

A God Centered view of Sin

By Pastor Andy Aikens

One day, when my son Caleb was about three years old, he came running through the house at breakneck speed. He had already eaten one cookie and was headed for another. The problem was that his mother had told him he could have only one cookie. Instead of obeying his mother's word and living in the joy of his mother's pleasure, he attempted to take a second cookie.

He could have enjoyed hours of uninterrupted playtime with all kinds of wonderful toys. He could have gone for a romp in the backyard. He could have experienced great delight playing in his sand box or swinging on his swing. But, he wanted that cookie. Somehow in his mind that cookie promised infinite joy. He would not be satisfied until he had eaten the forbidden morsel. The cookie did not deliver the joy that it promised.

His mother heard the cookie come off the pan where it had been sitting. She confronted him immediately. With a mouth full of cookie, he could not deny his crime. Crumbs sputtered from his lips as he muttered that he was sorry. I am sure that he was sorry; he was sorry that he had been caught.

Sin does us the same way. Instead of granting happiness, sin robs us of happiness. Sin can and usually does deliver temporary pleasure, but it never delivers infinite happiness. That is because sin operates in us in a way that is contrary to our design.

People were designed for God. Isaiah 43:6,7 says, "Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory." The problem is that we have been living for everything but God. We have not been living as we were designed. And, we have been caught.

The Bible tells a similar but much more significant story in Genesis 1-3. It is the story of Adam and Eve. Our first parents were faced with a similar dilemma. In the entire Garden of Eden they were forbidden to eat from only one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they had obeyed God's command to not eat the fruit of this tree, they would have enjoyed the pleasure of God. They could have found great delight in all the other trees of the garden. They could have experienced the joy of intimately communing with God and with each other. Instead, they chose to disobey God's commands. They chose to live contrary to their design. They preferred the promise of the tree of knowledge to the promise of the presence of God.

Significant consequences resulted from their action. Genesis 2:16-17 promised that there would be, "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.'" Now, they did not fall over dead on the spot, but they died nonetheless. Death began to decay the soul of man as he charted a course of preferring himself to God, which is the essence of sin. Man was designed to find his greatest delight in God and his glory. However, man chose to live contrary to

this design, and since that time none of us has treasured God, as we should. We have sought our happiness in just about everything but God.

Only if there was no God

The sin of man is of no consequence if there is no God. Material wealth, suffering, success and even sickness are of little consequence if there is not a God. If there is not a God, then there is nothing to do but to throw off restraint and live without regard to each other or any thing. But, there is a God, and he is holy. He created all that there is, governs the universe according to His holy principles and will someday hold all mankind responsible for their lives. And, if the Gallup poles are even close to correct, most Americans affirm that there is a God. This raises interesting questions when considering the moral consciousness of Americans. If we know that there is a God, yet we continue to live as though there were no God, then we must be suppressing or ignoring our knowledge that there is a God.

The Apostle Paul told us as much in his letter to the Roman Christians. In chapter 1 of Romans Paul says, "For 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." He then goes on to explain how all kinds of evil and wickedness abound among all human beings. I have often wondered why sin is so pervasive. It appears that in our denial of God we have taken the next step and denied morality as well. This is merely a cause and effect reality, and I know that it exists because I hear it in our national dialogue. Everywhere I turn, people are redefining right and wrong to fit what seems best in their own eyes. Among the unsaved I really don't expect things to be much different, but when I see the same reality unfolding in the church, I am bothered. It would not be difficult to find members of evangelical churches that believe homosexuality is OK. It is time for a generation of Christians with more than a vague suspicion that something is wrong. We need the next generation to also be able to articulate what is wrong in order to strengthen our churches.

This articulation begins with the correct benchmark for measuring sin. The magnitude of sin should never be measured by comparing men to men. The true measure of sin is calculated by comparing men to God and God's standards. In order to comprehend the depth of man's depravity, we must view the height of God's holiness and know that we are held responsible for falling short. In order to understand what sin is, sin must always be viewed from God's perspective. To view sin from man's perspective reduces sin to a mere list of bad behaviors. However, sin is much more than a list of moral infractions. It is an attitude of the heart that affects all our actions, even those actions that might be deemed good by someone looking at our lives from the outside. Viewing sin from God's perspective is what I mean by the title of this chapter, "a God-centered view of sin."

