

§ 10. Doctrine of Man
Lecture 21
Evaluating the Nature of Sin

Welcome to Defenders. I hope you had a good week. Last Sunday we had folks joining us from Africa, Asia, Latin America, as well as Europe and North America. We're glad that you've taken time to be with us today.

Today we want to come to some evaluation about the nature of sin. Recall Romans 5:12-14:

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 . . .

It is generally agreed that in Romans 5:13 Paul interrupts his train of thought with a possible objection, namely, even if people lied and stole and murdered and so on prior to the giving of the Mosaic law, how could such acts count as sin, since they had not been forbidden? Such an objection seems to arise from Paul's own theology, for he had just said, "where there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15).

The objection is a profound one, which still occupies Christian ethicists today. It comes up, for example, in my debate with Eric Wielenberg on "God and Morality." On a typical Divine Command Theory of ethics, moral values are rooted in God's nature and our moral duties in his commands. The question arises then concerning acts which are objectively evil, since they are contrary to the divine nature, but which are not morally wrong because God has not forbidden them to certain persons at various times and places in history. Such acts are morally *bad* but not morally *wrong*. Someone engaged in such acts is therefore evil but blameless, since he contravenes no moral duty. Such persons therefore cannot be justly punished for their sins, since they have done nothing wrong, but nevertheless still find themselves alienated from God by their evil character. Paul seems to envision just such persons living between the time of Adam and Moses. The question is how God can judge such people.

Unfortunately, Paul's thinking about this problem is not as clear as we might have appreciated. One should have expected Paul to answer the objection by repeating what he said earlier in Romans 2:14-15, "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts . . ." Hence, they are, indeed, accountable. Why Paul does not answer in this way is a puzzle. Some commentators suggest that Paul is anticipating his later introducing the law as a way of

exacerbating sin (Romans 7:7-25), and so he argues here by way of concession that people without the Mosaic Law are not responsible for meeting its demands. Paul could maintain both positions consistently by holding that the Mosaic Law introduces a degree of specificity (e.g., Sabbath observance) that was not available through general revelation alone. That would accord with his saying in verse 20, “Law came in, to *increase* the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

Be that as it may, Paul seems willing to countenance the existence of people who lived between the times of Adam and Moses who were *evildoers* but not *wrongdoers*, that is to say, they were morally evil but not accountable. Commentators seem to agree that when Paul says that their sins were not like the transgression of Adam, Paul makes this very differentiation. Since they do not have the law, the morally evil things they do are not, properly speaking, transgressions, that is to say, the breaking of a law or commandment.

Paul asserts that death nevertheless reigned over such people. He thereby seems implicitly to differentiate between death as a *consequence* of sin and death as a *penalty* for sin. Since the relevant persons are not accountable, death cannot be their just desert, that is to say, the punishment that justice requires. Rather death would have to be the consequence of their sin. This fact shows that Paul is talking here about spiritual, not physical, death. It would be outlandish to think that each person is born physically immortal and then by sinning brings about physical mortality upon himself. But each person might be reasonably said to bring spiritual death upon himself in virtue of his sinning. Evildoing is spiritually deadly and alienates us from a holy God, so that spiritual death is a consequence of sin even if it is not a punishment for sin for those who have no law.

So sin is not just a transgression of God’s moral law. Sin becomes a transgression once God issues a command against a certain form of evildoing. This would seem to bear out Martin Luther’s judgment that sin is basically unbelief. It is acting in ways contrary to the nature of God.

Because God is the Good and has constituted certain moral duties for us by issuing commandments to us, disobedience to those commandments is sinful transgression. But sin is so much more than just law-breaking. Sin is a personal affront to God. It is not simply transgression of some moral law, it is turning away from God himself. So there is a much more personal dimension to sin than simply breaking the law. It is an affront to God.

In any case we should not think of sin as just a weakness in man, as many modern theologians do. Rather, I think we need to affirm that man is objectively morally alienated from God and guilty before God and therefore finds himself in a state of condemnation. He is both a sinner and a transgressor. It is not just guilt feelings which are our problem.

Rather, we are objectively morally guilty before God and therefore under his just condemnation, deserving his punishment and wrath.

I think that this understanding of sin is important because it helps to answer non-believers who say, “What kind of God is this? ‘Believe in me or be damned!’ Is that an all-loving God? Is that the kind of God that you believe in?” And the answer is: No, not at all! It’s not that God says, “Believe or be damned!” Rather, we are already objectively guilty and alienated from God. We have already raised our fists against him and so find ourselves in a state of condemnation and guilt and lostness before him. So God says to us, “Believe and be saved!” That is his offer to us. Believe and be saved! So when we understand the nature of sin and our condemnation before God, I think we have a clearer understanding of the predicament in which we find ourselves and of why God’s offer of salvation in Christ is truly a *rescue* operation. It is an offer of salvation to save us from the state of condemnation in which we already exist. Failing to understand that, as many non-believers do, will make God appear to be an arbitrary and tyrannical person who says, “Believe in me or else I will damn you.” That is not the proper concept of God. He is trying to save us from our self-induced condemnation.

What I’ve said underscores why unbelief is, as Luther says, the most fundamental sin. For it is unbelief that truly separates us from God’s saving grace. We are already separated from God and condemned before him in virtue of our evildoing and our transgression. If God says to us, “Believe and be saved!” and we say, “I will not believe,” then we thrust God and his salvation from us and push him away. So I think that this understanding of sin is really critical if we are to understand God’s offer of salvation and God’s grace extended to us in Jesus Christ.

Next time we will take up the question of original sin – whether or not we somehow stand condemned because of Adam’s sin and culpable for the sin that he committed. See you next time!¹

¹ ?Total Running Time: 13:00x (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)