

§ 10. Doctrine of Man
Lecture 24
Evaluating the Doctrine of Original Sin

Good morning! Welcome to Defenders. I hope that you've found this section on the doctrine of sin to be as interesting and stimulating as I have. Today we want to come to some evaluation of the doctrine of original sin. I've been asked by some of our viewers to deliver my lesson a little bit more slowly to help facilitate note-taking, so I'm going to try to use a more measured pace in our lesson today.

The degree to which we are persuaded to adopt Augustine's view of original sin is going to depend upon our exegesis of Romans 5:12-21. Augustine's doctrine was in fact based upon a mistranslation of Romans 5:12, where Paul says, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men," and then Augustine's Latin text read, "in whom all men sinned." That is to say, he thought that the text meant that death spread to all men because in Adam all men sinned. But that is not how the original Greek text reads. Most commentators construe the Greek expression *eph hō* as a causal conjunction "because" and take "all men sinned" to refer to people's own individual acts of sin. Paul says then that "death spread to all men because all men sinned."

Douglas Moo, who is the author of a major commentary on the book of Romans, insists that some explanation is needed for why "people so consistently turn from good to evil of all kinds."¹ No one thinks that every person just sins by sheer coincidence. Moo says, "Paul affirms in this passage that human solidarity in the sin of Adam is the explanation – and whether we explain this solidarity in terms of sinning in and with Adam or because of a corrupt nature inherited from him does not matter at this point."²

Moo's first alternative – sinning in and with Adam – in fact does nothing to explain why people consistently sin, for as we saw in our study of the doctrine of the atonement the imputation of sin is purely a legal or forensic notion which has no effect whatever upon a person's moral character. Just as the pardon of a condemned criminal does not suddenly make him a virtuous person but simply no longer legally guilty, so also the legal imputation of guilt does not transform the moral character of an otherwise blameless person.

Hence, the traditional doctrine of original sin postulates minimally a corrupted human nature inherited from Adam, if not imputed guilt, as the explanation for the universality of sin. But does Paul teach such a thing? As Moo observes, the doctrine is, perhaps

¹ Moo, *Romans*, p. 356.

² Ibid.

surprisingly, nowhere to be found in Romans 5:12-21. There is nothing here about a corrupted nature inherited from Adam.

That raises the question: is there no *other* alternative to either imputation or corrupted nature for explaining the universality of sin? Of course there is: our inherent self-seeking animal nature in combination with the web of corruption in which we are born and raised explains the universality of sin. Such a natural biological tendency towards survival and, hence, selfishness, coupled with a morally corrupt environment, suffices to explain why all have sinned. This explanation of the universality of human sin does not require even that Adam and Eve had biological ancestors, merely that they were created by God with a biological propensity to survival that is then reinforced and distorted by upbringing and society.

So on this view Adam was the floodgate through which sin and death entered the world, and death then spread to all men because each one sinned in his own turn. When Paul goes on to say that “by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners,” that “one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men,” that “because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man,” and that “many died through one man’s trespass,” he may be understood to trace all sinning and, hence, condemnation and spiritual death back to Adam’s initial transgression, through which sin entered the world.

Scholars sometime appeal to pseudepigrapha Jewish texts like 4 Ezra 7:118 as an anticipation of Paul’s doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s sin to all men. But these scholars typically fail to quote the verse in context. Here is the conversation that takes place between Ezra and the Lord:

I answered and said, “This is my first and last word: It would have been better if the earth had not produced Adam, or else, when it had produced him, had restrained him from sinning. For what good is it to all that they live in sorrow now and expect punishment after death? O Adam, what are you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants. For what good is it to us, if an eternal age has been promised to us, but we have done deeds that bring death? And what good is it that an everlasting hope has been promised us, but we have miserably failed? Or that safe and healthful habitations have been reserved for us, but we have lived wickedly? Or that the glory of the Most High will defend those who have led a pure life, but we have walked in the most wicked ways? Or that a paradise shall be revealed, whose fruit remains unspoiled and in which are abundance and healing, but we shall not enter it, because we have lived in unseemly places? Or that the faces of those who practiced self-control shall shine more than the stars but our faces shall be blacker

than darkness? For while we lived and committed iniquity we did not consider what we should suffer after death.”

He answered and said. “This is the meaning of the contest which every man who is born on earth shall wage, that if he is defeated he shall suffer what you have said, but if he is victorious he shall receive what I have said” (4 Ezra 7:116-29).

Read in context, the text actually expresses beautifully the balance between Adam’s failure and people’s responsibility for their own acts of sin, just as we find in Romans 5:12: “as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned.”

Next time we’ll take a look at how Augustine’s doctrine of original sin might be philosophically defended if we should choose to adopt it. Until then, God bless.³