

“Foundations: Sin”
Genesis 3:1-13

February 15, 2015

Rev. David Williams
Scripture: Galatians 3:1-13
Sermon:

Introduction

I’ve heard Ravi Zacharias tell a true story twice about a young woman from an Eastern Worldview in which they believe in reincarnation and karma. The woman fell in love and got married. She and her husband, both from a rural area, moved to the city. Over the course of a few years, they grew apart and the woman began an affair. When her husband found out he was devastated. He begged her to break off the relationship and return to him, but she refused. He asked her for one final favour before she left him. In a few minutes, would she please allow him to lay his head on her lap as he used to do. She agreed.

Her husband went to their room for a few moments, and then returned. He lay down on the couch and rested his head in her lap as he had done many times before. After a few moments, the woman realized that he was not sleeping. He had actually stopped breathing! Alarmed, she leapt up and called for an ambulance. By the time help arrived, he was dead. When he stepped away from her and went into their room, he had taken poison.

The woman was wracked with grief and guilt. She struggled to deal with it for some time. Finally, she went to a guru who spoke with her at length. The guru went away and meditated for a time. Then he came back and told her that he had seen into her past lives and his past lives and determined that he has been reaping his karma from a past life. He told the woman she need not feel any guilt whatsoever.

In the West, for decades, our universities have taught that there are no absolutes. Certainly, there are no moral absolutes. Morality is what society makes it. After teaching this for years, is it any surprise that there is rampant corruption on Wall Street? The current economic down turn that has affected most of the world for over 10 years started because a number of financial brokers were dishonest. They packaged large numbers of high risk mortgages together and sold them as investments. Usually, mortgages are a safe investment because only a small percentage of people default on their mortgages and there is the collateral of the actual house backing the loan. So, under normal circumstances, a mutual fund of hundreds or thousands of mortgages should be a safe investment. However, these brokers packaged together all the risky mortgages and sold them as if they were “regular” mortgages. When people started defaulting on their mortgages, it triggered the economic crisis that still affects the world. They didn’t “hurt” anyone, which is our culture’s usual standard of wrong, “Do whatever you want as long as you don’t hurt anyone.” And yet we are surprised at the result of teaching this for generations.

A week ago, at the conference here at the church, “Loving Your Muslim Neighbour,” I heard a powerful testimony from a Christian woman who grew up in a Muslim family. Not only was her family Muslim, but her father was an Ayatollah, a very high ranking Muslim religious leader! She told of how, as a young Muslim woman, she worked in an orphanage in Iraq, not out of love for children necessarily, but in order to build up her spiritual bank account to offset her sins. She barely survived a bomb or missile strike that hit her orphanage and killed everybody else. When she woke up from her coma in the hospital, she was angry her parents had not “pulled the plug.” Why? Because if she had died, she would have died a martyr and that would have guaranteed her entrance into Heaven. As it was, she now had to continue to do good works to outweigh her sins so that when she died and Allah weighed her sins against her good works she would have a chance of entering paradise.

In the West, the word “sin” is a four letter word.[incl pic] If you start talking about sin, you will often be shut down immediately. Why? Because the word sin carries with it the connotation of a moral law, and our culture’s worldview, whether we speak of Postmodernism or Naturalism, rejects the idea of an objective or universal moral law.

And yet, all worldviews have an opinion on sin. All worldviews, religious or secular, attempt to deal with it. Why? Because even if we avoid the use of the word “sin” we all see its affects around us every day. Sin is related to the problem of evil, which everyone, in every culture encounters personally. Sin matters. **Our beliefs about sin, as you can see from these three examples, shape how we live and affect how we treat others.**

So what is the Christian view of sin? **Sin is the fallen state of our nature; our inner disposition of rebellion against God and his lordship reflected in our thoughts, desires, will, feelings and actions.** Now I realize that is a bit of a mouthful, but we are talking about a deep concept here! Review that again- the fallen state of our nature; so sin is part of our nature as human beings. It is our inner disposition of rebellion against God; it is part of our disposition and it is about our relationship with God. It is reflected in our thoughts, desires, will, feelings and actions. It is inner, in our disposition or in our heart, and it bubbles over or over flows in our mind, our desires, our will and our actions.

