§ 10. Doctrine of Man
Lecture 20
The Fall of Man and the Nature of Sin

Welcome to Defenders! We're so glad that you could join us on this podcast.

Today I'd like to say a few brief remarks by way of evaluation of the doctrine of the Fall before we turn to a new subsection dealing with the nature of sin.

On the one hand, there is clearly truth in the modern interpretation of the Fall of Adam and Eve. As their very names indicate, Adam and Eve do have a symbolic significance in the story. "Adam" just is the Hebrew word for "man." So Genesis 1 is speaking in universal terms: in the beginning God created man – "Adam." This, I think, shows clearly that Adam is a sort of symbol of mankind. Moreover, as we have seen, the narrative of the Fall is filled with all sorts of symbolic or figurative elements like the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the serpent in the Garden who deceives the woman, an anthropomorphic deity who is physically walking in the Garden, and so forth.

Nevertheless, in spite of the figurative language and the obvious symbolic function of the narrative, we also have seen good biblical grounds for thinking that Adam was an actual historical person. Thus, it seems to me that, despite their symbolic function in the Genesis narrative, Adam and Eve are regarded by the biblical writers as genuine historical persons. I think what we can say is that the creation and Fall of man are historical events that actually happened though they are told in a dramatic literary form involving figurative speech. The story of Adam and Eve has been called a historical drama. It is a dramatized, or figurative, story telling of an actual historical event. I've argued previously that a more sensitive genre analysis of Genesis 1-11 would classify the stories of the primeval history as mytho-history.

How might the Fall have looked literally? We may envision, with Catholic thinker Kenneth Kemp, an initial population of, say, 5,000 hominins, animals which are in many respects like human beings, but which lack the capacity for rational thought. Out of this population, God selects two and furnishes them with intellects by renovating their brains and endowing them with rational souls. (Alternatively, God creates *de novo* an original human pair with rational souls.) Only they are therefore truly human. At some point they become aware of God's moral requirements, which renders them responsible moral agents. Unfortunately, they misuse their free will by choosing to commit a sin (the original sin, if you will), thereby becoming morally guilty before God and alienating themselves from God, though not from his offer of love and forgiveness. As we have seen from our study of Genesis 3, 1 Corinthians 15, and Romans 5, Adam was thus responsible for introducing spiritual death, but not physical death, into the human race, since as biological organisms Adam and Eve were naturally mortal. Whether their sin was

imputed to all of their human descendants or somehow corrupted the human nature of all their descendants will be discussed when we get to the section of our discussion on original sin. For now, given the historicity of Adam and Eve, there is no reason to deny the reality of a first sin on their part for which God held them morally culpable.

We are thinking about man insofar as he is a sinner and fallen before God. We've looked briefly at the doctrine of the Fall, and now I want to turn to a new subsection on the nature of sin – what is sin? How should we understand sin?

Let's look first at four biblical passages on the nature of sin. First, Genesis 2:15-17:

> The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die'.

Here God gives man a command to keep, and it will be through the transgression of this command that man falls into sin.

Next let's look at Romans 5:12-13, 18-19. Paul, reflecting upon Adam's sin and Christ's atoning death, writes,

> Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned—sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam. . . . Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

In this intriguing passage, Paul speaks of Adam's sin in terms of "trespass" and in terms of "disobedience" to God. But he recognizes that sin was in the world even before the giving of the law, though he seems to say that the people in that case were not culpable for their sin.

Now turn to Romans 7:7-12. Here Paul describes some of the effects of sin in the natural man. He says,

> What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which

> promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Finally, the fourth passage is from 1 John 3:4. Here John gives a very pithy definition of sin: "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." So here is John's concept of sin. Sin is lawlessness.

Let's look now at some attempts to systematize this biblical data.

First, let's talk a bit about the traditional view of the nature of sin. Traditionally, sin has been understood to be a transgression of God's moral law. We saw that the Scripture speaks of sin as lawlessness and that Paul speaks of a trespass on the part of Adam. So sin is a transgression of God's moral law.

