

Really Bad, Unless...

<i>Text</i>	Romans 5:12-21
<i>Readings</i>	Psalm 51; Genesis 3:1-7
<i>Confession</i>	Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3 Question 7 & 8

Beloved people of God,

There is one question when we speak about our perfect and sinless, powerful God who created everything that keeps cropping up and it is this, "Where did sin and evil begin?" And if that isn't hard enough to answer, there is a follow up question – "If God was so good and so powerful, why does He allow this evil to seemingly go on unabated?" If God's simple word could create the universe, why doesn't He say – "Sin and evil - get out, so that I can enjoy and glory in what I have created and that My creation can enjoy bliss!"

Well, Scripture does not ask these questions. Genesis 3 simply states that we lost our purity by the fall of Adam and Eve into sin in the Garden of Eden. Sin and evil did not start with the Internet or the invention of iPods and Tablets. In fact, Scripture doesn't even blame the devil. The beginning of our troubles began when our first parents disobeyed God. Yet, that is an answer we cannot readily accept. We reason that before sin erupted in the heart of Adam and Eve, it dwelt in the serpent and since the 'ancient serpent' is described as the devil in Revelation, he is the cosmic mastermind of all evil.

Still others, some theologians have so much difficulty explaining the origin of sin and evil, they have developed a school of thought that has become known as "Open God" or "Open Theism" theology. They teach that since God is love, good and kind, He cannot be in control of the evil that happens in the world, but when it does happen, He uses it for his good. In this way people explain the terrible things that happen – September 11, suicide bombers, wars, tsunamis and other disasters.

But Scripture doesn't allow us shift the blame from our first parents. In fact the actual origin of sin in the world is not explained in Scripture, but it began having its disastrous consequences when our first parents disobeyed God. But that of course immediately raises the question, why has the disobedience of our first parents affected the rest of humanity? It seems so unfair! Some even suggest that they wouldn't have done what Adam and Eve did.

A Sunday School teacher was confronted with that question by his students one day. So the following Sunday, he set up a table in the middle of the room. He brought in many lovely cup cakes, all decorated with cream – a delight to any child's eyes. He then placed a stainless steel serving dish, covered with a stainless steel top in the middle of the table, surrounded by all these cream cakes. And being a hot day, he had the ceiling fans operating so that the children could enjoy the perfect environment to eat the cakes.

And then he instructed the children, you can eat any cup cake that is on the table and as many as you like, but don't lift the lid to see what is under that stainless steel serving dish. The moment you do that,

everything will be ruined. And with that he left the room for a few minutes. When he came back, someone had lifted the stainless steel serving dish, for the feather down had blown throughout the room, even settling on the good cup cakes and making them uneatable. Everything was ruined. It proved the point - we're no better.

So how do we deal with the sin in our lives and God's right to punish us? We answer that by speaking about sin in two ways.

First, we speak about our original sin. When Adam and Eve sinned as our first parents it was a 'representative' act. Mums and dads represent their children. Prime Ministers and Presidents represent a nation. The decisions they make are binding on us, for good or bad. The Bible uses a similar logic when teaching us about our original sin. It teaches that through the disobedience of the one man Adam, many were made sinners (Romans 5:12).

But notice in verse 12, Paul is not saying that all men die because all people commit sins. Rather, he says, that all sinned when Adam and Eve sinned. In them we sinned and therefore with them we die. Now we may object to that and rather be seen as individuals with unique personalities. But the reality is that both are true, we are individuals, but we also belong to humanity and therefore we need to admit our corporate guilt.

However, that is not all bad. In fact we would be foolish to deny our oneness with humanity, because if we do, then we also deny God's answer to man's sinfulness. For Romans 5:19 teaches us that, "...so also through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous." Therefore, it is to our advantage to admit and accept and confess that we are born as sinners under Adam, for Jesus Christ, came to save the lost children of the first Adam. Let me explain original sin another way.

Does a person sin because he or she is a sinner, or do we become sinners when we commit sin? Some people call murderers, thieves and rapists sinners because they commit terrible crimes. However, the difficulty with that reasoning is as soon as something becomes socially acceptable to mankind, it is taken off the sin list. For example, divorce, adultery, homosexuality and even abortion have been taken off the sin list by society in general. People, who say that they are not sinners, deny original sin.

However, if you are a Christian, informed by God's Word, you say people commit crimes because they are sinners. They are infected with the original sin of the first Adam. That understanding is helpful, for when we have a proper understanding of original sin it helps us to be more forgiving of others, realizing that it is only by God's grace that we have been spared from such serious crimes. It makes us humble and more inclined to be compassionate towards our fellow human being, and we say in our hearts, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Now that doesn't mean that we have lost our sense of proportion. To actually rob a bank is far worse than dreaming about it. Yet, the love of money can send us to hell even though we never actually rob a bank. Our

actual sins we commit are the full-grown thistles and weeds of our original sin. Let me give you another example of original sin. When a teenager or young adult or elderly person dies, although painful to us for death is always the enemy, we usually accept it because most of us can come to terms with the fact that they are sinners and the wages of sin is death.

And yet we struggle when a little baby dies because we think, "What great sin has this child committed for God to allow that?" Well this little child may have done nothing wrong at all. Yet, he or she is born a sinner received from our first parents. That is our original sin (Psalm 51:5).