Some of you here will have never heard anything like this before. I know we have a number of people in our congregation who are very interested in Christianity but are not yet Christians. Others are brand new Christians, who have little or no background understanding or teaching on Christian beliefs. This morning, I hope you **grow in your understanding of one of the foundational beliefs of Christianity.** The whole reason for Jesus coming, dying on the cross and being raised from the dead is to solve the deep problem of human sin. This is very important to understanding Christianity!

There are others here who have a Christian background, who have a lot of church experience who think they understand the Christian view of sin, and yet you, too, may be baffled by this definition. Some of you think, “Sin is the bad things we do.” This view is sorely incomplete. In fact, it reflects the Jewish and Muslim idea of sin more than the Christian idea of sin. It is also the predominant view of sin in the culture around us, even if they reject it. It is this superficial, or simplistic idea of sin that is being rejected by our culture. They are challenging the idea that the things we do are bad. For those of you who are here this morning and, whether you’d thought about it or not, this is the idea of sin that you hold, my hope is that you, too, will **grow in your understanding this morning and mature in your walk with Christ as you gain a deeper insight into the work he does in battling sin.**

Some of you here this morning you already understand that sin is a problem that goes much deeper than what we do. You understand that a person could do nothing at all and still be sinful, still be in need of a saviour. A person in a coma, who can’t do any bad things, still needs a saviour because, as a human being, they are separated from God! If you already understand the deep nature of sin, my hope for you this morning is that you go beyond your own understanding and consider how you would explain this to a non-Christian. We all have co-workers, neighbours, classmates, friends or even family members who are not Christians. If you already know what sin is, **think this morning about how you would serve others by explaining the Christian view of sin to a non-Christian.** How would you explain it to an atheist? What about a Hindu? Or a Muslim?

Where does this understanding of the nature of sin come from? Really, it is developed by looking at numerous passages in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, but it has its foundation in Genesis 3 and the Garden of Eden. Described as “The Fall,” Genesis’ description of Adam and Eve’s sin forms the root of the Christian doctrine of sin, so let’s take a closer look at that passage.

Context

Let’s put this passage in perspective. It was originally written down by Moses, but I’m sure its roots go back deeper than that in terms of oral traditions held by the Israelites while they were enslaved in Egypt. The account, though, was written originally for the Israelites after they were freed from slavery in Egypt and were about to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. They were to be a people different or set apart from the cultures around them and part of that difference was an understanding of sin. What is quite astounding about the account in Genesis that we are about to examine is that it actually tells us that the problem of evil in the world begins with us! The contemporary cultures around Israel would have believed that nature itself, filled with spirits and other supernatural beings, was the source of sin and evil. Yet Genesis tells us that God created the world and it was good. The not so good parts of creation are actually our fault; they are not inherent in nature itself.

Keeping in mind our definition of sin, that it is the fallen state of our nature, our inner disposition of rebellion against God and his Lordship, as reflected in our thoughts, feelings, desires, will and actions, let’s read this passage together.

Text

Read Genesis 3:1-13

Observations

Wow. There's a lot going on here in this text! First, the fact that snakes don't really talk and that knowledge doesn't grow on trees tells us that there is some theological interpretation happening in the way Moses recorded these events. [Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 66] So we need to begin by expecting things to be a bit deeper than they first appear.

Notice where the serpent begins, what is his opening attack? **“Did God really say....” The serpent puts Eve in the position of evaluating God's commands and speaking for God.** That is, the serpent puts Eve in the position of God! That is the root of the temptation, far more subtle and dangerous than the fruit itself!

How does Eve respond? She should have said, “You must ask God himself what he commanded. He will be here this evening since he always visits us.” Instead, she chooses to speak for God, to clarify his command, but she gets it wrong. She goes beyond repeating God's command and adds to it. She says, **“You must not eat the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”** Not only does Eve accept the role of speaking for God, she takes it upon herself to improve upon, or add to God's word.

