



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 4

The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.1 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Creation of Human Beings

God created two human beings on the sixth day of world history: a man and a woman (Adam and Eve). This is stated first of all in Genesis 1:27-29: **“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ And God said, ‘See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.”**

It is common in our world today to refer to human beings as animals. In fact, evolutionists believe that human beings have gradually evolved over millions of years from animals and are in the process of evolving into kinds of creatures that will be superior to our present state. But God clearly tells us in His Word that human beings are a separate creation, created directly by God. They did not evolve from any other created thing. Human beings alone were created in the image of God. Human beings alone were put in charge of the rest of creation. The similarities between human beings and other creatures are substantial but superficial.

Genesis 2:7-25 supplies additional information on God’s creation of human beings. We are told that **“the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”** This first human being was the male Adam. After describing the splendid home God had prepared for Adam in the Garden of Eden, and presenting the one command God gave to Adam, the account tells us how God created a desire in Adam for a human partner. God brought all the animals to Adam so that he could give them their names. **“But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.”**

The account continues: **“And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’”**

There are some similarities between human beings and animals. This is not surprising since the same Creator created both of them. For example, the diet of both humans and animals was the same at first. God gave all plant life to both humans and animals for food. Both humans and animals came from the earth, and after sin and death came into the world through human sin, both humans and animals die and return to dust. Solomon later pointed out these similarities: **“What happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other, Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all return to dust”** (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20).

But the differences are greater than the similarities. God commanded the earth to bring forth the animal world. Humans were created directly by God. The bodies of both man and animal return to dust in death. But there is a difference between man and animal with respect to their souls (or spirits). With regard to humans Solomon says: **“The spirit will return to God who gave it”** (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

This agrees with his own previous question: **“Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?”** (Ecclesiastes 3:21). But the greatest difference is the fact that God created the first man and woman in the image of God. This means that there is also a difference in intelligence, in personality, in responsibility. God gives instructions in words to human beings so that they may honor Him and pray to Him. Animals do not read directions and they do not pray. David wrote: **“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go, I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding”** (Psalm 32:8-9). God gave His command concerning the trees in Eden only to Adam and Eve, not to the animals.

Notice that every human being has both a body and a soul. God first formed man’s body from dust, but there was no life in that body until God **“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”** (Genesis 2:7). Jesus clearly delineated these two parts of the human being when He told His disciples: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”** (Matthew 10:28). When the body is put to death, the soul lives on, either with the Lord in heaven, or with the spirits in hell.

Temporal death, that is, the death of the body, is a separation of the body from the soul (or spirit). Rachel’s death in giving birth to a son is described in this way: **“And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benjamin”** (Genesis 35:18). Before Elijah brought a dead boy back to life by the power of the Lord, he prayed: **“O LORD my God, I pray, let this child’s soul come back to him. Then the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived”** (1 Kings 17: 21-22). The Bible describes Jesus’ death in the same way: He **“yielded up His spirit”** (Matthew 27:50); **“He gave up His spirit”** (John 19:30). Even though there is some difference in the way the words are used, soul and spirit basically refer to the same part of a person.

All human beings who have ever lived and who are living today are the descendants of Adam and Eve. In fact, since all the original earth inhabitants were destroyed in the great flood of Noah’s time, all human beings who are living today are descendants of Noah and his wife and one of their three sons, Shem, Ham, or Japheth. The apostle Paul told his audience in Athens: **“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord”** (Acts 17:26-27). Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians in Rome: **“Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned”** (Romans 5:12).

The Bible does not set one race or tribe of men above other races or tribes. All humans are creatures of God, originally made in the image of God and descendants of Adam and Eve. In fact, when God created Adam and Eve, He created all human beings in them. We also can say with Job: **“Your hands have made me and fashioned me, an intricate unity”** (Job 10:8). We can also praise God with David, saying: **“You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lower parts of the earth”** (Psalm 139:13-15).

Questions

1. When did God create human beings?
2. What are some of the reasons for rejecting the view that humans are animals?
3. How did God create in Adam a desire for a human partner?
4. In what ways are humans similar to animals?
5. In what ways are humans different from animals?
6. What are the two parts of the human being?
7. What happens when a person dies?
8. In what way are all human races and tribes related to each other?
9. Why is there no reason to put one race above another race?
10. Why can you say that God is your Creator?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.1.1 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Image of God

The main thing that separates human beings from the animal world is the fact that God made male and female humans in His own image. We read in Genesis 1:26-27: **“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; ...So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.’”** Thus, God made humans to be beings like Himself in some ways.

Although there have been many suggestions as to what is meant by the image of God, we are on the safest ground if we stick to the New Testament explanation of God's image, as Paul explained it in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. **“But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him...that you put off...the old man...and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness”** (Ephesians 4:20-24). To be created according to God, or in the image of God, is to be created in true righteousness and holiness. **“Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him”** (Colossians 3:9-10). To be created in the image of God therefore means to have a kind of knowledge of God that is unavailable to God's other creatures. Human beings are in a class by themselves.

For this very reason God made a distinction between human beings and animals after the world-wide flood. God said to Noah and his family: **“Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs”** (Genesis 9:3). Man was now given permission to kill animals and use them for food. But God considered killing a human to be very different: **“Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man”** (Genesis 9:6). Thus, it is contrary to Bible teaching to put animals of any kind on the same level as humans, as though the lives of animals are just as precious as the lives of human beings.

James, the brother of Jesus, also placed human beings on a special level when he wrote: **“No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God”** (James 3:8-9). It is not fitting that we should use our tongues to bless God and then curse other people, who were created in the image of God.

In other words, being created in the image of God means being like God, not in outward appearance or in having identical attributes, but in being in harmony with God morally. Being in harmony with God means that we want what God wants and are eager and zealous at all times to please Him in every way.

When humans fell into sin through disobedience to God's command, the image of God was lost. Man was no longer holy and righteous like God. Man was no longer in perfect harmony with God. But God did not want that situation to continue; therefore, God immediately went into action to restore the image of God in human beings. He promised a Savior (Genesis 3:15) who would undo the damage inflicted by Satan. God sent His Son Jesus into our world to recover mankind by suffering and dying for our sins and rising from the dead in victory. Now the Holy Spirit is active through the good news of Jesus to create saving faith in Jesus in human hearts. When this happens, there is also the creation of

the new man in human hearts. This new man is in harmony with God once again, for this new man is created in the image of God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Although there are false teachers who claim that God has or had a human body (for example, Mormons), Moses told the children of Israel: **“You saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire”** (Deuteronomy 4:15). Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob: **“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth”** (John 4:24). A spirit does not have a body.

Since Jesus, God's Son, is both God and man and he lived here on earth among men, we get a good idea of what is meant by the image of God by observing Jesus in action, as He is described in the four Gospels. God wants us who believe in Jesus to be like Him, as it is written: **“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren”** (Romans 8:29).

As the image of God is renewed in us, we become more like Christ in our thinking, saying, and doing. As Christ denied Himself and took up His cross, so Jesus tells us: **“If anyone desire to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”** (Matthew 16:24). The apostle Paul said: **“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 2:5). When Jesus reveals Himself in glory at His second coming, our renewal will be complete, the old man of the flesh will no longer be a part of us, and **“we shall be like Him”** (1 John 3:2).

Questions

1. Which are the only creatures that were made in the image of God?
2. What is the similarity between God and the human beings He made?
3. Why does the image of God not mean a similarity in bodily form?
4. What distinction did God make between man and animal after the flood?
5. What was life like in the Garden of Eden?
6. How was the image of God lost?
7. How is the image of God restored?
8. How can we get a good idea of what the image of God is like?
9. How long do we have to wait before the image of God is totally renewed in us?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.2 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Fall of Man into Sin

The beautiful harmony and bliss in the Garden of Eden came to an end when the devil introduced thoughts into the hearts of Eve and Adam that led them to disobey God's commandment concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God's Word was clear: **"Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"** (Genesis 2:17). Adam and Eve did not sin because of any deficiency in themselves. The temptation to sin came from an outside source, the devil. **"He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning"** (1 John 3:8).