A God-centered view of sin affirms that sin is not so much about the damage it does to man as it is about the dishonor it does to God. Let's look at five Scripture texts that help us comprehend the devastation of sin. These texts

help us comprehend the devastation of sin because these texts help us see sin in relation to God as opposed to man.

1 John 3:4 says, "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." Since God spoke the law to the fathers and the prophets, this sentence means that sin is a total disregard for what God has said. To disregard the words of a person in authority is to dishonor that person. When we sin, we dishonor God no matter how small the sin is. This is made plain in the next passage.

James 2:10-11 teaches, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker." The slightest infraction of the law is enough to make a person guilty of breaking the whole law. I have often marveled at the lists of grievous sins found in the New Testament. One of those lists is found in Romans 1:29-31, and right in the middle of this list, surrounded by sins like murder and adultery, is the sin of disobeying parents. I dare say that there is not one of us who is not guilty of this infraction. Yet, we do not take God's word very seriously in this matter, even though scripture tells us that whoever stumbles at just one point (of the law) is guilty of breaking all of it.

As we move forward in this discussion we move from those things that are universally recognized as sin to those things that are less recognized but may be more to the point. We must learn to view sin from God's perspective. Therefore, let's look at Romans 14:23, which says, "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." We may boldly say that any action, no matter how moral, that is not done in faith is sin. Hebrews 11:6 corroborates this point when it says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God." By not trusting God as we should, we grievously sin against God. We dishonor him by not treasuring him, as he deserves. Amazing!

Similar in its logic 1 Corinthians 10:31 commands us, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Anything that is not done to the glory of God, intentionally or unintentionally, is sin. It is easy to think of many things we have done throughout any given day that are not done for God's glory. In fact, it is overwhelmingly true that our tendency is to live for our own glory instead. When God is not our singular focus, we dishonor him. Consequently, we are subject to a just condemnation. This view of sin, more than any other, allows us to see the true nature of sin. We display the depravity of our hearts by preferring ourselves to God. This is the essence of our rebellion and it must be recognized for what it is. For even when we seek comfort in television, food or sex instead of God, we demonstrate the treasonous bent of our hearts. If it is not done in faith, and if it is not done for God's glory, then it is sin.

Comprehending the Reality of my sinful condition

Human beings are sinners. This is a hard pill to swallow. When everybody from Jay Jay the Jet Plane to Oprah Winfrey has been telling us that we are pretty good, it is difficult to comprehend why God views humanity as sinful. The self-esteem gospel has reached its zenith in the twenty-first century. Regardless, it is important for believers in Christ to come to grips with *the* foundational truth about humanity. We are sinful. Yes, we were created good in the beginning, but we did not stay that way. Every human being born into this world after Adam and Eve is subject to the ruling principal of sin.

This is because all humanity born after the Fall is born into a very different condition than that of Adam and Eve before the Fall. No one repeats the experience of Adam and Eve in their pre-Fall condition. These distinctions can best be summarized as follows:

- **Pre-Fall** – Able to sin, able not to sin
- **Post-Fall** – Not able to not sin
 1. Pre-salvation = sin is our master
 2. Post-salvation = sin remains in the believer, but not as master (abiding sin)
- **Heaven** – not able to sin

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had the ability to sin or not to sin. However, once they did sin, this all changed. After that first disobedience occurred, they and their posterity no longer had that ability. After the Fall mankind could only sin. Traditionally it is said that man was "not able to not sin."

This is an important Biblical part of a good definition of sin. If we reduce sin to infractions of morality, then we miss the desperation of our condition. We not only do evil, but we also are unable to do any good that will merit salvation. Many like to argue with this viewpoint by referring to man's ability to do good deeds. Boy Scouts can help little old ladies cross the road. But, according to the Bible this is not righteousness. Remember our previous definition of sin. If it is not done in faith, and if it is not done to the glory of God, then it is sin. In a post-Fall world boy scout deeds will always be tainted with wrong motives or intentions, like self-glory or ambition or merit badges.

