with the context of a rebuke to the Pharisees for what they were saying.

3. Some hold that this sin is serious apostasy by genuine believers, and that only those who are truly born again could commit this sin. They base their view on their understanding of the nature of the “apostasy” that is mentioned in Hebrews 6: 4– 6 (that it is a rejection of Christ and loss of salvation by a true Christian).

But that does not seem to be the best understanding of Hebrews 4– 6. 29 Moreover, though this view could perhaps be sustained with respect to Hebrews 6, it does not explain blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the gospel passages, in which Jesus is responding to the Pharisees’ hard-hearted denial of the work of the Holy Spirit through him.

4. A fourth possibility is that this sin consists of unusually malicious, willful rejection and slander against the Holy Spirit’s work attesting to Christ, and attributing that work to Satan. A closer look at the context of Jesus’ statement in Matthew and Mark shows that Jesus was speaking in response to the accusation of the Pharisees that “it is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons” (Matt. 12: 24).

The Pharisees had seen Jesus’ works repeatedly. He had just healed a blind and dumb demoniac so that he could see and speak (Matt. 12: 22). The people were amazed and were following Jesus in large numbers, and the Pharisees themselves had repeatedly seen clear demonstrations of the amazing power of the Holy Spirit working through Jesus to bring life and health to many people.

But the Pharisees, in spite of clear demonstrations of the work of the Holy Spirit in front of their eyes, willfully rejected Jesus’ authority and his teaching and attributed it to the devil.

So it was irrational and foolish for the Pharisees to attribute Jesus’ exorcisms to the power of Satan— it was a classic, willful, malicious lie. After explaining, “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12: 28), Jesus declares this warning: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (Matt. 12: 30).

He warns that there is no neutrality, and certainly those who, like the Pharisees, oppose his message are against him. Then he immediately adds, “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven” (Matt. 12: 31).

The willful, malicious slander of the work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus, in which the Pharisees attributed it to Satan, would not be forgiven.

The context indicates that Jesus is speaking about a sin that is not simply unbelief or rejection of Christ, but one that includes:

- (1) a clear knowledge of who Christ is and of the power of the Holy Spirit working through him,
- (2) a willful rejection of the facts about Christ that his opponents knew to be true, and
- (3) slanderously attributing the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ to the power of Satan.

In such a case the hardness of heart would be so great that any ordinary means of bringing a sinner to repentance would already have been rejected.

Persuasion of the truth will not work, for these people have already known the truth and have willfully rejected it.

Demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and bring life will not work, for they have seen it and rejected it.

In this case it is not that the sin itself is so horrible that it could not be covered by Christ's redemptive work, but rather that the sinner's hardened heart puts him or her beyond the reach of God's ordinary means of bringing forgiveness through repentance and trusting Christ for salvation.

The sin is unpardonable because it cuts off the sinner from repentance and saving faith through belief in the truth.

***The fact that the unpardonable sin involves such extreme hardness of heart and lack of repentance indicates that those who fear they have committed it, yet still have sorrow for sin in their heart and desire to seek after God, certainly do not fall in the category of those who are guilty of it.***

This understanding of the unpardonable sin also fits well with Hebrews 6: 4– 6.

There the persons who "commit apostasy" have had all sorts of knowledge and conviction of the truth: they have "been enlightened" and have "tasted the heavenly gift"; they have participated in some ways in the work of the Holy Spirit and "have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come," yet they then willfully turn away from Christ and "hold him up to contempt" (Heb. 6: 6).

They too have put themselves beyond the reach of God's ordinary means of bringing people to repentance and faith. Knowing and being convinced of the truth, they willfully reject it.

## **The Punishment of Sin**

Although God's punishment of sin does serve as a deterrent against further sinning and as a warning to those who observe it, this is not the primary reason why God punishes sin.

The primary reason is that God's righteousness demands it, so that he might be glorified in the universe that he has created.

He is the Lord who practices "steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the LORD" (Jer. 9: 24).

Paul speaks of Christ Jesus "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, through faith" (Rom. 3: 25).

Paul then explains why God put forward Jesus as a "propitiation" (that is, a sacrifice that bears the wrath of God against sin and thereby turns God's wrath into favor):

"This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins" (Rom. 3: 25).

Paul realizes that if Christ had not come to pay the penalty for sins, God could not be shown to be righteous. Because he had passed over sins and not punished them in the past, people could rightly accuse God of unrighteousness, the assumption being that a God who does not punish sins is not a righteous God.

Therefore, when God sent Christ to die and pay the penalty for our sins, he showed how he could still be righteous—he had stored up the punishment due to previous sins (those of Old Testament saints) and then, in perfect righteousness, he gave that penalty to Jesus on the cross.

The propitiation of Calvary thereby clearly demonstrated that God is perfectly righteous: "it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3: 26).

Therefore in the cross we have a clear demonstration of the reason God punishes sin: if he did not punish sin he would not be a righteous God, and there would be no ultimate justice in the universe. But when sin is punished, God is showing himself to be a righteous judge over all, and justice is being done in his universe.

## Things to Mull:

1. Are you aware of any sin remaining in your own life?
2. Mention any specific ways in which this was true?
3. Why do we not feel more often a deeper sense of the hatefulness of sin?
4. How would you feel about the universe and your place in it if you thought that evil had always existed and there was an ultimate “dualism” in the universe?
5. Can you name some parallels between the temptation faced by Eve and temptations that you face even now in your Christian life?
6. Do you feel a sense of unfairness that you are counted guilty because of Adam’s sin?
7. Do you really think that, before being a Christian, you were totally unable to do any spiritual good before God? Explain.
8. What kind of freedom of choice do the unbelievers whom you know actually have?
9. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, are you convinced that they will not change their fundamental rebellion against God?
10. How can the biblical teaching of degrees of seriousness of sin help your Christian life at this point?
11. Have you known a sense of God’s “fatherly displeasure” when you have sinned? What is your response to that sense?
12. Do you think that Christians today have lost sight of the hatefulness of sin to a large extent? What ramifications are there because of this?

Grudem, Wayne (2009-05-18). Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (pp. 490 - 511). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