The account of the fall into sin in Genesis 3 does not mention the devil or Satan by name, but the identification is made clear in Revelation 12:9: **"So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan."** The tempter was the devil, using the serpent as his disguise. The apostle Paul wrote: **"The serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness"** (2 Corinthians 11:3). He spoke to the woman, not the man, perhaps because the man had received God's commandment directly, whereas the woman had learned of the commandment indirectly. Satan's method suggested that God was perhaps not such a good God after all, since He had kept something apparently good from them. The creation of doubts about God, insinuations, and finally outright lies led Eve first of all, and then Adam, to disobey God's clear command. Jesus said of Satan: **"He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. ... He is a liar, and the father of it"** (John 8:44).

There is a difference in the sin of Eve and the sin of Adam. Paul said: **"Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression"** (1 Timothy 2:14). It seems Eve really believed Satan's lie: **"when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate"** (Genesis 3:6). Although Adam was not deceived, he also ate, contrary to better knowledge. In this way sin entered not only into Adam, but into all.

Before the fall into sin, Adam and Eve both had the ability to resist the devil's temptation. They had the ability to prevent sin from entering the world. They had the freedom either to obey or disobey God. In their freedom they chose to sin. It was not God's fault that they sinned; it was their own fault. Because of their sin, they died immediately in a spiritual way. They no longer loved their Creator. Instead, they were afraid of Him and tried to escape from Him.

Their actions did not come from good reasoning, but from evil desires that were suggested by Satan. Solomon said: **"Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life"** (Proverbs 4:23). Because their sin has been passed down to us, man's heart is filled with evil desires. **"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"** (Jeremiah 17:9).

Many of those who call themselves Christians today consider Genesis 1-11 to be human speculation on how the world originated. They speak of myths and legends and tales of origin, as though these things never really took place. But the words of Genesis do not in any way suggest that these events did not really happen. Jesus quoted the first chapters of Genesis as factual history (Matthew 19:4-6). The Gospel of Luke presents the ancestry of Jesus all the way back to the beginning, **"to Adam, the**

son of God” (Luke 3:38). Most emphatically, the apostle Paul lays out for us a grand comparison between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-19. None of this would make any sense if Adam had never really existed and the fall into sin had never occurred. This is the comparison:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned – (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:12-19)

This is a complicated comparison worthy of careful study. But it makes no sense at all if Adam was not a real person who lived as Genesis says he lived. The comparison is between two actual historical figures: Adam and Jesus. If Jesus truly lived, as we believe He did, then Adam must have lived also.

The Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) subscribes to the Brief Statement of 1932, where this confession is made:

We teach that the first man was not brutelike nor merely capable of intellectual development, but that God created man in His own image, Genesis 1:26-27; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10, that is, in true knowledge of God and in true righteousness and holiness and endowed with a truly scientific knowledge of nature, Genesis 2:19-23.

We furthermore teach that sin came into the world by the fall of the first man, as described Genesis 3. By this Fall not only he himself, but also all his natural offspring have lost the original knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and thus all men are sinners already by birth, dead in sins, inclined to all evil, and subject to the wrath of God, Romans 5:12, 18; Ephesians 2:1-3. We teach also that men are unable, through any efforts of their own or by the aid of ‘culture and science,’ to reconcile themselves to God and thus to conquer death and damnation.

Questions

1. What one commandment did God give to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?
2. Who talked to Eve to lead Eve and Adam into sin?
3. What method did he use in his temptation?
4. What are the four names given to the tempter in Revelation 12?
5. Why did Eve eat the fruit of the forbidden tree?
6. What is difference between the sin of Eve and the sin of Adam?
7. In what way did Adam and Eve die as soon as they sinned?
8. Why do we say that Adam and Eve had the freedom not to listen to Satan?
9. Why is it important to teach that the fall into sin was a factual event?
10. In what way are Adam and Christ similar to each other?
11. In what way are Adam and Christ different from each other?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.3 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Concept of Sin

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they became aware at once that something had changed in their lives. Instead of welcoming a visit from their Lord God Creator, they were so afraid of Him that they tried to hide from Him. They became conscious of a sense of shame and guilt in being naked, and so they tried to cover themselves. Their changed condition also became obvious in their foolishness in trying to hide from God. It also soon became clear that Adam and Eve no longer had the same love towards each other, for Adam blamed Eve (and God, who had given Eve to him) instead of taking the blame himself and sheltering his wife. Eve did not blame herself either, but pointed the finger of blame at the serpent.

All of this shows that Adam and Eve were now sinners. They had become mortal beings, subject to death and everything leading up to death. They had become subject to the devil and were in bondage to him. This brought about a fear of temporal death and also eternal death, which is the punishment facing all sinners. God had said to them: **"In the day you eat of it you shall surely die"** (Genesis 2:17), and now indeed they were already dead spiritually. From this time on, the devil **"had the power of death"** over them, and they **"through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"** (Hebrews 2:14-15). This was true not only of the two of them, but of all their descendants.

The reason that everyone in the world has this natural fear of death is that everyone in the world has a consciousness of sin. The apostle Paul said that the heathen Gentiles **"show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them"** (Romans 2:15). But in many cultures this consciousness of God and its accompanying sense of guilt before God has been so suppressed (Romans 1:18) that the concept of sin has almost been erased. For that reason, in addition to writing His law in their hearts, God has written and distributed His Law in the Bible. It is only when human beings have a knowledge of their sin that they see a need for a Savior from sin.

As we study the Scriptures to learn more about sin, we notice that the Holy Spirit uses many different words to describe sin in both the Hebrew and Greek languages. In our English translations we also have different words used to convey the concept of sin in its various aspects. For example, the psalmist David said: **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit"** (Psalm 32:1-2).

Transgression or trespass is the idea of stepping somewhere outside boundaries that God has set in His Word. We know what a "No Trespassing" sign means: it means that we must stay off the land; it is forbidden territory.

The meaning of the word "sin" means "missing the mark", as when an archer misses the target. Our moral target is God's law written in our hearts and in the Bible. We miss that mark, and thus we sin. **"Sin is lawlessness"** (1 John 3:4). The apostle Paul describes sin as not doing what you should do and doing what you should not do: **"For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice"** (Romans 7:19).

Whether it is called sin, iniquity, unrighteousness, transgression, disobedience, trespass, error, evil, malice, wickedness, rebellion, or revolt, it is contrary to the will of God and brings the perpetrator under the wrath, anger, and judgment of the holy God.

In Psalm 38 David gives expression to the effect of sin in our lives: **“There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness”** (Psalm 38:3-4).

Sometimes the Bible uses the word **“flesh”** to describe man’s sinful nature. Before the Genesis flood God said of man: **“He is indeed flesh”** (Genesis 6:3). Jesus used the same term in referring to all mankind: **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh”** (John 3:6). Even after Paul became a Christian, he said: **“I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells”** (Romans 7:18). In his letter to the Galatians Paul made a list of some of the **“works of the flesh”** (Galatians 5:19).