Therefore, as a result of Adam's disobedience to God all humanity is in bondage to sin. We are sinners by nature as the offspring of Adam. In our natural state we can do nothing other than sin. You may be wondering how we are indicted by another man's disobedience. Allow me to illustrate how it works.

A General sent a dispatch to the enemy commander offering to accept terms of surrender. The second general wrote back requesting a meeting so the terms of surrender could be discussed. If they were satisfactory, the first general would deliver his army over to the other general.

Before the two armies met at Appomattox courthouse in April of 1865, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee met at the MacLean house to discuss the fates of their respective armies. Of all the wars America has engaged in there is none that is more significant to the fabric of our culture. This most famous surrender teaches us a powerful lesson about how one man can represent many.

Lee's decision to surrender his army was agonizing, but in the end, Grant's terms were too good to pass up for an army without any food. On the day that Lee surrendered, not only did *he* surrender, but also his whole army surrendered with him. And, in many ways the entire South surrendered as well.

In like manner, Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit affected all humanity. Like the general of a great army, his decision to surrender to the temptations of sin brought about the surrender of the entire race. In the book of Romans, chapter 5:12 and 14 the Apostle Paul describes what happened this way,

"Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned..."

"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 was a pattern of the one to come."

It is clear from the context that the one man is Adam. This text does not teach that every person relives the experience of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Rather, it teaches that all humanity was represented by Adam and sinned with him in the Garden of Eden.

Some people have difficulty accepting the fact that all humanity was implicated in the transgression of Adam. Regardless, the evidence for this interpretation is in the text. Paul says that death reigned, "even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam." So, why did death reign over them? Death reigned over them because Adam represented all humanity just like a general represents his army. Let's look further into chapter 5.

There are 5 key phrases in Romans 5:12-19 that unfold our interpretation.

- "The many died by the trespass of the one man" (v. 15),
- "the result of the one man's sin: judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation" (v. 16),
- "by the trespass of the one man death reigned through that one man" (v. 17),
- "just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (v. 18),
- "through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners" (v. 19).

From these texts it is pretty clear "that all the (human) race is somehow caught up in Adam's sin."¹

But let's be clear. Even though post-Fall humanity has received a sin nature from Adam it is very important to point out that all men are judged for their own sin. In chapter 2:5-6 of Romans, the word of God says, "But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day

¹ Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans. Eerdmans, 1988. p. 232.

of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works." The act of Adam was merely the instigation of a great disease that infected us all.

Because we all sin

The overwhelming testimony of scripture is that every human is sinful. This is not the testimony merely of Paul, nor is it the testimony of the New Testament only. This is the testimony of the entire Bible. Beginning in 1 Kings 8:46 we read, "there is no one who does not sin." Then, in Ecclesiastes 7:20 the teacher tells us, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." In Psalm 143:2 we hear the patriarch David say to God, "Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you." These Old Testament texts demonstrate the universality of sin throughout redemptive history.

However, the testimony does not end there. Turning now to the New Testament we hear the Apostle Paul tell us from chapter 3 of Romans, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." This verse explains that God holds every person accountable to his law. A little further down in verse 23 of the same chapter he explains why, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Every human commits sin. There are no exceptions.

Galatians 2:16 instructs us that, "By works of the law no one will be justified." Because men cannot obey the law in action or attitude we are subject to the law's just condemnation. As the result of one sin our debt to God is so great that we cannot merit salvation by our own deeds. As true as that is, it is not one sin that condemns us but many. For, ever since that one sin, mankind has been piling up disobedience after disobedience. Our transgression of the holiness of God is infinite.

Furthermore, to deny this truth is also sin. 1 John 1:8 says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." And verse 10 adds to this, "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." Not only is it sin, but to deny the pervasiveness of sin is to call God a liar. I don't know about anyone else, but I am not prepared to do that. For even if you do not believe the testimony of Scripture there is still the testimony of experience. Clearly scripture is authoritative and experience is not. However, to the worldly-minded it is important to point out that any newspaper, history book or news program on television will demonstrate the pervasiveness of human sin. This truth is verifiable in God's word, but it is also verifiable to anyone who is willing to open his eyes, much less look into his or her own heart.

