

Foundations 101

Date: November 5, 2008

Topic: Harmatology: The Study of Sin

Summary: What is sin? Are we sinful from birth? How does our dual nature work?

Reading Assignment: *Systematic Theology, Grudem* pg. 490-514 or *Bible Doctrine, Grudem* pg. 210-226.

I. Introduction/Definitions

Sin- "Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature," (Grudem, pg.490).

Culturally, sin is thought of in terms of negative actions like lying, stealing, or hurting someone. But even the Ten Commandments contain prohibitions against sinful attitudes. We are told not to covet our neighbor's house, wife, ox, etc. (Exodus 20:17). In the New Testament Jesus reiterates this point in prohibiting anger and lust (Matthew 5:22; Matthew 5:28). Paul also lists jealousy, selfishness, and anger as things opposed to the Spirit and of the flesh or sinful.

"Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness."

-1 John 3:4

"They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."

-Romans 2:15

"Sin is directly opposite all that is good in the character of God, and just as God necessarily and eternally delights himself and in all that he is, so God necessarily and eternally hates sin" (Grudem, pg. 492).

II. Origin of sin

Where did sin come from? How did sin come into the universe? Before we answer these questions we must first understand that God himself did not sin and can not be blamed for sin.

"The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he."

-Deuteronomy 32:4

“Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”
-Genesis 18:25

“Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding: far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding: far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong.”
-Job 34:10

“Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”
-James 1:13

On the other hand we must guard against an opposite error- it would be wrong for us to say that there is an eternally existing evil power in the universe similar to God. To believe this would be “dualism” which claims God and the Devil are equal but opposite gods fighting for control. Also, we have to remember that God was not surprised by sin or that it challenged or overcame his omnipotence or his providential control. So we must be balanced affirming that God himself did not sin nor can he be blamed for sin yet he still “accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). So while God did “ordain” that sin would come into the world, it came into the world through the voluntary actions of moral creatures.

Even before Adam and Eve sin was present in the angelic world with the sin of Satan (1 John 3:8). But concerning the human race we see the origin of sin in Genesis 3 with Eve being tempted by the serpent who turns out to be the Devil (Revelations 12:9). She believes the Devil and they sin against God in at least three ways:

1. By believing the devil concerning the Tree of Knowledge they began to question “what is true?” This is an insult to the character of God.
2. Adam and Eve decided to come up with their own moral standards. Sin caused them to ask what is right.
3. Adam and Eve challenged their view of who they were. They began to believe they could “be like God”. They moved from knowing they were creatures who worship the creator to thinking they were creators and should worship themselves.

The bible then goes on to say that this incident is where sin came into the world. And because all humans descend from that point in history we have all inherited a sinful nature. Our sinful nature is made clear by the fact that we struggle with the same three things Adam and Eve did: What is true? What is right? Who am I?

“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”
-Romans 5:12

“For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”
Romans 5:19

Though we did not exist when Adam sinned in the Garden he acted as our human representative therefore God looked into the future, knowing we would one day exist, and saw us as guilty like Adam and in need of salvation. Of course the same applies to the sacrifice of Jesus. Though some of us existed when Christ died for us his sacrifice atones for our sin as well. So God rightly imputed Adam's sin to all the human race.

Objection:

The most common protest to “inherited guilt” is that it seems unfair. Since we did not actually decide to sin how can we be counted guilty?

Firstly, we are all sinners from birth because of our inherited sinful nature (Psalm 51:5; Psalm 58:3; Ephesians 2:3) (texts).

We all have also committed voluntary acts of sin for which God also deems us guilty (Romans 3:23). These works contribute the primary basis of our judgment on judgment day.

“He will render to each one according to his works”
-Romans 2:6

“For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality”
-Colossians 3:25

Secondly, and most convincingly, if it is not right or unfair to apply Adam's guilt to us who weren't even there it would not be right or fair to apply Christ's righteousness to us either (Romans 5:19). God set up the human race as an organic whole, a unity, represented by Adam as its head. In the same way God sees Christians as a new race of people who are a unit represented by Christ.