Questions

1. What changes took place in Adam and Eve after they disobeyed God’s command?
2. How did Adam and Eve die in the day that they ate from the forbidden tree?
3. What does it mean that Adam and Eve became mortal beings?
4. What is meant by accusing and excusing thoughts, and when do they take place?
5. What are some of the different terms the Bible uses for sin?
6. What did Jesus mean when He said that what is born of flesh is flesh?
7. What words for sin are used in your native language, if it is not English?
8. Do the persons in your locale have a strong sense of guilt when they sin?
9. Why is it so important to have a concept of sin?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.4 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Universality of Sin

Every sin is a sin against God. God has written His law in the hearts of all human beings. This law is called the natural law. This law corresponds to the moral law given in the law of Moses. It is explained in the New Testament. This law does not include the ceremonial laws and civil laws that were given only to the children of Israel. These ceremonial and civil laws were in force only until the coming of the Messiah. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul lists **“those things which are not fitting,”** such as **“unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, ...envy, murder, strife, deceit, evilmindedness, ...whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful.”** He adds that the Gentiles know **“the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death”** (Romans 1:28-32). Even without any written law, the Gentiles (that is, the non-Jews) know that these things are sinful and against the will of whatever god or gods they can imagine. Nevertheless, although they know these things are wrong, they **“not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them”** (Romans 1:32).

The children of Israel, in the days before the coming of the Messiah, committed sin every time they disobeyed the laws God gave them through Moses. This included the civil and ceremonial laws that no longer apply to Christians living in the New Testament. For us Christians today it is certainly true that every transgression of the moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments and as explained in the New Testament, is a sin against God.

Since God has placed superiors over us in the government, in the home, and in society, any disobedience or lack of respect toward these authorities is also sinful, except when these authorities demand something that is contrary to God's law. The apostle Peter wrote: **“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men”** (1 Peter 2:13-15). Likewise, the apostle Paul wrote: **“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God”** (Romans 13:1). The same holds true for authorities in the home and authorities in the workplace.

Nevertheless, it is permissible and even mandatory that we disobey these human authorities when they contradict God's law. In such cases we need to follow the example of Peter and the other apostles in saying: **“We ought to obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29). When they were commanded **“not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus,”** Peter and John replied: **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard”** (Acts 4:18-20).

Sin therefore is as common in our world as air. Paul concludes: **“We have...charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin”** (Romans 3:9). **“By the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:20). **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:23). The apostle John agrees, saying: **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us...If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us”** (1 John 1:8-10).

Sometimes we know when we are sinning. At other times we are unaware of our sins. David says: **“Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults”** (Psalm 19:12). Before he was converted to faith in Christ, Paul was unaware of his sin. **“I did it ignorantly in unbelief,”** he said (1 Timothy 1:13).

In our modern world sin is commonly excused or minimized. Instead of admitting that we are sinners, we often attempt to blame our sins on others, on our upbringing, on our surroundings, on our government, on our lack of education, or on anything other than ourselves. This is the same thing that Adam and Eve did when they blamed each other, the devil, and even God for their sin, rather than taking responsibility for their own actions.

Questions

1. What is meant by the natural law?
2. Where in Scripture do we learn about the natural law?
3. Of what are all people aware, because of the natural law?
4. What laws were the children of Israel obligated to obey?
5. Which part of the written law applies to us Christians today?
6. Why is it sinful to disobey human authorities, such as the government or our parents?
7. When would it be right for us to disobey governmental authorities?
8. Who is guilty of sin in our world today?
9. How would you prove that someone is a sinner if they deny it?
10. If we deny that we are sinners, whom are we calling a liar?
11. Is it possible to sin without realizing that we are sinning? Explain.
12. How do we attempt to evade responsibility for our sins?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.5 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Progress of Sin in Our Lives

The beginning of sin is a lack of trust in God. When Eve no longer trusted in the goodness of her Creator, she began to sin. Her unbelief led her into faulty thinking and she put the word of a serpent she did not know above the word of her Creator, who had blessed her in every way. How does it happen that people follow the Antichrist rather than the Christ? Paul explains: **“For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness”** (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12). Instead of believing the truth, they follow their own desires to do wrong, and what follows is delusion.

James writes: **“Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death”** (James 1:14-15). First come **“the lusts of the flesh”** and then **“fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind”** (Ephesians 2:3).

Once we no longer trust in God’s goodness but put our own desires above God, then we think of God as an enemy. Every sin is really a sin against God. David sinned against Uriah, Uriah’s wife Bathsheba, Joab, and the whole people of Israel by his sin of adultery and murder, but later he confessed to God: **“Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight”** (Psalm 51:4). Sin is never a minor matter. Isaiah says: **“Your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear”** (Isaiah 59:2). Every sin is a slap in God’s face. **“There is no fear of God before his eyes, for he flatters himself in his own eyes”** (Psalm 36:1-2). God wants us to humble ourselves before Him, but when we sin, we are putting ourselves above Him.

“Love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10), but every sin is a sin against love. What God wants from us is love for Him and love for our fellowman. But every sin involves putting ourselves above God and doing our own thing, rather than doing His will. This is not love, no matter how we try to rationalize our disobedience to God as love. **“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil, does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth”** (1 Corinthians 13:4-6). Sin is basically selfish and self-centered. It seeks its own welfare rather than seeking the welfare of anyone else, and it certainly does not seek the glory of God.

Questions

1. Where did Eve’s sin begin?
2. What is God’s judgment on those who refuse to believe the truth?
3. What are the three steps in man’s downfall, according to James?
4. In what way is every sin a sin against God?
5. How does God summarize His law?
6. If you remember the two tables of the law, list them here.
7. Give an example of someone defending his disobedience as love.



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.6 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Cause of Sin

There are many thinkers and philosophers who have accused God Himself of being the cause of sin. Since God created the devil and his angels and he created human beings, they argue that God could have made them so that they would not sin. But such thinking does not agree with the teaching of God's Word. David testifies in Psalm 5:4: **"For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You."** In Isaiah's vision of God, he heard the seraphim crying out: **"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts"** (Isaiah 6:3). And Jesus said that His **"Father in heaven"** is **"perfect"** (Matthew 5:48).

When God created man and the spirits, they were able to resist evil. In their original state both angels and human beings had the power to remain holy. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God did not accuse Himself; He accused the serpent and the two human beings He had made. We cannot fully understand the ways of God, but we dare not teach anything that does not bring glory to God. We dare not accuse Him of sin.

The Bible plainly tells us that God does not tempt anyone to sin. **"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone"** (James 1:13). Never do we read that God approves of sin or condones sin. God hates sin, as Psalm 45:7 says: **"You love righteousness and hate wickedness."** As soon as sin entered the world, God was quick to announce His plan to eradicate sin. He announced the coming of the Woman's Seed to take away the power of Satan and sin (Genesis 3:15). In His zeal to remake a world without sin, God worked out His plan of salvation. This plan involved the sacrificial death of His own Son. **"And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all"** (Isaiah 53:6). **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them"** (2 Corinthians 5:19). **"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Some followers of John Calvin (supralapsarians) teach that God willed the fall of man into sin. They seem to teach that God is the cause of sin, but even they are not willing to say that God is the cause of sin. Jesus and His apostles very clearly taught that sin did not have its beginning in God but in Satan. Jesus said: **"He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it"** (John 8:44). **"The devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil"** (1 John 3:8). Notice that sin is called a work of the devil. The fall into sin, described in Genesis 3, is from the devil, who took on the form of a serpent.