There are three characteristics of sin that have been traditionally identified by Christian theologians. The first would be pride. Genesis 3:5 speaks of this. This is the account of the serpent's temptation of Eve. He says to her, "For God knows that when you eat of it [that is, of the tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Here you see an appeal to the pride of man; man is tempted to arrogate to himself the place of God. So one of the characteristics of sin is pride – arrogating to one's self a status that one ought not to have.

The second characteristic traditionally ascribed to sin is concupiscence. Not a word that we often use today, but concupiscence basically means a grasping, a coveting, a kind of envying that sin produces. Paul speaks of this as we saw in Romans 7:7: ". . . if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" But sin produces in us this sort of selfish grasping and desire for self-gratification, as opposed to seeking what God wants. So concupiscence, lust if you will – not just sexual lust, but this craving or coveting –, is a traditional characteristic of sin.

Finally, the third traditional characteristic of sin identified by Christian theologians is unbelief. In Romans 14:23, Paul says, "for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." So, one of the characteristic marks of sin is unbelief. Indeed, for Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, this is the chief characteristic of sin – unbelief – because it is out of unbelief that all of the other aspects of sin flow. It is fundamentally unbelief in God that is the root of all the other evils that are produced. So unbelief, far from being trivial, is really the principal sin that we commit.

Luther also characterized sin, interestingly enough, as a kind of curvature of the soul in upon one's self. One is no longer oriented toward God as the supreme good, but there is a

kind of bentness, a kind of self-curvature, whereby we are curved in upon our selves, seeking our own gratification and desires.

Those are some of the traditional ways in which sin has been characterized by Christian theologians.

Now, in contrast to the traditional view, many modern theologians have tried to domesticate sin by reinterpreting it. For example, the father of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the early 19th century German theologian, held that sin is a weakness of our God consciousness. He thought that the essence of religion was having a consciousness of God and of one's dependence upon God moment by moment throughout life, a sort of absolute dependence upon God. Sin is a weakness in this God consciousness. It is being oblivious to God – not being aware of one's dependence upon God, a sort of forgetfulness of God. So on such a view man is not really fatally morally flawed. He is not morally guilty and condemned before God. Rather, he is just inhibited. He needs to come to a kind of full realization of his dependence upon God, to expand his consciousness, as it were, and to experience his absolute dependence upon God moment by moment. So Schleiermacher really robs the traditional doctrine of sin of any of its moral quality.

Similarly in the case of the 20th century theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich really could not even be called a theist. He didn't believe that there really is a personal mind or being distinct from the world who has created the world. Tillich referred to God as "the ground of being." He is a sort of non-descript ultimate reality that is the foundation or the ground of everything else, and everything else is simply a manifestation of this fundamental reality. For Tillich sin is alienation from the ground of being. Rather than recognizing your unity with the world and with the ground of being, you are estranged from it. You don't recognize your unity with the ground of being and so are alienated from it.

So Tillich reinterpreted the three traditional characteristics of sin in line with this philosophy. For example, what was unbelief for Tillich? Unbelief is the failure to recognize your unity with God. You really are one with God. God is the ground of your being, and you are one with God, but unbelief is a failure to recognize that oneness with God. So you need to get rid of that alienation and estrangement by recognizing your fundamental unity with God.

What is pride for Tillich? Pride is self-exaltation. Rather than being oriented toward God, you are oriented toward yourself and exalt yourself. It is a refusal to recognize yourself as finite. You are just a finite creature that is ultimately doomed to perish and pass away, and pride is thinking of yourself as somehow more significant than you really are; failing to recognize your finitude in the face of the ground of being.

Finally, concupiscence Tillich reinterprets to be, again, just self-seeking – seeking your own goods and interests. For Tillich I think you can see, as with Schleiermacher, we have this same tendency to obscure the moral dimension of sin and to deny it. We don't hear anything here about guilt or condemnation or punishment or the need for forgiveness and redemption. Sin is just a sort of failure of human consciousness to realize our oneness with God and dependency upon God.

I don't mean to imply that all modern theologians hold to views like Schleiermacher and Tillich – far from it – but nevertheless I think that they illustrate the movement away from the traditional concept of sin that has characterized some modernist thinkers.

Next week, we'll say something by way of evaluation about the nature of sin. Until then, stay safe.[1]

[1] ?Total Running Time: 20:47