Now that the serpent has Eve on shaky ground, now that he has drawn her into his trap, he turns up the heat with an outright lie, **“You will not surely die!”** He flatly contradicts the word of God, calling God a liar. He then sweetens the lie with a false promise, “When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

This is the central point of the temptation- to be like God! Some have described the problem of sin as “not letting God be God.” That is, not allowing God his proper place of authority in our lives and in the world. This is the issue at play here. First, **the serpent entices Eve into a debate on God's commands, a challenge to God's authority, then calls God a liar and tells Eve she can elevate herself to God's status if she so chooses.** God initially gave Adam and Eve a choice to follow his command about the tree or not. God did not put a fence around the tree. He merely told them not to eat of it. Now, that power of choice is given a new dimension. To choose to disobey means to be elevated to the status of God, knowing good and evil. “To be as God, and to achieve it by outwitting Him, is an intoxicating programme. God will henceforth be regarded, consciously or not, as rival and enemy.” [Kidner, p. 68]

“When the woman “saw” that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took it and ate it.” Notice, Eve now saw with her own eye. She evaluated the fruit on her own terms, not on God's terms. **Eve looked for herself, judged for herself and chose for herself.** This is the rebellion of sin at work! This is the power of temptation. **Temptations are always pleasing to the eye. We always think we will gain something when we give in to temptation.**

And immediately we see what so often happens. Once temptation is given in to, it turns to ash in our mouths. Eve gave the fruit to Adam, they both ate of it and their eyes were opened, just as the serpent promised. But the opening of their eyes did not make them like God! Instead, they realized they were naked, were ashamed and tried to cover themselves! Temptation never lives up to its promises!

Before, moving on, though, we need to back up one step. How was it that Eve was able to give the fruit to Adam?!? Where has he been this whole time?!? Clearly, Adam was there during the entire encounter. This is another aspect of the nature of sin. Adam was to be Eve's caretaker and protector. He received God's command about the tree directly, before Eve was made. It was up to him to step in and interrupt this whole conversation! He was supposed to correct Eve's mistake in adding to God's word. He should have stomped the serpent to bits when it called God a liar. But instead, Adam sat back and allowed somebody else to be sucked in by temptation. **Adam failed to protect Eve, which was his responsibility.**

It is vital to the account that Adam was there. We not only sin in our actions and active rebellion against God, we also sin in our failure to fulfil our responsibilities to God and one another. Sin had entered the Garden before any fruit was eaten! Also, it is vitally important that it was Eve the serpent addressed and drew in first. Imagine, for a moment, that the roles of Adam and Eve were reversed. Imagine if the serpent had enticed Adam and he had then given the fruit to Eve. Eve would have been justified in defending herself to God, “Adam is my husband. I ate what he provided. He was the one who received your word directly. What position was I in to challenge him?” So the element of the account that it was Eve who was seduced while Adam stood by and watched is significant. Adam failed in his role as provider and protector. Just as Eve freely chose to eat the fruit, not under coercion or duress, Adam knowingly ate the fruit as well, not under duress or out of ignorance.

What happens next? As we mentioned, Adam and Eve realize they are naked and cover themselves with fig leaves, which are spiny and sharp and not very comfortable as under garments! What is the significance of this? It reflects a rift in their married relationship now that they have chosen to rebel against God! They were naked together already. God had already given the command to multiply, so they had presumably already had sexual relations. But now, having chosen for themselves to challenge God, they no longer trust one another either and are afraid in their vulnerability.

Next, when they hear God in the Garden, a sound that used to signal a joyful reunion, they are afraid. Suddenly, in their rebellion, they must hide from God. God, being God, certainly knows what happened. God, being all knowing, also knows where they are hiding. But notice what happens when God enters the garden and they are not where they were usually to be found. **“But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”** Here we see the very heart of God from the beginning. Coming to Adam and Eve, God sought them out, even when they had sinned! This is the message or at least the underlying theme of the entire Bible. God created humanity to be in relationship with Him. Humanity chose to sin, thus breaking that relationship. And yet, in spite of their sin, **God chooses to pursue them, calling to them, seeking them.** In Genesis 3, God came down to the Garden. In the New Testament, we see the second person of the Trinity, the Son, Jesus, coming down from Heaven to Earth as a human being himself in order to carry on that pursuit, to make clearer and louder the call, to seek and to save the lost!

