

LESSON 3:

How Serious is Sin?

I. Introduction and Review

The previous lesson highlighted the historic Christian teaching that man occupied a high status prior to the Fall. He bore the image of God in knowledge, holiness, and righteousness and exercised dominion over all creatures to the glory of God. At the same time, he was in “happy communion” with God (WCF 4.2). The first question of both Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms aptly describes the chief end of man as to “glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Man was created to be in a covenantal relationship with God, and this end was present in the Covenant of Life—also known as the Covenant of Works—God had with Adam. That Adam could have expected a more intimate communion with God based on his personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience (WLC 20) was exemplified by the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22-24). Christianity thus stands in stark contrast to other world religions and philosophies which assume that people by nature are in a low status, ignorant and imperfect and have to work to overcome that. Biblically speaking, it is the Fall (WLC 21, 23 || WSC 13, 17) which explains the misery, depravity, and evil that we now see around us. Indeed, denigrating the pre-fall high status of man, denying the seriousness of sin and dismissing the idea of God as judges go to the heart of men’s effort to eviscerate the Gospel.

II. The Seriousness of Sin

Since the Fall, people have persistently sought to minimize the seriousness of sin. In the popular culture of our day “sin” often carries the connotation of some artificial prohibition or boundary, the transgression of which can be pleasurable, powerful, and even cool. **Biblically understood, however, sin leads to the corruption of one’s nature and understanding, to addictions, defilement, enslavement to all kinds of evil, bodily pain, shame, guilt, hardened hearts, damaged and destroyed relationships, and ultimately to death, both physical and spiritual** (WCF 6, WLC 25, 27 || WSC 18, 19). The Apostle Paul describes all who are under sin this way (quoting Psalms 14 and 53) in his letter to the Romans:

There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their

Preparation

1. How do people understand the concept of sin in our culture today?

Observation

2. Look at WCF 6, WLC 21-30, WSC 13-20 and Rom. 3:10-18. What are the results of sin? What is at the root of sin?

lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Romans 3:10-18)

This is not some hypothetical world, but the world in which we live now and in which mankind has lived since the Fall. One needs only to look around or turn on media to see evidence of this everywhere. We have become so accustomed to this present darkness that it is difficult for us to comprehend the fact that the “normal” state of man—that is, man as he was created prior to the Fall and as he was intended to be—was totally unlike this. Sin should be abhorrent to us.

Paul’s reference to there being “no fear of God before their eyes” points to what the root of sin really is: obstinate, self-glorifying rebellion against God and the moral order He made embedded in creation. We see this in the Genesis 3 account of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Even before they partook of the forbidden fruit, they accepted a twisting of God’s words (Gen. 3:3-6), desired their own gratification (Gen. 3:6) and entertained the notion that they could attain to a God-like status apart from God’s command (Gen. 3:5).

This mindset of obstinate, self-glorifying rebellion against God and the moral order He created is aptly captured by the popular nineteenth century poem, “Invictus” (1875) by William Ernest Henley:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Note several things about the poet’s attitude. His soul—really, his will—is considered “unconquerable.” The universe is one of capricious chance, void of order or meaning. Nevertheless, he is self-confident and self-reliantly autonomous. This poem has been described as exhibiting Victorian-era stoicism, but the arrogance and the hubris of it is not merely stoic; it is positively

Nietzschean. This is what the world and sinful man aspires to be. We determine our own reality. The real reality, however, is that no one is the master of their fate; all people are subject to other people and to forces outside of themselves. Ultimately, it is God alone is the master and determiner of their fate.

III. God as a Righteous Judge

Combined with the denigration of the concept of sin is the tendency people have to dismiss the notion of God as a righteous, almighty Judge. There are probably fewer biblical doctrines that are more unpopular today – even among “Bible-believing” Christians – than the idea that our God is a judging God. To the contrary, for many people today their favorite Bible verses are Matt. 7:1 (*“Judge not, that you be not judged”*) and 1 John 4:7 (*“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love”*). Most of us probably have heard some variant on the theme from our unbelieving friends and family of “I just can’t bring myself to believe in a God who would judge people and send them to Hell.” Along with this, we also have other negative connotations with “judging.” On (so-called) reality TV shows, the judges are the ones who boot our favorite performers off from the next round of competition. Moreover, we live in a day in which everyone expects to be affirmed as beautiful, successful, smart, skilled, and above average. Not to receive such affirmation is considered hurtful and mean. So, for many Christians, the idea of God as Judge is tantamount to making Him seem mean. In an age of “niceness” such as ours, we do not want to go there.