The second way we speak about sin is our "inherited pollution." Scripture reminds us in many places that there is not one who does good; not even one (Romans 3:10). Our nature has been poisoned. We are sinful and we have sinful children. None of us can escape this poison, for all of us have parents and all parents are sinful. The name for this poison is "inherited pollution" meaning that we all born and conceived in sin. Now the difficulty arises when we try to work out how it is transmitted. Some people came up with some unbiblical notions how this poison was transmitted. The early church considered for many years that the sexual act was the cause for this pollution to be transmitted.

They derive this from Psalm 51 where David says, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." However, in Psalm 51 David was confessing his sin with Bathsheba and implores God for forgiveness. David realises that his adultery with Bathsheba was not just a bad mistake; it was not just an isolated error; but a corruption for which he takes full responsibility. He is overwhelmed by his sin. He cries to be cleansed with Hyssop; He pleads for forgiveness (hide your face from my sins, blot out my iniquity); He cries out for a new heart.

He realises that he needs a new heart to live before the face of God. David is not saying that he couldn't help it or that you can't expect anything else. He doesn't say, "Blame Mum and Dad" as so many are prone to do today. Rather, he thinks with horror, not only of the sinful act, but also of his sinful self, his very existence. His whole being has been affected. David realized that when you sin you can only blame yourself and what's more you will be called to account.

So sin is not only an act we commit, but it is a power that enslaves us. The power rules us from birth to grave and no one is born free. We are born in prison. It's our inherited pollution. And that is why Scripture is correct when it teaches that by nature, people are totally affected by sin. Totally, for many people make mistakes about that. For instance, the rationalists claim that the mind is free of sin and therefore we can think correctly. Not true!

The Arminian thinks that the 'will' is free of sin and therefore we can choose correctly. Not true! Some denominations believe that the church is free of sin and that the sacraments offered by the church make us right with God. Not true! We cannot think right in every instance. We cannot chose correctly in every instance, nor can the church save us. That is the work of Christ alone! And that is why we run to our Saviour, for in Him there is forgiveness and life.

Now if you are tempted to say that you are not totally sinful, than perhaps you are one of those who have never seen yourself in light of God's Word and God's holiness and what it cost Jesus to pay for your sin. Yet, on the other hand, if you say as a Christian that you cannot do any good and are inclined to all evil, and that all our good deeds are like dirty rags before God, then although sounding pious, you haven't understood the power of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit working in you.

When you say that you are totally sinful, you are testifying to the power of sin, but God wants us to testify to the power of his Spirit. Total depravity is the state from which the sinner is delivered by the power of Christ (Ephesians 2:4). We were dead, enslaved, condemned, BUT God has rescued us from this depravity, this deadness, through his Son's redeeming work, applied by the Holy Spirit.

Make no mistake, sin is far worse than we are inclined to think, but salvation is bigger than any minister can tell. Through Christ Jesus we have been set free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2). Yes, we were once totally depraved, but now revived in Christ and by his Spirit. Yes, we were dead in the first Adam, but now made alive and raised with Jesus Christ.

So as a Christian, we must be able to say that we are able to do good and are no longer inclined to all evil because we are now indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And yet we hesitate don't we? I think one of the reasons we hesitate is our up-bringing. Some have been brought up to think that it is a "Christian" thing to say that we are totally depraved. Yet, it is not. It may show a deep respect for the power of sin, but it does not show enough faith in the power of the Saviour and the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

The second hesitation, which I think is legitimate, arises from a biblical kind of fear and trembling. We know how weak our flesh is and how strong the world and the devil are. So we don't become over confident. We are thankful that through the help of God's word and Spirit we have broken the habit of committing some sins and enjoy the freedom it gives, but we remain on our guard. You and I can speak of the liberating power of Jesus. He paid the debt. He set me free from the inability to do good because His Holy Spirit now lives in me. He broke my inclination to evil and He gives me a desire to live for him. Praise God for that!

Yet, when I think of the old nature of sin, I find that it is not far away, but that it is still very close. The reality is that we are born in sin and it clings to us until that day when God will do the last bit of surgery on me and bring me to glory.

One more thing before I close. You will meet people, I have and I know you will one if not already, who claim that they no longer sin. They think that they are so near God, so filled with the Spirit that they no longer sin. Sometimes that sort of nonsense talk can make you feel lousy for we are tempted to ask, "What's wrong with me, I don't experience that." Let me use Paul to answer.

In 1 Corinthians 15:9 Paul refers to himself as the "least of the apostles" not fit to be called an apostle, for he persecuted the church. In Ephesians 3:8, a few years later, he wrote to the church at Ephesus and he called

himself, “the very least of all the saints.” Near the end of his life, when he wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:15) he spoke of himself as the “foremost of all sinners.”

Paul was one of the greatest saints who ever lived yet grieved over his sin; battled against it constantly, and called himself a wretched man and chief of sinners. The more we love God for what he has done for us in Christ the more we become sensitive to the sin that still clings to us. So we say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Hallelujah for that! We are no longer totally depraved.

Yet, while saying our hallelujahs, we lean heavily on God’s word and Spirit, being assured that our Saviour will never let us fall from his eternal hands (John 10:28).

Amen.