In a secondary sense, Adam and Eve were the cause of evil because they had the power within themselves to withstand the temptations of Satan, but they did not use that power. For this reason, Paul says in Romans 5:12,18: **"Through one man sin entered the world...Through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation."**

Questions

1. Why do some people say that God is the cause of sin?
2. How does the Bible prove that God is not the cause of sin?
3. Who is the one that brought sin into the world?
4. When man fell into sin, whom did God accuse of being the cause of their fall?
5. How has God shown His hatred of sin and desire to get rid of it?
6. What kind of world does God want to restore for man?
7. What do the people in your locale consider the cause of evil or of the bad things in the world?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.7 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Imputation of Sin

Every sin that everyone commits makes him or her guilty in the sight of God. According to His law, God counts that sin against the one who commits the sin. Many years after their sin of selling Joseph into slavery, his brothers finally admitted their guilt: **“We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear”** (Genesis 42:21). When King Joash of Judah led his people to serve idols instead of the true God, the chronicler says: **“Wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem because of their trespass”** (2 Chronicles 24:18). This means the Lord counted this sin of idolatry against them, and, therefore, in His righteous anger He sent troubles to them because of their sin. The counting of something as sin against someone is called *imputation*. When we sin against God, God counts this sin against us, and we are guilty and subject to His anger and just judgment. When God’s people sinned against Him, Moses said, **“With abominations they provoked Him to anger”** (Deuteronomy 32:16).

In the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He mentions **“our debts”** (Matthew 6:12). We owe God perfect obedience to His will. Every time we sin, we add to our debts. Because we continue to sin, our debts never decrease but only increase, unless the One to whom we owe these debts forgives us. Jesus’ brother James tells us that even the smallest sin on our part makes us guilty of breaking all of God’s law: **“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all”** (James 2:10). There is no way any sinner can escape from the just judgment of God’s law. **“We know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:19-20). Each one of us must agree with the psalmist: **“If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?”** (Psalm 130:3).

To make matters even worse for us, what God counts against us is not only the sins that we commit ourselves, but the sin of Adam (and Eve). Adam, at the time of his fall into sin, was the human race. Therefore, his fall into sin was the fall into sin of the whole human race, which includes all of us, for we were already created in Adam because all of us descend from him. The apostle Paul points this out clearly in Romans 5:12-21 where he compares the first Adam and the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Listen carefully to what he says. **“Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned”** (Romans 5:12). When he says that **“all sinned,”** it is clear that all sinned when Adam sinned.

Paul goes on to show that all of Adam’s descendants died in the years that followed, even though they had not broken a specific commandment of God as Adam had done. They died because they were all guilty of Adam’s original sin. God counted Adam’s sin against all mankind. God *imputed* Adam’s sin to each one of us, and so each one of us is guilty even before we commit any sinful acts of our own. **“Through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation”** (Romans 5:18). **“By one man’s disobedience many were made sinners”** (Romans 5:19). We **“were by nature children of wrath, just as the others”** (Ephesians 2:3). We are sinners by our connection to Adam even before birth. We are guilty sinners subject to God’s wrath and just judgment.

Just as we are all counted as sinners because of Adam's sin, even so we are all counted as righteous because of the second Adam's obedience. We do not want to go into detail on this point in our discussion of sin, but we must point out this amazing truth. So, there are two imputations. Adam's sin is imputed to all human beings and Christ's righteousness is imputed to all human beings. This is the great comparison summarized by Paul in Romans 5:18-19: **"Therefore, as through one man's offense came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous."**

Notice that according to these words all human beings are counted as righteous in God's eyes because of Christ's obedience, just as all human beings are counted as sinful in God's eyes because of Adam's disobedience. **"We judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died"** (2 Corinthians 5:14). **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them"** (2 Corinthians 5:19). God does not count or impute the sins of the world against the world because He has already imputed the world's sins to Jesus Christ. Jesus endured the full punishment for all human sin on the cross. This is the greatest of all blessings from God, as David says: **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity"** (Psalm 32:1-2).

Forgiveness for all! Righteousness for all! This is what the second Adam has accomplished for all mankind. As many as were lost through Adam's fall, that many have been saved by Christ's righteousness. But individuals can lose this righteousness of Christ by unbelief. It is only by faith in Christ, that is, by trusting in Christ and in what He has done for us, that these blessings Christ has won for the world become ours personally. All of these teachings will be discussed more fully in future lessons.

Questions

1. What makes every one of us guilty in the sight of God?
2. Why can we call God's wrath a righteous or holy wrath?
3. What word did Jesus use for sin in the Lord's Prayer?
4. Why is this word a good word to use in thinking about our sins?
5. What is the only way by which we can become not guilty of our sins?
6. What does God's law have to say to everyone on earth?
7. Who became guilty of Adam's sin in addition to himself and Eve?
8. Explain what is meant by the imputation of Adam's sin to all humans.
9. What does the Bible mean when it says that we are children of wrath?
10. Explain the comparison between Adam and Jesus Christ as simply as you can.
11. For whom has Christ won the forgiveness of sin?
12. What is the only way by which each one of us can receive this forgiveness?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.8 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

Original Sin and Actual Sins

Besides being guilty of Adam's sin by imputation (original sin), we are also all guilty of actual sins, that is, sins that each one of us commits in thought, word, and deed. We sin by our thinking, by our speaking, and by our doing. Jesus said: **"Out of the heart (original sin) proceed evil thoughts (thought), murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts (deed), false witness, blasphemies (word). These are the things which defile a man"** (Matthew 15:19-20).

The apostle Paul often gives lists of actual sins. These lists are not intended to be complete lists, but rather examples of various kinds of sins. Such lists are found in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 3:5-11, and Colossians 3:5-10. Actually, everything that is done by an unbeliever is a sin, because **"without faith it is impossible to please"** God (Hebrews 11:6). Cain's offering to God did not please God because Cain did not bring his offering in faith. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God is not pleased with offerings that He Himself has commanded if they come from those who are continuing in evil as unbelievers without repentance. **"Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates,"** he says. **"They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood"** (Isaiah 1:14-15). Actual sin begins with the first desire to sin, as James says: **"When desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin"** (James 1:15).

The Bible speaks of some actual sins as unintentional or involuntary. These sins may be sins of weakness or sins of ignorance. After the great Genesis flood Noah **"began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent"** (Genesis 9:20-21). This was most likely a sin of weakness and not an intentional sin to defy his Maker. When Jesus' disciples were asked in the Garden of Gethsemane to **"watch and pray,"** they did not watch; they did not pray, but they fell asleep. Jesus recognized this as a sin of weakness, not as an intentional sin, for He said: **"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"** (Matthew 26:41). The apostle Paul confessed that he often committed unintentional sins, doing what he did not want to do: **"What I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do"** (Romans 7:15).

After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot's escape with his two daughters, these two daughters **"made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose"** (Genesis 19:33). Lot's sin of incest with his daughters was a sin of ignorance on his part, since he did not know what was going on. The Old Testament regulations allowed for special sacrifices **"if a person sins unintentionally against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which ought not to be done, and does any of them"** (Leviticus 4:2; Numbers 15:27). Such sins of ignorance are indeed sins which need to be forgiven, as Jesus prayed from the cross: **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"** (Luke 23:34).

On the other hand, many sins are intentional or deliberate sins. The Old Testament laws made a distinction between involuntary sins and intentional sins. We read in Numbers 15:30-31: **"The person who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him."** For example, when Absalom, David's son, plotted against his father over a

long period of time and then stole the kingdom from him, this certainly was a deliberate sin on his part. He had planned it and then he carried it out. There is no sign that he ever repented (2 Samuel 15). The betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot was certainly also a sin committed willfully and with malicious intent (Matthew 26:14-16).

All sins deserve eternal punishment. All sins are dangerous. But those who sin continually, and defiantly flout God's grace in their lives, do so at grave spiritual risk to their souls. Paul warns the Christians in Rome: **"If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live"** (Romans 8:13). In the Christian there should be a continuing struggle against the flesh and the sin it desires to do. There are setbacks along the way, but it is always dangerous to plunge ahead on a sinful path when one knows that it is a sinful path and a path that is contrary to God's clear will.

