

A Better Story – The Fall (Romans 3:9-20)

How did it all go wrong?

Every parent has had that experience when they realised that their child is not a perfect little angel. Maybe as a baby they smiled and giggled, and when they'd crawl they'd follow you around and do everything you say. But one day they suddenly change from this delightful cherub, to a defiant, stubborn tantrum-throwing toddler. And you wonder, 'What happened?', 'Where did it all go wrong?'

Well as we look out at our world, we can wonder the same thing. Last week we saw that the whole universe was made by an amazingly powerful and loving Creator. Everything he made reflects his glory and majesty. And human beings were made special, with unique dignity and responsibility to rule over creation. It was a very high position. Which is why what happened after that was called 'The Fall.' Human beings fell from their high position into sin. They fell short of the glory of God, and lost the happiness they had in the beginning with Him. But God continued to be kind to them and work out his plan to one day bring them back to him.

But sin is a religious word. What exactly is sin? This is a huge question, but we'll look at just three central aspects of what sin is in the Bible, focusing on the letter to the Roman church. And we'll see that sin is 1. Relational, 2. Moral and 3. Universal.

1. Relational

The first thing to see is that sin is relational. The first humans, Adam and Eve, were made to be in loving relationship with God. In other words, they were dependent. And that's what being righteous means. To be in a right relationship with God. Humans don't create their own identity. They are made to reflect the image and glory of God. And they enjoyed all kinds of pleasures and freedom, symbolized by being able to eat from any of the trees in the garden.

But there was this one tree they were not allowed to eat from. A lot of people think the first sin was sex, or eating an apple. But the tree they were not allowed to eat from is the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. That is, they had a choice whether to receive what God says is good and bad for them, or to decide what is right and wrong for themselves, rejecting what God had said.

Led by Satan, Adam and Eve decided they would define reality for themselves and ate the forbidden fruit. From that time on, sin, which is this anti-God, self-promoting mindset became part of human nature, and passed on to all of their descendants. You can see this in our passage for today.

Romans 3:10-12a *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.* ¹² *All have turned away,*

Our nature is to turn away from God and seek to live our lives without him and his rule and guidance. The Bible has many pictures for this relational aspect of sin. It's like a Father who provides everything his son could want or need. The son wants his stuff, but he doesn't want the Father. So he asks him for his

inheritance, then leaves the family home, wastes all the good things his Father gave him and eventually comes to ruin. That's the story of the Prodigal Son.¹

It's also pictured like a woman who commits adultery against a faithful Husband. Or a people who rise up and rebel against their kind and powerful King. Or the workers of a vineyard who rob the Owner of the fruit of his vineyard. Sin is not just doing bad stuff. It is deeply personal and offensive to God our loving Maker.

This relational element is crucial because our natural way to define right and wrong is just doing bad stuff. And it's all about how we treat other people. But the Bible says the most important relationship in the universe is between us and God. The most important commandment is 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind.' The second is to love your neighbour.

Imagine if you had the perfect daughter... She helps with the housework and always keeps her room tidy. She is responsible and hard working. She helps her brother with his homework, and every time she borrows the car, she returns it with a full tank of petrol. Sounds like the perfect daughter right? There's only one problem, she never says a word to you. She doesn't say, 'Good morning. Or how are you? In fact, the only time she talks to you is when she wants something. But she never says thank you.

The question is, do you still think she is the perfect daughter? Of course not! She is ungrateful and rude. You have provided everything for her and she does not want to know you. She treats you like you don't even exist. See the problem with defining sin by how you treat other people, is that you leave God out of the picture. Which is exactly what sin is! Our hearts are so affected by sin that we don't see how sinful it is to leave God out of the definition of sin! Sin makes us blind to our sin. Which is why we don't think we're that bad... The essence of sin is deeply relational, because it's rejecting our relationship with God.

2. Moral

Now even though sin is not just doing bad stuff, it has a moral dimension. Our break in relationship with our good God means that our morality gets corrupted. Imagine if perfect morality is firing an arrow and hitting the bullseye. Well, sin means that we always miss the mark. It's like some feathers have been ripped off the arrow, and now it can't fly straight. Our souls always turn away from God. Our very natures have become corrupt. We break God's laws because our hearts reject the Lawgiver. Again, our passage shows the moral dimension of sin:

Romans 3:13-18 *"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."
"The poison of vipers is on their lips."¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood;¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,
¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know."¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

Now we might think, 'Well I'm not that bad. I'm not a murderer or thief.' But Jesus says that the seed of all those big sins is in our hearts. And if we don't control them, they will grow bigger and bigger. An example is what Jesus says in Matthew 5,

¹ Luke 15:11-32. Interestingly, it's also the picture of sin in Isaiah 1:1-9
2nd August 2020

Matthew 5:27-28 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

If we take an honest look at our own lives, we know that we have cursed people in our hearts. We have lied to protect ourselves. We have lusted over people we are not married to. We continually fail God’s perfect standards of morality.