Sadly, we see their response. Reluctantly, they answer God, acknowledging that they were afraid of being seen by Him in their nakedness. God asks them if they have disobeyed. God already knew they had. He wasn't asking them for the sake of gaining knowledge. Rather, this is part of God's judgement of us. He holds us accountable for our sin.

How does Adam respond? He shifts blame twice! He blames God, **“This woman you put here with me,”** and he blames Eve, **“She gave me some of the fruit....”** Following his example, the woman, Eve, shifts blame onto the serpent, another of God's creatures.

In the following verses, which we did not read, God outlines the powerful, painful consequences of sin and rebellion for the serpent, for the woman and for the man and all their descendants.

Interpretation

So what are we to make of all this? As I said, this passage is far more nuanced than we may think at first, especially if we were first introduced to it as children in Sunday School. It is a more sophisticated description of humanity's fall into sin than just eating forbidden fruit!

First, we see that **sin is our choice. It is a matter of free will.** Nobody in this story was forced into doing, saying or thinking anything. [Kidner, p. 67] Although Adam and Eve both tried to shift blame onto others for their sin, in the end, their choice to rebel against God was their own.

Second, hopefully it became clearer to you that **sin is more than just our bad actions. It is an attitude of heart.** The problem began before the fruit was eaten. The problem began when Eve, and Adam along with her, allowed themselves to take the position of judging God's word on their own terms and then evaluating his commands by their own standards. This all came out of a rebellion in their thoughts, desires, feelings and will. It came to a climax in their actions, but **the rebellion took hold of them before they took hold of the fruit.** The tree presented an “alternative to discipleship: to be self-made, wresting one's knowledge, satisfaction and values from the created world in defiance of the Creator.” [Kidner, p. 63]

God created the universe and saw that it was good. Humans were created in God's image and were to live out that nature daily. They were given the freedom to choose, not being ruled by their instincts and environment like the other animals. They used that freedom, that divine power of autonomy, to rebel against God and choose another way. “In this manner people of all eras have attempted to set themselves up as autonomous beings, arbiters of their own way of life.” [Sire, p. 38]

In doing, so, however, they listened to a creature, the serpent, rather than the Creator. They, and by extension we, “lost our ability to stand over against the external universe, understand it, judge it accurately and thus make truly ‘free’ decisions. Rather, humanity became more a servant to nature than to God.” [Sire, p. 38] Sin affected our intellect, our morality, our social relationships and our creativity. [Sire, p. 38]

What does all this mean? What does the Christian doctrine of sin hold that is different from other

religions?

Well, remember the story from the beginning of the woman who committed adultery and her husband committed suicide? She was told that she was not guilty of sin because this was karma from a past life being worked out in her husband. **In Eastern worldviews, we are not only responsible for our own sin, but for unknown sins from past lives.** What a burden! But furthermore, evil is not something to be combatted or treated, it is karma working itself out.

When Mother Theresa first went to India to work with the poorest of the poor, many of those suffering from terrible diseases, she was not greeted with joy! [pic] No! The Hindus in India were actually quite upset that she was aiding those who were suffering. Why? Because they believed she was messing with their Karma! They believed that she was interfering with these people's karmic attempts to work out the sin of past lives. In a system with Karma, you don't just pay for the bad things you've done in this life, but all your previous lives too. So suffering is not something to be alleviated. Rather, suffering is to be endured. **There is no room for mercy or grace in a system involving Karma!**

In our second example, that of Wall Street corruption, we all know that what they did was wrong. We were all livid when we heard executives were being given "golden parachutes" and huge bonuses for trying to fix the situation. We have all seen the drastic economic effects of their dishonesty. But what answer do we really have if there are no moral absolutes? What help is it? If morality is a societal construct, and we've said as a society that the only rule is not to hurt people, then can we truly hold them morally responsible if they did not violate actual laws?

Furthermore, in a system or worldview that denies sin and says that morality is whatever society says it should be, can we really be indignant at what other countries, what other societies say or do? I remember leading up to the last winter Olympics people were upset with Russia's policies regarding homosexuality. Not just homosexual marriage, but homosexuality itself. The media in the West was filled with indignation that homosexual activity is illegal in Russia. **But if morality is whatever society says it is, who are we in our society to complain about what another society says is moral?** Or, for that matter, who are we to complain about human rights violations in other countries? In their society aren't they free to set their own moral standards? Yet we all know, instinctively, that injustice is wrong, even in another country.