Reflection

6. What are some reasons people give for rejecting the notion of God as a righteous judge? How would you counter those claims?

Yet, the idea of God judging us is a biblical one, indeed, one our Lord Himself mentions: see Acts 17:31; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 2:16 Rom. 14:10, 12; Matt. 12:36-37. Because of this, **we need to come back to the covenantal relationship God had with Adam before the Fall.** Because man was made to be in a covenantal relationship with God and because he was to both bear God’s image and commune with God, there is more going on in the Fall than simply partaking of the forbidden fruit. Adam was the federal head of all humanity (WLC 22 || WSC 16), and the only other person in all of Scripture to occupy such a position is Christ Jesus Himself (Rom. 5:12-21). Just as Jesus was a Prophet, Priest, and King, so too did Adam hold these offices. As priest, Adam was to tend the Garden and keep it (Gen. 2:15), in effect, to keep the sanctuary pure from defilement. This responsibility defines how Adam should have reacted to Satan’s temptation. In keeping the Garden pure, Adam as Prophet, contrary to Satan’s lies, should have spoken the truth of God’s word, both to his wife and to Satan. As king, Adam should have expelled or destroyed the serpent. It would not have sufficed simply to have refrained from eating the fruit; the serpent no doubt would have tried to tempt Adam and Eve again and again. The serpent needed to be defeated. Had Adam done these things, then he would have shown his obedience to the LORD

and moved to greater intimacy with the LORD, opening the door indeed to the Tree of Life. **Thus, Adam's sin was not merely a slip-up, but a far more deep-seated rebellion.** God's image-bearer and the one who he created to be in communion with Him, betrayed Him on a very personal level. Thus, God hates sin.

The fact that sin is a personal affront to God also makes it less abstract. WLC 24 and WSC 14 are correct in describing sin as "any want [i.e., lack] of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God," but in stating this we must remember that **the Law of God is not some abstract standard**, but is to govern God's relationship with His covenant people. God's standard for His people—which almost certainly was the same for Adam in the Garden—was given when God brought Israel out of Egypt. At that time, He commanded the nation to "*love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength*" (Deut. 6:4-5) and "*love your neighbor as yourself*" (Lev. 19:18). Christ Himself reinforced this standard during His earthly ministry and indicated that these two commands summarized the entirety of the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:34-40). **This runs directly contrary to the notion so prevalent in our day the standard is that our good deeds should outweigh our bad. Not only is that notion impossible to calculate, but the standard is completely binary; either we hit it exactly or we fail. This is a standard no one meets.**

Moreover, the proof text for WLC 24 and WSC 14 draws on 1 John 3:4 which reads, "*Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.*" This underscores the notion that **sin is willful rebellion against God.** We were created to reflect God, but mankind (in Adam's sin with the Fall and in our sins individually) has tried to usurp God's authority and assert its own autonomy, and because of that, we do not reflect the image of God in His perfect holiness. Indeed, because of our sin, we *misrepresent* God's image. Indeed, unless He is working within us, we will not even *want* to reflect Him. God is well within His rights to judge those who are misrepresenting His image. Thus, our sins have a cosmic effect, and are more than just adherence to a list of do's and don't's.

God is not only justified to judge, given the seriousness of the offense done against Him, but must judge, to demonstrate His character as both merciful and just (WLC 28 and 29, WCF 33:2 but see in particular Exod. 34:6-7). This is important to keep in mind against claims by some (e.g., universalists) that God will save everybody. He will not do that since to do that would suppress this revelation of His holy character. His final (eschatological) judgment serves both as a deterrent to sin and as a comfort to believers in persevering under adversity (WCF 33.3). With the latter, in particular, it is important to remember that *all* injustices will be judged in the end. Human justice is imperfect, but God's justice is not. To appreciate this, imagine for a moment if this were not true: any crime, injustice, or wrong not punished in this life, would never be punished at all. The perpetrators would get away with it. The effective message, therefore, would be, get whatever you can in this life, and because if you get away with it, there will never be any accountability, in this life or the next. That makes God out to be hypocritical in terms of being just by His nature. This also has an implication that we often do not like to think about, namely, that we cannot ask God to do justice *for* us, but then expect He should not do justice *to* us. That would be like the

unforgiving servant Jesus talks about in Matt. 18:21-35. It is asking God to be inconsistent with Himself. Therefore, as we seek justice for the wrongs done to us, we have to acknowledge that we have done wrong to others, not the least of whom is God Himself.