III. What does this mean practically?

What are the implications of inheriting Adam's guilt and his subsequent corruption?

1. In our nature's we totally lack spiritual good before God. It is not just that some parts are sinful and some parts are pure. We are, in our entirety, marred by sin. Remember sin is much more than doing something “bad.” Sin affects our intellects, emotions, affections, and our hearts.

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”
-Romans 7:18

*“To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.”
-Titus 1:15*

*“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”
-Jeremiah 17:9*

These passages do not say that humans can do no good for the human race in some sense, just that they can not do any good in any spiritual sense.

2. In our actions we totally unable to do spiritual good before God. As sinners, not only do we lack the ability to possess any spiritual good in us we also lack any ability to do anything that in itself would please God. Nor can we come to God on our own strength.

*“Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”
-Romans 8:8*

*“Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”
-John 8:34*

*“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”
-Hebrews 11:6*

IV. Dealing with the actual sin in life

In this section we will deal with several practical issues concerning our sin.

1. All humans are sinful before God

*“They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.”
-Psalm 14:3*

*“Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.”
-Psalm 143:2*

*“⁹What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ¹⁰“None is righteous, no, not one”
-Romans 3:9-10*

“⁸If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

-1 John 1: 8-10

2. Does our ability limit our responsibility?

Pelagius, a popular Christian teacher in Rome from around 383-410 A.D. taught that God only holds man responsible for that which he is able to do. He says, since God warns us to do good we must have the ability to do good. However scripture directly contradicts this idea. The true measure of our guilt and responsibility is not our own ability to obey but rather the absolute perfection of God’s moral law (Matthew 5:48).

Moreover, if our responsibility was limited by our ability then extremely hardened sinners who are in great bondage to sin would be less guilty than mature Christians striving to obey God daily! This scenario would mean Satan himself has no guilt at all!

3. What about infants?

Are infants “guilty” before they commit any actual sins? While many believe there is an age of accountability for infants, meaning God does not view them as guilty until they reach a certain age, the scripture directly contradicts this notion (Psalm 51:5). This means they not only have a tendency to sin but are viewed by God as sinners (Psalms 58:3).

So do babies who die in early infancy, before they understand and accept Christ, go to hell? The bible is clear that one must be reborn to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). And newborns and infants are not able to accept Christ with any of their abilities or faculties, so their salvation would have to be totally of Christ’s doing and the work of the Holy Spirit. We see precedent for this happening in the scriptures. Not for infants dying young and going to heaven but reaching into the womb to redeem some even before they take their first breath. So it is clear that God is able to save infants in an unusual way. As Christians we also know that God is always right and always does what is righteous.

John the Baptist:

“For he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

-Luke 1:15

David:

“On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God.”

-Psalm 22:10

So we should take comfort in the truth that God is right and loving rather than trying to invent a controlling mechanism. The Bible makes it very clear that God loves children and he doesn't need any ability or faculty from the one he wants to redeem!

4. Are there degrees of sin?

In some ways yes, and in some ways no. All sin is equal in making us legally guilty before God (Galatians 3:10; James 2:10-11). On the other hand, some sins are worse than others because they affect our relationship with God and others to different degrees.

*"Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."
-John 19:11*

*"And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations."
-Ezekiel 8:6*

*"He said also to me, "You will see still greater abominations that they commit."
-Ezekiel 8:13*

*"Then he said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these."
-Ezekiel 8:15*

5. What happens when a Christian sins?

When a believer sins we must understand what is affected and what is not affected. Our legal standing before God or our justification is unchanged at all. However our relationship with God is disrupted and spiritual life is damaged.

*"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."
-Ephesians 4:30*

*"For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."
-Hebrews 12:6*

*"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent."
-Revelations 3:19*