In Islam, sin is something that has to be outweighed by good works. The belief is that when a person comes to a certain age or moral responsibility, an angel is assigned to them to record every good deed and every bad deed they do. These will then be weighed against each other when the person dies. But there is no way to gain access to that list! There is no way to see how much sin is in there. So you must constantly work against the shadow of sin that may or may not be in the book.

This is a very superficial understanding of sin and the problem of the human heart. It is similar to the view of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They took great strides to avoid becoming unclean or defiled. They performed all the required duties in the Law and many more. But what did Jesus say to them? He called them "white washed tombs" because they were sparkly clean on the outside, but dead on the inside! [Matthew 23:27] In another instance, he said that it is not what goes into a person, what they eat, that makes them unclean, but what comes of their heart. "For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come--sexual immorality, theft, murder...etc." Sin is a matter of our inner being, of our hearts and minds. It is deeper than what we do, it is about how we think, what we want, and what we choose.

Now Apply It

So what does this all mean for us? Sin is a deeper issue than we might think. It is a problem all people of the world face and, thus, all worldviews have to grapple with. Nobody has an easy answer for the problem of sin that is satisfactory. The Christian worldview's understanding of sin, however, is the most robust, the most comprehensive and deals best with the problem of sin. It is a very big problem!

Sin is not just about doing bad things. It is about being rotten in your heart. That means that reforming your behaviour is not enough to combat sin. You can behave perfectly, but still be filled with anger, lust, envy, pride and hatred.

So what is the solution to the problem of sin? This is where Christianity shines. Having the deepest description of sin, Christianity provides the best solution to the problem of sin. **In Christianity, the solution to**

sin is taken out of human hands. It is a problem too big for humanity to deal with. If our hearts are rotten, how do we renew our own hearts? We can't! So God took on the problem of sin himself.

The solution to the problem of sin is for God Himself, to come to earth as a human being, to live sinlessly and willingly die in our place. **The solution to sin is the willing self-sacrifice of Jesus**, the sinless one, the only person who ever, in his free will, never rebelled against God. And this so angered the people of his day that they killed him for it! But on the third day, God raised him from the dead, vindicating him and then exalted him to the highest place, seating him at the right hand of the Father and giving him the authority to judge all of creation at the appointed time. **The solution to the complex problem of sin involves the complex concepts and doctrines of the Atonement and in the Incarnation, Justification, Repentance and Grace.**

If the solution to sin has been taken out of our hands, how do we partake of the solution? Did Jesus' death and resurrection provide salvation for everybody? Even Hitler? No. To partake of the solution to sin, we need to repent of our rebellion against God. We need to turn back to God, surrendering to Him because sin is rebelling against Him. **We must ask Jesus to forgive for our sin and trust in him to fix our broken relationship with God.** Then, we must willingly submit to the work of the Holy Spirit to perform spiritual surgery on our diseased hearts. We must submit to the Spirit's razor-sharp scalpel as he cuts into our heart to cut out the spiritually gangrenous flesh and spiritually cancerous tumours. We have to cooperate with the Spirit as he works in us to change our very dispositions from one of rebellion against God to one of obedience and loving submission to God.

That is the Christian doctrine of sin and its solution. That is the only, but best hope we have to address the corruption each of us finds in ourselves when we look honestly. That is radically different than any other religion or world view. That is why Christianity is different. That is why the Christian doctrine of sin matters.

[pic] So today, if you have become aware of the rottenness of your own nature, I urge you to pay a visit to the "physician of souls." If you see the rebellion in your own heart, whether you're a Christian yet or not, **turn to God and ask him to forgive your rebellion in Jesus' name.** Intentionally submit yourself to the ongoing work of the Spirit to purify and heal your heart back to its intended state so you can know God and enjoy his company forever. Whether it be for the first time or the hundred and first time, **surrender your will to God in Jesus' name**, ask for his forgiveness, ask for a renewed sense of his sin-destroying love, and commit to renewing your obedience to him out of love for who He is. Amen.