Such an acknowledgement brings into focus the humility we need to have – and which the world lacks – in approaching the doctrine of God as judge. Too often people assume that we as human beings start off as innocent and a judging God is nitpicking what we do or do not do. God's pronouncements after the Fall were merely enacting what he decreed when He said that in the day that Adam ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil he would surely die. For this reason, people are not starting from some neutral perspective; all mankind is *already* under a death sentence. Moreover, many who do not want to believe in God as a judging God hold that view because they do not want to be judged nor want their loved ones judged. In other words, they do not want to acknowledge they are insolent rebels deserving of judgment. At the end of the day, those who are inclined to dismiss God as judge need to heed the sobering reminder that since God is our creator and is all-powerful, it is His universe, and He can do whatever He wants with it. He is under no obligation to save us outside of His own outside covenantal faithfulness, let alone meet our expectations of what a "loving God ought to do." **We live at the mercy of the Lord.**

IV. Man's Changed State as a Result of Adam's Sin

Before closing, a few clarifications surrounding man's estate after the Fall need to be addressed to fill out a biblical understanding of sin.

First, there is the issue of what is transmitted from Adam to his progeny. **WCF 6.3 identifies three things that are conveyed: the guilt of Adam's sin, the curse of Adam's sin (i.e., mortality), and a corrupted nature.** It is those things we have inherited from Adam's Fall. Along with this, it is also important to realize this **corruption of human nature did not change what is essential to making us human beings.** The Fall introduced comprehensive ethical corruption into our lives; it did not make us less than human beings. Our fundamental problem as humans is one of a corrupted heart, mind, and soul. It is not our finitude, and we cannot claim that our sins are because of how God made us.

Second, a clarification is needed regarding "Original Sin," as Adam's sin is called in WLC 25, 26 and WSC 18. This is differentiated from the sins that we, as Adam's offspring, have subsequently committed. **Original Sin resulted in a**

Observation

3. According to WCF 6.3, what three things are conveyed to all people because of Adam's sin?

4. What is "Original Sin" according to WLC 25, 16, and WSC 18? How does that differ from our sins?

5. Are all sins equal? Compare WLC 150, 151, and 152.

corruption of man's faculties of knowledge, will, and passions. This is what is being referred to when the Confessional standards (WCF 6.2-5) speak of people having a "corrupt nature." WCF 6.4 and WLC 25 gives a good description of this when it says that because of the corruption of man's nature "...he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually... from which do proceed all actual transgressions." Left to our own devices, we are not inclined to do what is good in God's eyes. Reformed theologians have also spoken of this as "total depravity," although that term can be somewhat misleading. Our "depravity" (i.e., corruption) is "total" in that all faculties are affected, not that we are as bad as we possibly can be. If you have a lifetime to work with, you will perfect your sins to be worse than they are now. **That said, our propensity to sin is so thoroughgoing in every facet of our lives, so entrenched in our psyche, and so habituated in practice that we cannot change of our own accord or under our own willpower. This is what we mean when we say that we are dead in sin.** We are not merely sick; we are dead in sin. We need God to change us.

Lastly, a clarification is needed nowadays in terms of whether all sins are equal. The Westminster Standards are helpful here as well. WLC 152 and WSC 84 both note (to use the WSC's language) that "Every sin deserves God's wrath and curse, both in this life and that which is to come." In other words, any sin is liable to condemn us apart from the redemption extended to us in Christ. At the same time, the Catechisms do recognize that not all sins are the same (WLC 150, WSC 83). To again use the Shorter Catechism's language (WSC 83), "Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others." WLC 151 provides a lengthy discussion of what makes some sins worse than others.

V. The Promise of Redemption

As WLC 30 (and WSC 20) points out, "God did not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery" but brought them out into "an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace." We will be looking at this salvation in greater depth throughout the remainder of this course. What this lesson has shown is that because of Adam's sin and our sins, what God's salvation needs to do is rectify our judicial status before Him and renovate our corrupt natures, both with the goal of restoring us to the communion with Him which Adam had and the greater intimacy that was originally promised. The next lesson will focus on the key events in salvation history.