That’s why the Bible also pictures sin as a pollution. God made us very good, because he is perfect and pure. But we have polluted ourselves with sin, and we desperately need to be cleansed. It’s not just that we are the offenders when we sin. We are also the victims of sin. Like an addiction, we are enslaved to sin and can’t free ourselves.

Even if you don’t believe in God, ask yourself, ‘Can I keep the standards of morality that I set for myself?’ We make promises to ourselves about how we’ll live. We want to be honest, and kind and live with integrity. We tell ourselves, ‘I’ll never hurt my spouse’. But we constantly fail. We shout at our children when we’re tired. We lie, and cover things up. We put ourselves first and don’t love our spouse as we should. We know money won’t buy happiness but we long for more of it. And we buy things to make ourselves feel valuable, if even for a short time.

The Bible says all of this, is because we reject God and his morality. We don’t love each other because we don’t love God. As it said in v. 18, ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’

3. Universal

Finally, sin is not just a problem for really bad people. The murderers and paedophiles. No, sin has infected the whole human race, because our natures were corrupted by the fall. Good people, bad people, atheists and religious people, are all alike under sin.

We keep thinking that if we make better laws, we will make a better society. But you have to ask the question, why do we keep needing better laws? Because our sinful hearts always find ways to get around them. The problem is not that we don’t know what right and wrong is. The problem is that we don’t want to follow the right, unless it helps us. We want *others* to do what’s right to us. But we very easily explain why it wasn’t that bad to do the wrong thing in that instance. We justify ourselves.

One of my favourite shows is Suits. My wife makes fun of me because the show is more to do with the drama of the lawyers’ lives than the actual law. But one thing that keeps coming up again and again is that people will always try to find a way around the law. The lawyers themselves do lots of dodgy things, bending and even breaking the law. But of course, they do it for the right reasons. They *had* to do it to protect someone, so it’s really the right thing to do. The human heart always justifies it’s own corruption. We deceive ourselves.

That’s why lawyers have to keep writing more and more fine print. Because people always try to find loop holes. So lawyers have to create massive terms and conditions, to make sure no one can misinterpret them or get around them. If the human heart really wanted to follow the law, then you wouldn’t need to keep updating them. In fact, the simplest and clearest laws are the 10 commandments. So foundational that the

whole Western legal system is based on them. Only 10 laws, that cover all of human life. Very simple. But even the people with the best law were not able to follow it. For the problem is not the law, but our hearts.

Romans 3:20 *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

The law is like a mirror. We don't know what we look like unless we look in the mirror. By looking at the law, we see just how far we fall short of God's standards. And it's everyone. 'No one is righteous, not even one... No one seeks God. All have turned away.'

It's a concept called 'Total Depravity'. We have to be careful here. Total Depravity does *not* mean that we are as bad as we possibly can be. We could be a lot worse. And we are still capable of doing good things. It means that no part of us is untouched by sin. Our minds, our hearts, our souls – our whole selves are corrupted by sin. Every thought, intention and action is stained by sin. Even our good works are tinged with sin. We may have hidden motives for doing good things; like getting recognition from others, or making ourselves feel good and holy. That's why Jesus consistently called out the religious people for their hard hearts. They did lots of things which looked good, but not out of love for God or people. They did it because they were proud and self-righteous and wanted to get praise from others.

And this total depravity affects the whole human race. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn saw the corruption of human nature in the Soviet Gulag forced labour-camp system. And he wrote of the universal nature of sin in 1973:

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"²

The Bible says that sin enslaves us and we cannot free ourselves. We are dead in our sins and dead people can't revive themselves. We are crooked and we can't make ourselves straight. We are unclean and we can't purify ourselves. Only God can save us. And that's why he sent Jesus. We'll look at that next week.

But sin is serious. It is relational, moral and universal. And the Bible says that it leads to death and judgement. If God does not save us, then our sin will destroy our souls. And that will be an eternal torment. It is horrible, but if we don't see how bad our situation is, we won't cry out for mercy. If we don't see how sick we are, we won't take the medicine. Thanks be to God that in his mercy he does save us from sin. So please join us next week as we see the wonderful news of what God has done to save us from sin. But let me leave you with this verse from later in Romans, as we look forward to next week:

Romans 6:23 *'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.'*

² Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 1973.