The Human Heart

Speaking of hearts, have you ever heard someone say about another person, "Well, at least he has a good heart?" Another expression I hear often

occurs in conversations where people attempt to be penetratingly honest by saying, "I just wanted to share my heart." I am always wary of such sentiments as these. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Because of the sinfulness of humanity our hearts often deceive us. Even in our desire to have others think well of us, we often tell lies in order to make ourselves look good. Even small lies. To tell a lie in order to give the impression that you are ethical or dependable is a great inconsistency of the heart. Yet, it is commonplace.

Self-knowledge begins by grasping the reality of your own depravity. You cannot begin to be honest until you confess our dishonesty. You cannot be cured of racism until you confess that you are prejudiced. It is impossible to be cured of the diseases of the heart until you acknowledge that you have a disease.

However, we live in an age that pushes a different message. Self-esteem has rapidly become the greatest social issue of our culture. I know that there are many reasons for depression, and I am not attempting to make a sweeping generalization. Yet, there is a common theme that runs through the stories I hear concerning those who are depressed. They feel worthless. I agree that we should be concerned about this, but I disagree with many of the cures that are offered by psychological professionals. A true self-image can only be obtained if it is based in reality.²

Emotional well-being is a serious issue in a person's life, but where does a proper self-image come from and what does it consist of? Our self-image has to be shaped by the gospel. The Gospel has two stories when it comes to mankind. These two stories can be summarized as, "I am a great sinner, and, praise God, Jesus is a great savior!" The first story is we are terrible sinners, unable to do anything that merits God's approval. In fact, we are full of sin (Romans 3:10-23 and Romans 5:12-21). The second story is that Christ has redeemed sinners (Ephesians 1:7; 2:1-5).

The first part of this two-part narrative is extremely important because it is the portion of the story that informs us about where we have come from. The significance of this point for this chapter and the three that follow it is paramount. It is paramount because it is the application of these truths. The primary reason for the failure of the church to produce Biblically consistent disciples rests squarely with our amnesia regarding our first condition. If the work of redemption is intended to take our lives in a particular direction, how can we know where to go if we do not know where we have been?

Romans 5:8 hits the nail on the head by emphasizing where we have been and where we are going. It says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And so we have to think of ourselves in two ways. We must always

² The reality I speak of is the reality according to scripture. As long as psychologists attempt to elevate the self-esteem of their counselees with secular wisdom and drugs they are not working within the eternal reality/perspective of the Bible. That is not to say that medicine is never an option. However, when counselors fail to address issues of sin and redemption, medicine is just a mask. Secular wisdom is never appropriate. It marginalizes the Bible, the church and ultimately God.

remember that left to ourselves we are worthless. This means there is nothing redeeming in any of us in our natural state. In this natural state we are capable of doing good deeds. Many are naturally gifted as well. It is clear that human beings are created in the image of God, and Christians are commanded to love their neighbors. There is some recognition in these truths concerning why and how human beings should value one another apart from the work of redemption. However, none of our good works or dazzling skills will win points with God. We have been separated from him by our sin. This single fact is the great conflict in the history of humanity. The problem to be solved in the narrative of redemption is the problem of man's rebellion against God. However, if we forget that we are in rebellion, then it makes no sense to talk about a savior, a salvation or a church.

Timothy Keller summarized it well when he said, "Without a knowledge of our extreme sin, the cross's payment seems trivial and does not electrify or transform. But without knowledge of Christ's completely satisfying life and death, the knowledge of sin would crush us or move us to deny and repress it. Remove either, the knowledge of sin or the knowledge of grace, and people's lives do not change."³ This process of change begins with a look at the universal condition of sin. The next three chapters will examine the nature of that sin in light of its effects, which are death, guilt and corruption. Hopefully this knowledge of the deep effects of sin will enliven and enlighten our comprehension of salvation. As we come to know ourselves through the Scriptures, my prayer is that we simultaneously come to know the deep mercy that has rescued us from our depravity. Because our hearts are deceitful and wicked, it should not surprise us that we wrestle with sin. It should surprise us that we have any moments of overcoming it. This is not to excuse anyone's sin, particularly my own. Rather, it is hopefully an understanding that will inspire us to repent and look to Christ more often in the matters of the human heart so as to trust him and glorify him.

³ Timothy Keller, *The Centrality of the Gospel*. I have this article in a church planting training manual published by Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.