

§ 10. Doctrine of Man
Lecture 25
A Continued Evaluation of Original Sin

Welcome to Defenders. I'm glad that you could join us today.

We've been talking about the doctrine of original sin. Last time I argued on the basis of our study of Romans 5 that Paul teaches neither the imputation of Adam's sin to all men nor that all men inherit a corrupted human nature from Adam. Therefore, I think that Augustine's doctrine of original sin is not incumbent upon the biblically faithful Christian.

But suppose we do want to go Augustine's route in thinking that all men somehow sin in Adam. How might we understand such a doctrine in the face of the Enlightenment critique, which as you'll remember, held that no person can be justly punished for another man's sin? Well, traditionally Reformation theologians have understood Adam to be the federal head of the human race. He represents us before God just as here in the United States our federal representative represents us in the United States Congress. Our representative votes for us. We don't live in a pure democracy in which all of us go and vote. Rather, we have a representative system whereby our representative votes in our place. Or to borrow a different analogy from the financial world, think of a stockholders' meeting. Jan and I sometimes receive in the mail a proxy form which we are asked to sign in order to authorize someone else to serve as our proxy at the shareholders' meeting. Since *we* ourselves do not attend the stockholders' meeting, our proxy does, and he votes in our place. It is *our* vote, however, that he is casting, not his own, because he is our proxy. Similarly, if we think of Adam as our proxy before God, or as the federal head of the human race, then it seems to me that we can make sense of the idea that all persons are culpable for what Adam does. He acts on our behalf, and we are held responsible for it. Therefore, all persons are born sinners and condemned before God.

The natural response to this, I think, is to say, "Well, who asked Adam to be my representative? I didn't authorize him to be my proxy! Why give him the right to stand before God and act in my place to make a decision for which I am then held blameworthy?" It seems to me that what the defender of Augustine's doctrine could say is that Adam, as our divinely appointed representative, sinned before God and that had we been in Adam's place instead we would have done exactly the same thing. So the Augustinian may affirm the truth of a counterfactual of freedom about each one of us; namely, if I had been in Adam's place, I would have done the same thing and sinned. Therefore, we cannot complain that we have been misrepresented by Adam before God. Adam has faithfully represented us before God; he has done exactly what we would have done in that situation.

This would not, however, explain the universality and totality of sin. We should need to supplement the imputation of Adam's sin with a corrupted human nature inherited from Adam as well. While this may not be taught in Romans 5, the Christian theologian is certainly within his rights to supplement Scripture with such a hypothesis. It's worth mentioning in this connection that when classical Reformed theologians talk about total depravity, they do not mean that people are as bad as they could possibly be. Obviously, some people are a whole lot worse than others. Hitler was a lot worse than Mother Teresa. So what total depravity means is that there isn't any aspect of human nature which is untainted by sin or is pristine. Rather, every aspect of the human personality is tainted by sin. It's analogous to a drop of ink in a glass of water. The drop of ink diffuses itself throughout the entire glass and affects all of the water – the water is totally affected by the drop of ink. But obviously, the water isn't as black as it could possibly be. It could be a lot worse, but nevertheless there is totality in the sense that the whole is affected.

So a corrupted nature would explain why people inevitably sin. On the Pelagian view, it would be possible for a human being to grow up and never need Christ as his Savior. He would never need to be redeemed because sin isn't inevitable. He could live a sinless life, either through the grace given him by nature, as Pelagius thought, or in response to his request for grace, as the Semi-Pelagian believed. But if we are heirs of a corrupted nature, then there is no possibility of heaven without Christ's atoning death on our behalf.

How should we then regard children? I think Jesus' attitude toward little children shows that God's graciousness is extended to children. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, for such is the Kingdom of Heaven." I think that Jesus' attitude toward children gives good grounds for thinking that either children are not imputed original sin or else that God's grace is extended to children, particularly to those who die in infancy. It seems to me therefore that the practice of infant baptism is not only unnecessary but is a terrible mistake, especially when it is conjoined with the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, that is to say, the doctrine that in water baptism one is also baptized in the Holy Spirit and regenerated. The practice of infant baptism tends to lead to a church filled with unregenerate people who are trusting in their baptism as infants as the basis upon which they are Christians but who haven't actually made a personal decision to receive Christ and so be regenerated. If infant baptism is regarded as merely a symbolic act but isn't actually simultaneous with Spirit baptism, then that problem would be somewhat alleviated because one wouldn't regard a person as regenerate simply as a result of being baptized as an infant. But when you conjoin infant baptism with the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in order to wash away original sin, then you court the real danger of having unregenerate adults.

So I don't think that infant baptism removes the stain of original sin. There is nothing in Scripture that would suggest that baptism is a means of grace by which original sin is expunged. Rather, we can simply trust God to be gracious to those who die in infancy.

Furthermore, it seems to me that we should not think of original sin as sexual in nature or as passed on through sexual intercourse, as Augustine believed. That would turn sin into a sexually transmitted disease. But surely sin is not a physical ailment. Rather, what proponents of the doctrine of original sin should hold is that man's moral capacities are now somehow flawed. In virtue of Adam's sin the soul is somehow incapacitated in its moral abilities to resist sin and to do good. So man in the state of nature – that is, in his unregenerate state – doesn't seek God.

Pelagius erred in thinking that in his unregenerate state human beings will seek for God, ask for his grace, and so forth. Rather the testimony of Scripture is that the natural man does not seek the things of the Spirit of God; they are foolishness to him. He does not understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Therefore, no one would come freely to God unless God took the initiative. God must seek out the erring sinner. It is not that we come to God of our own free will and ask for his grace; rather, God's grace is expressed in his taking the initiative and in drawing us to him. Now, the question of whether we have the freedom to resist that drawing or whether God's grace is irresistible is a further question, and we'll take up that question when we get to the doctrine of salvation. But for now I think that we ought to affirm that we do not take the initiative in salvation; we are sinful, fallen, alienated from God, estranged from him, and therefore we would not come to him apart from the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and God's taking the initiative.

Finally, I think we should affirm that sin does permeate social institutions. The liberal theologians were right in seeing sin as something that gets institutionalized in commerce, in entertainment, in government, in politics. This is very true. Here in the United States, for example, our entertainment industry is thoroughly corrupted by graphic violence, sexuality, and profanity. We have also seen systemic evil in government over the past few years in the efforts of the so-called "deep state" to carry out, in effect, a presidential coup, by the spurious accusations which lay at the root of the Muller investigation. We live in a society that is inherently corrupted by sin. But this is because *individuals* sin. Society is corrupted because it is made up of corrupted and fallen individuals who then try to live together as best they can in some sort of harmony. So Christians must never be distracted from our primary task of sharing the Gospel with other individuals, even as we also pursue efforts at societal reform.

Next time we'll turn to the subject of the freedom of the will. Until then, have a great week.¹

¹ ?Total Running Time: 14:26 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)