As long as God's Holy Spirit is in us and at work in us through God's Word, the struggle continues. But it is possible for a believer not only to grieve the Spirit but even to drive Him out. We all need to pray with David: **"Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me"** (Psalm 19:12-13). We need the forgiveness for the sins we do not understand – the sins that are hidden even from us. But we need God's special help to fight against deliberate sins, so that they do not have dominion over us. That is why Paul instructs us: **"Do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts... For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace"** (Romans 6:12-14). Paul continues with this warning: **"Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?"** (Romans 6:16).

All sins committed by unbelievers are sins leading to death, for without faith it is impossible to please God. Even those deeds that look like good deeds to human eyes are not good in God's eyes. Only those who believe in Christ can do things that God considers good. Remember the difference between Cain and Abel, as explained in Hebrews 11:4.

By faith in Jesus Christ, who has paid the penalty for all sins, the believer is a forgiven sinner. Like David, the believer says to God in his words or thoughts: **"I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' And You forgave the iniquity of my sin"** (Psalm 32:5). Our God is not a God who is eager to remove us from His flock. **"A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench"** (Isaiah 42:3). The apostle Paul assures us: **"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus"** (Romans 8:1). **"If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world"** (1 John 2:1-2). We should not forget that Jesus, who died for our sins, is now at God's right hand interceding for us. **"It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us"** (Romans 8:34).

God's strong warnings are given to believers to help them fight against the sins that are always threatening to take over and drive out the Holy Spirit. **"Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God"** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). A similar warning is given in Galatians 5:19-21, concluding with these words: **"Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."**

We usually think of sins as acts that are wrong. But in addition to these sins of *commission*, there are also sins of *omission*, that is, sins where we do not do what we ought to do. James says: **"To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin"** (James 4:17).

Questions

1. What is the difference between original sin and actual sins?
2. Why is it impossible for unbelievers to do good in God's sight?
3. Why did God accept Abel's offering, but not Cain's offering?
4. Give an example of a sin of weakness.
5. Give an example of a sin of ignorance.
6. What is the difference between involuntary sins and deliberate sins?
7. What must believers in Christ continually do every day of their lives?
8. What does it mean when it is said that sin has dominion over you?
9. What comfort do believers have when they fall into sin?
10. What is the difference between a sin of commission and a sin of omission?
11. Which sins are prevalent in your locale?
12. How must Christians struggle against these sins?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.9 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Sin against the Holy Spirit

Jesus mentioned the sin against the Holy Spirit in His ministry. There are parallel passages in the synoptic Gospels concerning the incident that led Jesus to speak of this sin. In Matthew 12 we learn that in reaction to Jesus' miracle of healing a blind and mute man who was possessed by a demon, the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons through the power of **"Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons"** (Matthew 12:24). Since Beelzebub is another name for Satan, Jesus responded by pointing out the foolishness of saying that Satan was fighting against himself. **"If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself"** (Matthew 12:26). Jesus was casting out demons **"by the Spirit of God"** (Matthew 12:28). It was in connection with this accusation that Jesus warned the Pharisees: **"Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come"** (Matthew 12:31-32).

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says: **"Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation" – because they said, 'He has an unclean spirit'"** (Mark 3:28-29).

Luke's Gospel does not give the same background to Jesus' warning but indicates that Jesus said similar words to His disciples after warning them: **"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy"** (Luke 12:1). Jesus continued: **"Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven"** (Luke 12:10).

Thus the sin against the Holy Spirit, the so-called unforgivable sin, consists of a deliberate and stubborn rejection of Jesus and His Word against better knowledge, accompanied by a blasphemous speaking against the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. Jesus did not actually say that the Pharisees had committed this sin; He was warning them against committing this sin. Jesus, of course, died for all sins, including this sin. And the God of our salvation, the Triune God, surely wants all men to be saved by faith in Jesus. But when one rejects the means by which faith is created, that person makes faith impossible. The warning is given to prevent people from committing this sin.

Other passages in Scripture seem to allude to this sin without calling it the sin against the Holy Spirit. The prophet Isaiah said of the children of Israel: **"But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; so He turned Himself against them as an enemy, and He fought against them"** (Isaiah 63:10). In his address to the Jewish leaders before he was martyred, Stephen said: **"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you"** (Acts 7:51).

There are several severe warnings in the letter to the Hebrews that possibly refer to the sin against the Holy Spirit. In Hebrews 6:4-6 we hear these words: **"It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame."** In this case, the warning is given to persons who were in danger of falling away from

their faith in Christ, not to persons like the Pharisees who had always rejected Christ.

A similar warning is given in Hebrews 10:26-31: **“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. And again, ‘The LORD will judge His people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”** Insulting the Spirit of grace is a very dangerous thing to do on the part of any believer; it may be fatal.

The apostle John seems to be speaking of the sin against the Holy Spirit when he tells us that there are some sinners we should pray for, and others for whom we need not pray. He says: **“If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that”** (1 John 5:16).

Jesus sees all and knows all, but even he did not definitely say that any Pharisees had committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. And because the book of Acts (for example, Acts 15:5) tells us that some Pharisees, including Paul himself, were brought to faith in Jesus, we cannot definitely say to anyone: “You have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit.” Rather, we are to use it as a serious warning against rejecting the testimony of the Holy Spirit about Jesus. It has happened in church history that some Christians have been very much concerned that they have committed this unpardonable sin. But any person whose conscience is bothered in this way most assuredly has not committed this sin. For anyone who is sinning against the Holy Spirit is not concerned about the sins they commit. The Gospel of universal grace must be proclaimed to any sinner who is afraid they have committed this sin against the Holy Spirit.

The point we should always remember is that when the Spirit begins His work of showing us our sins and showing our Savior to us, we should not stubbornly delay our repentance. The prophet Samuel said to King Saul: **“Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king”** (1 Samuel 15:23). Consider also Jesus’ sad words to the people of Jerusalem: **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’”** (Matthew 23:37-39).

Questions

1. What is special about the sin against the Holy Spirit?
2. Under what circumstances did Jesus mention the sin against the Holy Spirit?
3. What is the sin against the Holy Spirit?
4. Why can we be sure that Jesus died also for sins against the Holy Spirit?
5. What sin did Stephen accuse his listeners of committing?
6. How do you feel after reading the warnings from the letter to the Hebrews?
7. What would you say to someone who thinks he has committed the sin against the Holy Spirit?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.10 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Hardening of Hearts

Very similar to the sin against the Holy Spirit is the hardening of the heart. One difference is that the sin against the Holy Spirit is a sin against the Gospel, which the Holy Spirit is trying to bring to us, while the hardening of the heart may occur toward either the law or the Gospel. The first occurrence of hardening of the heart in the Bible is the hardening of the heart of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. He hardened his heart against the demand of the Lord God to release his Israelite slaves so that they may worship Him. Moses presented this demand to Pharaoh, **“Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.”** Pharaoh’s reply was this: **“Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go”** (Exodus 5:1-2).

In the Bible history that follows this encounter in the book of Exodus (chapters 6-10) there are twenty passages that refer to the hardening of the heart. Ten times Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and ten times God hardens the Pharaoh’s heart. This contrast is found in the original Hebrew, but it is not always so noticeable in translation. When God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, it is God’s way of terminating Pharaoh’s time for repentance. From that point on, it becomes impossible for Pharaoh to repent. First Pharaoh hardens his heart in stubborn opposition to God, and then God finally hardens Pharaoh’s heart. We read in Exodus 11:10: **“The LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the children of Israel go out of his land.”**

Even after the tenth plague, when Pharaoh finally told the Israelites to get out of his land, he again changed his mind and he pursued the fleeing Israelites with his horses and chariots. Pharaoh could not truly repent at that point, for we read again: **“The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel”** (Exodus 14:8). The end result, of course, was that his forces were drowned in the Red Sea.

