

Lesson 48: Chapter 6: Paragraphs 4-5: Original Corruption

OUTLINE

Original corruption and actual sin
Original corruption and sin in the regenerate

INTRODUCTION

Am I a sinner because I sin, or do I sin because I am a sinner? Is desire for sin an act of sin, or only the willful consent to that desire? Has sin impacted every part of who I am as a human being, or is there some part like the will or mind that is left intact? Can the unbeliever perform good deeds? Does a Christian still have a sinful nature? What difference does regeneration make? These are the questions that we are concerning ourselves as we come to the end of this chapter on sin.

We have looked at the doctrine of original sin and focused so far on the imputation of Adam's original guilt upon those whom he represented. But the doctrine of original sin has two parts, original guilt which we receive by imputation and the original corruption that came upon human nature as a punishment upon sin that has been handed down to every human being. Paragraph 4 looks at our total inability from which come all actual sins. Paragraph 5 speaks about the remaining presence of sin in the Christian.

Original corruption and actual sin

4. 'From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.' Paragraph 3 spoke about the original guilt and corruption being conveyed to all people. Paragraph 4 finds the cause of all actual sin in the this root cause or original corruption. Why do we sin? It is not because God made us sinful, it is because we have inherited a sinful nature from which all our sins flow. At the time this was an important emphasis which pushed back at two errors. On the one hand you have the Socinians who essentially embraced the Pelagian teaching that we have no sinful nature, we sin because we imitate Adam and his offspring not because of any inner inclination to sin. They had a false notion of free will that they consistently followed even to the point of denying that we had a sinful nature. The other error that needed to be answered was the anthropology of the Roman Catholic Church and Arminianism. They believed that humanity after the fall was not dead in sin but merely sick in sin, that certain faculties were still whole enough that they could exercise their minds and wills sufficiently to search for God and salvation and take hold of God and salvation. Paragraph 4 pushes back at both emphasizing that there is such a thing as a sinful condition; and that we are dead in sin and totally unable as far as good and spiritual things are concerned. Contrary to Socinians we sin because we are sinners, it is not true that we are only sinners because we sin. And contrary to Arminianism and Catholicism every part of who we are is impacted by sin, so that we are totally incapable of good in the sight of God and inclined to all evil.

The first proof text offered is Romans 8:7, v7-8, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.' Paul in describing the natural

man, the one who is not saved and does not have the Holy Spirit. In his native state in sin is predisposed to being against God, there is a natural hostility in his heart which leads him to rebel against God's law, in all its forms, in the heart, in nature, on stone. Paul goes further and explains that he does not because he cannot. This is what we call total depravity, all of what we are as human beings has been impacted by sin so that we reject the good and are inclined to all evil. Also, Col. 1:21, 'And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.' 1 Cor. 2:14 describes this impact of sin on the mind giving rise to what is called the noetic effects of sin, 'The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.' A native hostility to God, an inability to submit to God's law, an inability to embrace spiritual truths, this is what we are. When it comes to the noetic effects of sin there are not only the natural effects like memory loss, dementia, etc. There is the willful suppression of the truth as well, Rom. 1:18; Eph. 4:18. Pelagius was right to say that we are influenced by our environments and sin because we are imitating others, but the bible makes very clear that this is because of our condition in sin, Eph. 2:1-3, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' Our being dead in sin is what makes us follow other sinners, give into the temptations of satan, and be ruled by the desires of our hearts and minds.

Now we admit that human beings are still made in the image of God, and there are still vestiges of God's image in us so that we see a parent selflessly loving a child, we can see a country have good laws the judge evil and commend the good, we can have people give to the needy, and help without getting in return. But none of this denies our bent away from God and good. There is a distinction that theologians use. There is goodness/righteousness 'Coram Deo' which is goodness in the presence of God, and here we say that all have sinned and all have fallen short of the glory of God, and that in order to be declared righteous in the eyes of a holy God for salvation one needs the imputed righteousness of Christ to be justified. But then there is 'Coram mundo' righteousness before the world. Compared to one another we can appear to have a civil good, but compared to God we have no spiritual good. For the purposes of executing law in civil cases we can declare one innocent or guilty; but according to God's standards we are all totally sinful. We are able to perform civil goods, but not spiritual goods. This means that as we compare ourselves with each other depending on upbringing; personality; opportunity, we can seem to have better or worse people. In this world many make distinctions between serial killers and the rest of us. The bible says that all human beings are equally predisposed to sin, equally compromised by sin, though not equal in the execution of sin.

The confession then states that from this state caused by original corruption flows all actual sin. The Puritans distinguished between original sin where we inherited original guilt and original corruption; and actual sin which is constituted by our own actions against God's law. The proof texts that show that sin flows ourselves are James 1:14-15, 13-15, 'Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.' Here we see by contrast that God does not

put the impulse for sin within us, that it comes from our own hearts, our desires. It is not the situation that we are in that makes us sin, it is the desire in our hearts that allow to take root, to entertain, to develop into a plan to act, and then act upon it. Matt. 15:19, 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.' Here Jesus indicates the same source of our sins, our sinful hearts in the grip of our sinful condition. God made me do it; the devil made me do it; my parents made me do it; these and excuses like them are not valid, we choose to sin ourselves, and we do it because of the sin that arises from within our own hearts. The point of these prooftexts is not to offer the idea of internal compulsion rather than external compulsion, simply offering another variety of determinism. The point is to highlight how we are following our own noses as sinners. The issue of whether we are guilty for the sins that arise from within us is not under discussion here, though our true culpability would be affirmed. The reality of the contingency of our actions is already stated under the doctrine of the decree and providence.