In the last days of the earthly kingdom of Judah, there was another man who hardened his heart: Zedekiah, the last king of Judah before the Babylonian Captivity. This was in the days of the prophet Jeremiah. We read that Zedekiah **“did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. And he also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear an oath by God; but he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel”** (2 Chronicles 36:12-13). It seems Zedekiah was not the only one to harden his heart at that time. Jeremiah reported that the people, as well, had hardened their hearts: **“They have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to return”** (Jeremiah 5:3). God’s judgment then followed. **“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Behold, I will bring on this city and on all her towns all the doom that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks that they might not hear My words’”** (Jeremiah 19:15).

When God sent His Son Jesus into the world, there were those who hardened their hearts against Him. When Jesus saw a man with a withered hand in the synagogue, the Pharisees watched Him closely to see whether He would heal the man. Jesus asked them, **“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”** When they kept silent, Jesus **“looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts”** (Mark 3:1-5).

There were times when even Jesus’ disciples were accused of having hard hearts. Jesus fed a crowd with five loaves and two fish. In the evening of that same day, He walked on water in their presence.

Still they were slow to understand who Jesus was. Mark wrote: **“They had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened”** (Mark 6:52). In their case, Jesus did not harden their hearts, for their hearts did not remain hard. Nevertheless, Jesus was troubled by their lack of faith. Even after He had fed the five thousand and the four thousand, they thought that Jesus was angry with them because they had forgotten to bring bread on the boat. Jesus scolded them severely: **“Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? ... How is it you do not understand?”** (Mark 8:18-21). They had collected twelve baskets of leftovers from the first miracle and seven large baskets after the second miracle. They should not have been concerned about having enough bread, but they should have trusted that their Lord could easily provide bread for them.

Because we sinners naturally resistance God and His Word, we all need to heed the warning of Psalm 95:7-8: **“Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”** We cannot know in advance how long God will give us to repent of our sins. Even though God is patient, there comes a time when God responds to our resistance by hardening our hearts and making it impossible for us to repent. When the ancient world turned away from God to gross idolatry, **“God gave them up to uncleanness,” “God gave them up to vile passions,” “God gave them over to a debased mind”** (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

When the Christians **“did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved”** (2 Thessalonians 2:10), God sent them **“strong delusion, that they should believe the lie”** (2 Thessalonians 2:11) – the lie of the Antichrist who has come with signs and wonders from Satan himself to deceive them. The timing of God’s judgment is not in our control, for it is written: **“He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens”** (Romans 9:18).

As is the case with the sin against the Holy Spirit, it is not for us to determine whose heart God has hardened. Rather we are to warn against the possibility of hardening one’s heart. When the apostle Paul preached the Gospel, he warned his listeners of the danger of rejecting the Gospel. He said to the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia: **“It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles”** (Acts 13:46). Jesus Himself warned His disciples that their message would be rejected by many and said: **“Whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!”** (Matthew 10:14-15).

These warnings against the hardening of the heart should lead each of us to examine ourselves to see if we are resisting God and His Word in some way. When we see signs of such hardening in ourselves, we need to bow before God in humble repentance and ask to be restored through God's grace and forgiveness. **“If we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”** (1 John 1:9).

Questions

1. In what way did the Pharaoh of Egypt harden his heart against God?
2. What did God do in response to Pharaoh’s repeated stubbornness?
3. How did God finally send judgment on the Pharaoh of Egypt?
4. Which king of Judah hardened his heart against the Word of God?
5. What judgment from God came to this king and his people?
6. Why was Jesus angry with the Pharisees in connection with the man with the withered hand?
7. Why was Jesus upset with His own disciples when they forgot to bring bread?
8. Why is it dangerous to postpone our repentance?
9. Why has God sent the Antichrist into the church?
10. What warnings did Paul and Jesus Himself give to their hearers?



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 4.11 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Bondage of the Will

Because of original sin human beings by nature cannot choose to do anything good in the sight of God. Natural man has no free will to choose good or to do good. When God looked at the human race in the years before the Genesis flood, **“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”** (Genesis 6:5). Of course, there were some persons, such as Enoch and Noah, who had been brought to faith in the promise of a Savior by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel (Genesis 3:15). These few persons **“found grace in the eyes of the LORD”** (Genesis 6:8).

The prophet Ezekiel described the natural heart of man as a **“stony heart”** or a **“heart of stone”** (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). Jesus summed up the problem by saying: **“A bad tree bears bad fruit”** (Matthew 7:17). The apostle Paul declared: **“The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God”** (Romans 8:7-8).

Regarding God, the only thing man is able to conceive is that he must do something to make God show favor to him. For this reason, all man-made religions lay the burden on man to come up with some kind thought or action that will satisfy God and move God to remove His punishment from us and reward us for the good things we do. But God’s standards are much higher than any human being can hope to fulfill. Even God’s own chosen people, the Jews, imagined that they could please God by obeying the laws God gave them. Their own teachers even added many regulations in an attempt to please God. They did not realize that the purpose of God’s law was not to give them a way to eternal life, but to show them their inability to please God by their works. Their inability to perfectly follow the law was meant to lead them to seek refuge in God’s promise of a Savior. The apostle Paul himself had at one time attempted to earn God’s favor by keeping the law. But after his conversion he recognized the futility of trying to keep the law and described the problem of the Jews in this way: **“I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God”** (Romans 10:2-3).

Since human beings are by nature **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1) they are unable to do anything at all to remove the just condemnation of God and the punishment their sin deserves. Even when God, in His grace, comes to them with the Good News of Jesus and the salvation He worked out for them, they are not at all able even to cooperate with God in bringing themselves to faith in Christ. In other words, natural man has no free will to choose to do good or to choose to believe God’s promise of a Savior. Just as a person who is physically dead can do nothing to bring himself back to life, so also a person who is spiritually dead can do nothing to give himself spiritual life. He cannot even cooperate with God to bring about a new spiritual life. Conversion is entirely a work of God, not of man. The creation of faith in Christ in a person’s heart is a work of God, not a choice or a decision of man.

Jesus and His apostles stressed this truth repeatedly, because humans, because of their sinful flesh, like to give some credit to themselves for their new spiritual life. Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh,**

and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit...You must be born again” (John 3:3-7). We do not give ourselves this new birth; the Holy Spirit gives us this most necessary new birth.

What Paul said about this agrees with his Lord and Savior: **“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”** (1 Corinthians 12:3). Our coming to faith in Jesus is entirely the work of God, as it is written: **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”** (Ephesians 2:4-5). We were dead in sins; God made us alive. See also Colossians 2:13.

The creation of light on the first day of creation is like the creation of the light of faith in Christ in a human being dead in sins. **“For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”** (2 Corinthians 4:6). Even the desire to believe in Jesus is a work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: **“It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure”** (Philippians 2:13). The entire work of conversion must be ascribed to God alone. Natural man does not have a free will to choose to believe in Jesus.

Although the teaching of the bondage of the will in spiritual matters is clearly presented in Scripture, this has been a hotly contested teaching in the history of the Christian Church. Pelagius troubled believers with his notion that a man, by nature, is able to keep God’s commandments and is able to choose to believe in Jesus. The church father, Augustine, contended against this false teaching and stressed the Bible’s teaching that we are saved by grace alone. God does it all; we cannot even freely cooperate with God to bring about that first spark of faith in Christ. Nevertheless, many Bible students and teachers continue to teach that conversion is a joint project carried out partly by God and partly by man. This is sometimes presented like this: God has done His part by bringing the good news of Jesus to you; now you must do your part and make the decision to believe in Him. This is sometimes called “decision theology.” But even though a majority of Christian teachers and missionaries may follow this method, it is clearly contrary to the Word of God. Martin Luther contended in his time for the teaching of salvation by grace alone, and we must do the same today.

Questions

1. What is meant by the bondage of the will?
2. Who were the only ones who could do good in the eyes of God in the days before the Genesis flood?
3. How did the prophet Ezekiel describe the heart of natural man?
4. How do men, by nature think, they can gain the favor of God?
5. What are some man-made religions that teach salvation by works or rituals?
6. Why are we, by nature, unable to cooperate with God in our own conversion?
7. What are some of the Bible passages that ascribe conversion entirely to God?
8. Why is the creation of light in the beginning a good picture of conversion?
9. What is decision theology, and how is it contrary to the Word of God?
10. Why is decision theology dangerous for the Christian missionary?
11. What is the right way to bring the Gospel of Christ to unbelievers?
12. If you can, name some missionaries in your locale that use of decision theology in their work.



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.12 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Punishment for Sin

God in His holy justice punishes all sin. Sin can be compared to a debt that is owed to God. When the debt is paid in full, the sin is forgiven. Likewise, when the punishment for sin has been totally carried out, the sin is forgiven. Jesus taught that He Himself came into the world to pay the debt in full. He said: **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”** (Mark 10:45). The giving of Jesus’ life was the perfect and total ransom payment to cover for all of human sin. The punishment inflicted on Jesus and totally absorbed by Him was a sufficient punishment to atone for all human sin. He paid the price that no one else could pay. The punishment inflicted on Him was sufficient to obtain forgiveness for all sin.

Any disobedience of God’s law is sin that has to be punished. Therefore, every sinner puts himself under God’s curse by his sin. What hangs over his head is the threat of punishment for his sin, and that punishment is eternal death: separation from all the blessings of God. God directed Moses to divide the Israelites into two camps. One of the camps was to pronounce blessing on those who obey God’s law. The other camp was to pronounce a curse on those who disobey. The concluding curse was: **“Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law”** (Deuteronomy 27:26). The apostle Paul repeated this curse in his letter to the Galatians: **“As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them’”** (Galatians 3:10).

The prophet Isaiah foretold what the Messiah would do to compensate for all human sin. We find the perfect remedy for sin and the punishment sinners deserve in these words: **“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”** (Isaiah 53:5-6). Notice that God Himself transferred the total burden of all human sin, along with its punishment, from us sinners to the only sinless One, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. By taking on all human sin and its punishment, He brings us healing. There is peace for us instead of the curse of God hanging over us. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’)”** (Galatians 3:13). Notice that Jesus became a curse for us by hanging on the tree of the cross. That is where God punished Him for all human sin. That is where He was wounded, He was bruised, He was chastised, and He was given stripes, for our healing.

All of this is stated very clearly by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome. He declared: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:23-24). Note that the only way sinners can be justified (declared righteous) by God is through the redemption of Christ, that is, by Jesus’ absorbing the full punishment for all human sin when He was hanging on the cross. Note that as many as have sinned have been declared righteous (justified). As many as have sinned are declared forgiven because Jesus absorbed in His own body the punishment for all sin. This same truth is emphasized by Paul’s comparison between Adam and Jesus Christ. **“As through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life”** (Romans 5:18). Adam’s sin brought about condemnation to all. Christ’s redemption brought about the justification of all, that is, the forgiveness of sin.

Throughout their lives, sinners may think to themselves that they have gotten away with their sin, because God does not immediately punish their sin with eternal death. Through the words of the psalmist Asaph God says to these sinners: **“These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes. Now consider this, you who forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver”** (Psalm 50:21-22). Our only hope is the One who has delivered us, Jesus Christ. But those who reject this one and only Savior remain under God’s curse and they will face their punishment of eternal death in the world to come. John the Baptist gave us this testimony: **“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him”** (John 3:36).

God may partially punish unbelievers for sin even in this life. Punishments of this kind are intended to lead sinners to repentance. The prophet Amos told the Israelites that God sent to them **“cleanness of teeth,” “lack of bread,”** withholding of rain, **“blight and mildew,” “a plague,”** and more; yet in each case God had to tell them: **“Yet you have not returned to Me”** (Amos 4:6-11). If His judgments do not produce repentance, God may inflict on impenitent sinners the greatest of all earthly judgments. He may take away His life-saving word. Amos warned his people: **“Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord God, ‘that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it”** (Amos 8:11-12).

There are many persons on earth who thumb their noses at God, so to speak, and pay no attention to anything He says or does. Such persons may become wealthy on earth and they may seem to prosper in every way. But God says: **“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to the flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life”** (Galatians 6:7-8). Therefore, the mighty on earth are warned: **“Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him”** (Psalm 2:12).

Sometimes it may seem that true believers in Christ are being punished here on earth for their sins. But if they cling to Jesus and trust in the punishment He absorbed in their place, they are not under God’s wrath or under any kind of curse. Think of the sufferings God permitted the godly man Job to experience. Yet God was not punishing Job; He was putting Job to the test for Job’s own spiritual growth. In such cases we should speak of God’s discipline or chastisement rather than His punishment, even though outwardly such discipline may look the same as God’s judgments on unbelievers.

The letter to the Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3:1-12 and explains God’s chastening like this: **“You have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.’ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”** (Hebrews 12:5-11).

We find an example of such chastisement for our good in what happened to the Christians at Corinth because of their abuse of the Lord’s Supper. After spelling out what they were doing wrongly, Paul says: **“For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world”** (1 Corinthians 11:30-32). Notice that the purpose of God’s chastisement is not condemnation, but to save us from condemnation.

Questions

1. When and how did God punish all human sin?
2. What kind of curse rests on all sinners because of their disobedience?
3. How was this curse removed?
4. On whom does this curse still rest, and why?
5. What does the cross of Calvary have to do with punishment for sin?
6. Prove from Isaiah 53 that our sins have been already punished.
7. Why does not every sinner receive the benefits of Christ's work?
8. Give an outline of the grand comparison between Adam and Jesus Christ.
9. Why does God sometimes send partial judgments on sinners in this life?
10. What was the result of God's judgments on Israel in the days of Amos?
11. What is the greatest of all earthly judgments?
12. What is the difference between God's judgment on unbelievers and His chastisement of believers?
13. What chastisement did God send to the Christians at Corinth? Why?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 4.13 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Conscience

The apostle Paul taught the Christians in Rome that everyone in the whole world has a conscience and an awareness of a divine being to whom he or she is accountable. These are his words: **“When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them”** (Romans 2:14-15). The Gentiles did not have the written law of God given to the Jewish people, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, the Gentiles, or non-Jews, had the moral law of God written in their hearts, so that they had some kind of knowledge of right and wrong. Often, they were as moral as the Jews, because they were obeying the law written in their hearts.

At the same time the Gentiles had an awareness of a divine being to whom they would have to give an answer for how they lived their lives. They had a consciousness of someone in authority or control over them. Because of the law of God written in their hearts and their consciousness of a divine being, their thoughts accused them when they believed they had done wrong, and their thoughts excused them when they thought they had done right. For this reason, the apostle wrote that even the Gentiles know **“the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things (evil things as listed in the verses preceding) are deserving of death”** and yet at the same time **“not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them”** (Romans 1:32).

The conscience of unbelievers is guided by their understanding of God’s requirements, but this understanding may not be fully in line with God’s Word. The conscience of believers should be guided entirely by God’s will as revealed in Scripture, but this is not always the case because of poor training or because of the desires of the flesh.

The Bible speaks of persons having a bad conscience or a good conscience. In his defense of his life before Governor Felix, the apostle Paul said: **“I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men”** (Acts 24:16). Paul strove to live in such a way that he did not feel in his conscience that he was living contrary to the two tables of God’s law: love for God and love for his fellowman. On the other hand, Paul told his assistant Timothy that there were false teachers who were **“speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving”** (1 Timothy 4:2-3). By our continued sinning against our conscience, we can get to the point where our sinning no longer bothers us. We can begin to convince ourselves that our sins are not really sins at all; our conscience no longer functions as it should.