Original corruption and sin in the regenerate

5. 'The corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be through Christ pardoned and mortified, yet both itself, and the first motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.' Contrary to perfectionist teaching, Christians still have a sinful nature after salvation. The verses quoted by the confession indicate this. Ecc. 7:20, 'Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.' 1 John 1:8, 8-10, 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.' It is interesting to note that at the time of the Puritans there were a group of people called the antinomians who because the Christian is justified denied that the Christian had any sin; that God ignored any sins on their part. Part of how they were refuted was to prove that the Christian does continue to sin, and does still need to confess their sins. This was not to undermine the fact that the Christian was saved, but to show that holiness was to be pursued and sin not excused. To paraphrase this emphasis you could say that God does justify us from sin, but He does not justify the least sin in us.

The puritans regularly pointed to Romans 7:14-25 to show that the Christian continues to struggle with the sinful nature. One Puritan Anthony Burgess highlights that Romans 7 is not dealing with a condition of habitual sin, what we might think of as addiction or besetting sin, nor so much with the problem of actual sin, but rather the underlying condition of a heart that still wants to sin, the sinful nature. This is a helpful perspective because Romans 7 is not there to excuse sin, or normalize it, but to highlight the ongoing fight between the flesh and the Spirit within us. Gal. 5:17, 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.' I disagree with Lloyd-Jones who spoke of the man of Romans 7 as a man under the conviction of sin. I disagree with Arminius that this is the unbeliever. I disagree with the ideas of some that this is Paul presenting the plight of the Jew under the law. It seems clear to me that though we have some difficult statements that Paul would not often use to describe the Christian, it is a chapter demonstrating the purpose of the law to expose sin, both in his experience as an unbeliever v7-13, and even as a believer, v14-25, pointing away from the law as our hope for salvation and to Christ alone.

The confession states that though we are regenerate and we still have indwelling sin, that sin is truly pardoned. Contrary to the fears of many you can be truly justified and yet still be a work in progress. Last week we looked at the idea of the Christian as two things at the same time, *simil iustus et peccator*, both legally righteous while still sinners by nature. The same thing is taught in Heb. 10:14, 'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.' This verse says that we are perfect and are being sanctified, so which is it, are we perfect or are we not yet perfect? And, the answer is yes. We are perfect in terms of our legal standing, there is no more righteousness that we can add to ourselves, we are righteous now as we will be on judgement day; but the Holy Spirit is dwelling within and causing us to see sin, confess sin, root out sin as we engage in the battle of sanctification.

And even though sin is still indwelling this does not mean we forsake the process of the mortification of sin, or that mortification cannot happen. We recognize that we are crucified with Christ, that the power, but not the presence of sin is overcome. We fight sin from a position of victory and with the due use of means we can put sin to death, we can nurture the fruit of the Spirit. But we will never be able to fully remove the nature of sin from ourselves no matter how hard we commit ourselves to mortifying our sins. Phil. 3:12-15, 'Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.' Chapter 13 on sanctification will pick this idea up and expand on it.

The last line of paragraph 5 is a striking and necessary one, 'yet both itself, and the first motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.' Our condition is not neutral but sinful, and the first motions of our sinful nature when it makes its smallest movements as a sinful nature, those too are sin. At the time of writing the confession there was a disagreement between Catholicism and the Protestants. The Catholics believed that only wilful sin is sin. This was probably the result from a statement by Augustine to that effect, 'Either, then, the will itself is the first cause of sin, or there is no first cause of sin.'¹ But this analysis is not deep enough to touch on the realities of what we are and do. We should be wary of too atomistic a view of our sin where we reduce it to one faculty, mind or will, but rather look at the Bible's view of the heart. The Bible when it describes our heart is of course not referring to an organ, but to the whole of our inner person. Our minds, our desires, our wills and motives would all be part of what the Bible calls the heart. Although on one level we do emphasize the volitional part of our activity to indicate guilt, this would be especially necessary in legal proceedings. There is a level of guilt that we carry that we ignore and even deny, where what we are when we are expressing ourselves naturally, according to our sinful instincts, is in itself not consistent with the image of God, the law of God or the character of God, it is not a thought, desire, or willing that Christ as a sinless human being would have done. Before man we would not prosecute them with the power of the law, but before God we would be condemned. Our concern is to establish all that God calls sin. 'Francis Turretin provides further insight, stating that the initial impulses of the corruptions of nature 'do not cease to be sins,

¹ Quoted by Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, p.171.

although they are neither wholly voluntary nor in our power.’² If an action is not wholly voluntary or within our power we would normally say we cannot be guilty, but we cannot ignore the fact that any water that comes from the polluted well is polluted. Matt. 15:19, ‘For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.’ Luke 6:43-45, “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, ⁴⁴for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.’ For this reason God judges us for sins of the heart and we seek holiness within our hearts, anger, lust, jealousy, envy, greed, coveting, etc. In fact we recognize that we may have sins that we are not even aware of, Ps. 90:8, ‘You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.’ Ps. 139:23-24, ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!’ Psalm 19:14, ‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.’ We recognize that we are bad at seeing our own sin but see it in others, Matt. 7:3. We recognize the deceitfulness of sin, that we are self-deceiving Jer. 17:9. Like the rich young ruler and the Pharisees we excuse, cover up and spiritualize our sins. This is why we need to get back to this teaching.

² Renihan, p213.