The fact that all human beings have a conscience of some kind gives missionaries a place from which to begin their presentation of salvation in Jesus Christ to those who do not know Jesus. Before the message of salvation can be good news to a sinner, the sinner must first realize that he is a sinner and that he has not lived up to the law of God written in his heart. He must realize that he is in deep trouble with God, whom he must face and to whom he must give account when he dies. In other words, when a missionary teaches God’s law to an unbeliever and tries to make him aware of his sin and his need for a Savior, the voice of conscience within that unbeliever and his accusing thoughts are at least in partial agreement with the law of God. The sinner recognizes that what the missionary is saying about

his sin and guilt is correct because it agrees with his own feeling of guilt. The fact that unbelievers often have a guilty conscience has led people from many different cultures try to make up for their feelings of guilt by bringing some kind of atoning sacrifice to the gods, or by following some code of behavior that they believe will be pleasing to the gods.

All attempts on the part of unbelievers to placate an angry God or gods always fall short. There is no way a person can truly have a good conscience rather than a bad or evil conscience apart from the fully atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Even the animal sacrifices God Himself commanded the Israelites to bring to Him did not take away sin. Their value was as a preview of the one bloody sacrifice of the Son of God later made on the cross. The fact that the animal sacrifices had to be repeated day after day, year after year, proves that they did not remove sin and guilt. **“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins”** (Hebrews 10:4).

The atoning sacrifice of Christ, however, had to be made only once. **“Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption”** (Hebrews 9:12). Christ’s sacrifice is how our conscience is cleansed **“from dead works to serve the living God”** (Hebrews 9:14). **“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”** (Hebrews 10:19-22). Putting our trust in Jesus, we know our sins are forgiven, and our conscience no longer bothers us; we are no longer afraid of God nor of facing His judgment on the Last Day. **“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Romans 5:1).

A good conscience through faith in Christ can again become a bad conscience when we knowingly follow a path that is displeasing to God. That is why our whole life must be a life of repentance in which we confess our daily sins and again turn to Jesus for forgiveness. We Christians need God’s law every day to remind us that we are sinners, and we need God’s Gospel every day to assure us that our sins are forgiven and that we are safe from God’s judgment.

The conscience of unbelievers and even believers may be misguided. A person may be led to believe that God-pleasing behavior is not God-pleasing, or that a certain sinful behavior is God-pleasing. For example, if a person has been told all his life that praying to an idol or to a godly person who has died is good, he may feel guilty when he no longer prays to that idol or that saint. If he prays to Mary, for example, he is sinning against God, because God says we should pray only to the Triune God. On the other hand, if he stops praying to Mary, he is sinning against his conscience, because he still believes in his heart that it is right to pray to Mary. The solution to this problem is to let our conscience be guided by God’s Word. This involves a process of Christian training and education – studying God’s Word carefully so that we are sure of what is right and wrong.

In the days of the New Testament there were many Christians who believed that eating certain foods was wrong. Their conscience would bother them if they ate such foods. The Bible calls such Christians weak Christians because they believed something was sinful that was not really sinful. There were others who believed it was sinful to work on Saturdays, because the Old Testament law forbid work on the Sabbath. How did the apostle Paul handle such situations? One thing he did was to establish whether such activities were sinful or not. For example, he wrote to the Christians in Colossi: **“Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ... Why...do you subject yourselves to regulations – ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh”** (Colossians 2:16-23).

The truth is then that God does not now make the eating or non-eating of certain foods a matter of conscience, that is, a matter of right and wrong. God does not now make the observance of the

Sabbath or other religious festivals a matter of conscience – a matter of right and wrong. We are free to worship on any day of the week. We are free to eat all foods or not eat them, as we please. We should not make rules about such matters and insist that everyone must obey such rules. Following such rules may make us look especially pious and holy to the world but has no value in the struggle against real sin.

Nevertheless, Paul was careful in his instruction to tell the strong Christians (the ones who knew that these things were not sinful) that they should not do anything to lead the weak Christians (the ones who thought these things were wrong) to sin against their consciences. For a full discussion of these matters read 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15. It may very well be that in bringing Christian teaching into cultures that are accustomed to many such rules that are not rules of God, Christian missionaries may have to forgo certain activities that are not wrong in themselves so as to avoid leading others to sin against their conscience. At the same time, it is necessary for these missionaries to begin the process of teaching God's Word, so that the people will gradually come to know what is truly God-pleasing and what is not God-pleasing.

Questions

1. How do we know that Gentiles as well as Jews have a conscience?
2. What is conscience?
3. What does it mean that the law of God is written in men's hearts?
4. What is a good conscience and what is a bad conscience?
5. Why does the fact that everyone has a conscience help the missionary?
6. What does everyone need to know before he can appreciate the Gospel?
7. What is the only right way for a bad conscience to become a good conscience?
8. What is the only way a sinner can have true peace with God?
9. What is the difference between strong Christians and weak Christians?
10. What does God's Word say about food laws and special days of worship?
11. How should strong Christians behave in the presence of weak Christians?
12. What is the only way we can determine what is truly God-pleasing?
13. List some things that many people in your locale think are wrong but which actually may not be wrong.
14. How would you proceed in dealing with these people?



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.14 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Giving of Offense

In the English language the word “offense” has several different meanings and uses. The word “offense” in the Bible has a special meaning that is often misunderstood. In the Bible sense of the word, giving offense means doing something to lead someone else into sin and possibly even eternal damnation. This of course is a serious matter. One may give offense by false teaching, by giving bad advice, or even by leading a weak Christian to sin against his conscience. It is sometimes spoken of as putting a stumbling block in someone’s way, or even of setting a death trap for a person.

Jesus warned against giving offense when He told His disciples: **“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!”** (Matthew 18:6-7).

The apostle Paul warned against giving offense through false teaching. He wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them... By smooth words and flattering speech”** they **“deceive the hearts of the simple”** (Romans 16:17-18).

A strong Christian gives offense when he or she urges a weak Christian to do something that is not wrong in itself but is contrary to the weak Christian’s conscience. This was a serious problem in the early church because there were so many Christians who had been brought up to believe that certain foods should not be eaten and that certain religious rituals and festivals had to be observed. The apostle Paul wrote extensively about this problem in his letters to Christians in Rome and in Corinth. For example, he wrote: **“Let us...resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way. I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died”** (Romans 14:13-15).

On the other hand, when someone insists that you are sinning by eating certain foods or by not observing certain festivals, it becomes necessary for you to express your Christian liberty to eat such food and to refrain from observing laws that others insist are necessary. When certain Christians insisted that all Gentile Christians must be circumcised and obey Jewish laws in order to be saved, Paul refused to have his Gentile assistant Titus be circumcised. Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia: **“Not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you”** (Galatians 2:3-5). In such cases we must follow Paul’s instruction: **“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”** (Galatians 5:1).

When no one was insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation, Paul freely chose to have his assistant Timothy circumcised in order that it would help him serve as a missionary among Jewish people. Timothy himself had a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father. **“Paul wanted to have him (Timothy) go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek”** (Acts 16:3).

Questions

1. What does “giving offense” mean, as the phrase is used in the New Testament?
2. What are some of the ways in which one can give offense?
3. Why is the giving of offense such a serious matter?
4. How can a strong Christian give offense to a weak Christian?
5. When does it become necessary for a Christian to exercise his or her liberty?
6. Why did Paul have Timothy circumcised, but not Titus?
7. What can we expect when we tell unbelievers about Christ?
8. What can he expect even after such persons have been brought to faith?
9. What must a Christian always remember in order to avoid giving offense?