

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 4

SIN

INTRODUCTION

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In the Olduvai Gorge in Africa, there have been found the remains of small man-like creatures which are nearly three million years old.

In 1977, Houghton-Mifflin published a book called *The Origin of Consciousness in the Break-down of the Bicameral Mind*, by Julian Jaynes. Jaynes has a fascinating theory. He argues that the sense of self, which we get from the awareness of our thought processes, only appeared about three thousand years ago.

Jaynes's theory is that, before that time, people were led by voices coming from one side of the brain and "heard" by the other side, which they mistook for divine voices.

Now there are many problems with the conclusions he draws from this notion, but the basic idea is interesting.

Actually, mankind did appear when a certain thing happened. Perhaps it was one starry night when one of our remote ancestors looked up at the stars and did something we have been doing ever since, something which no mere animal has ever done. He asked himself (or herself) a question: "What and who in the world am I, and what am I here for?" To be able to ask that question is to be human.

If a creature ten million years old, perfectly preserved, who looked exactly like you and me, were to be discovered in a glacier, there would be no way for us to tell whether or not he was human. Because we could not know what went on *inside* of him.

If Julian Jaynes is right, Adam and Eve were born three *thousand* years ago. But, on the other hand, they may have lived in the Olduvai Gorge three *million* years ago.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

As the book of Genesis presents Mankind's appearance on earth, something promptly goes wrong. It starts when Eve is off by herself. Man is social. We can only be fully human in community. And Eve without Adam is vulnerable (and vice versa).

Snake: Hi, cutie. Whatcha doing out here in the woods all by your lonesome?

Eve: Oh, I'm just taking a stroll and enjoying the pretty spring day.

Snake: Say, I notice that you never eat any of the fruit on that particular tree. How come?

Eve: Why, God says that if I do, I will die.

Snake: Oh, you won't die. What will happen is that you will gain the knowledge of good and evil and become like God.

Eve: Gee, I'd like that.

Satan is a deceiver. He twists the truth. He tells half truths. Part of what he promised came to pass. Eve did gain the knowledge of good and evil, that is, the experience of disorder in the midst of the order of God's creation. That was what she was choosing when she decided to have it her way instead of God's.

She is like the clerk in the store who decides to dip in the till. It will just be a loan, and she will put it back in time. Eve says, in effect, "Rules are for other people, not for me; I'm special."

She is like the person who says, "Isn't it nice there are so many denominations! You can find one which suits you." But the religion which suits me, which makes no uncomfortable demands on me, is not likely to be worth much.

This kind of thinking wants to make the Church conform or be relevant to the "best thinking" of the contemporary world, in the illusion that people will be attracted to her. In fact, what happens is she becomes only a pale, second-rate imitation of the "best thinking" of the secular world.

The snake also said Eve would be God-like. If each of us were to look into his own heart and really be honest, he would confess that that is exactly what he longs for—the *Likeness of God*.

But our megalomania has blinded us, and we don't say we want to be God-like. We say things like, "I want to be a splendid human being, a noble person, a heroic person, very wise, a good person, etc..." But even though we disguise it, what we really want is to be God-like. Ambition itself is a corruption or distortion of this hunger.

This is exactly what God wants for us: that we become God-like. The early Church Fathers never tired of saying that God became man in order that man might become like God.

Then what is wrong with Eve's wanting it? Well, it's not something you can take or achieve by your own efforts. You can only receive it as a gift.

Mother Eve wanted to get it her own way, by her own means. It seemed like a quick and easy way to get it: "salvation in six easy lessons." But there's more to it than going down front and shaking the preacher's hand. That may be a start, but a lot has to happen afterward. Do-it-yourself godliness doesn't work.

Every sin is an attempt (often unconscious) to escape from creatureliness and to appropriate to one's self one or another of the attributes of God. For example:

- Only God is self-sufficient. But I try to be—"I'm not going to be beholden to nobody!"
- Only God can be trusted to take charge of another person's life. But I have an enormous temptation to tell others how to live it. Parents do that to children; husbands do it to wives; wives to husbands; employers to employees, etc.

- Only God lives in eternity and is not bound by time. But I try to live in the past – when I am not trying to live in the future. But the present is the only time that I really have.
- God is the creator of reality. But we are constantly trying to make up alternative realities which are more agreeable to us than the real one. And we wind up believing our own fantasies.

None of us has a real grasp of reality and for two reasons:

- We are finite.
- We have distorted reality to suit ourselves.

THE FALL OF MANKIND

Whether or not evolution is an accurate description of what happened, the fall of our first parents was a fall from innocence into self-consciousness. This is the point of their realizing for the first time, after they have sinned, that they are naked.

The result of the fall is that our minds are imprisoned within themselves. And this dramatically interferes with a realistic appraisal of the outside world.

Adam (Hebrew for mankind), before the fall, was innocent. This doesn't mean "not guilty". It means he didn't know the difference between right and wrong.

To speak of the fall of man is not to suggest that man was once smarter than he is now. The opposite may very well have been true.

Probably, Adam enjoyed what the theologians call a mystical union with God, which means that he had no barrier to his awareness of God. He was able to see God in all things and to see all things in God. Although he was not able, probably, to make that statement. He was just doing it.

The fall occurred when God stopped being the center of Adam's attention, and Adam turned his attention upon himself and became preoccupied with himself. In other words, he began to use his mind to explore his own mind.

One can use his mind to explore another person's mind with relative safety. That's what goes on in conversation. But people who live entirely within their own minds are in madhouses.

AFTER THE FALL

The word *Eden* means "garden of delight." It is not to be thought of as a jungle, but more as a park. All the flower beds are kept weeded, etc. But after the fall, there are briars and brambles everywhere, and the earth yields her increase reluctantly.

As far back as we can go in history, man is always born without an inherent, built-in, knowledge of his *end and purpose*. He doesn't come into the world knowing who he is and what he is here for.

We have fallen back into ourselves and we are lost in ourselves. We spend our days wandering around following lesser goods and failing to find satisfaction. We have about us what someone has called a nostalgia for paradise. I know this much about myself: I am a prince in exile.

One of the most popular plots in folklore is the story of the child who grows up thinking he is the son of a lowly wood chopper, only to discover one day that he is the heir to the throne of the kingdom.

There is a dumb, vague awareness inside of us that we are suffering from some kind of amnesia, wandering around in a strange world not knowing who we are.

A person can, at the age of 80, sit in a rocking chair on the porch of the house in which he was born and in which he has lived all his life, looking out over a landscape which he has seen every day of his life, and be overcome with a feeling of homesickness.

The most happily married man in the world can find himself girl-watching. Every one of us has a deep yearning and longing for an infinite good. We can never be satisfied with a finite object.

Each one of us knows that he is less than he ought to be. No one is satisfied with himself. This indicates an awareness of a moral demand upon us to be better than we are. Each one of us knows deep in his bones that “things ain’t what they used to be—and probably never were.”

The story of the fall is not so much a story about what happened once upon a time to a couple named Adam and Eve. Rather it is the story of you and me.

ORIGINAL SIN

The doctrine of *Original Sin* means that man is born sinful. That is, from his origin, he is *sinful*. It does not mean man is *guilty* for the sins of his ancestors. Babies are born innocent, but *self-centered*, with a tendency towards selfishness which lasts into adult life and becomes sin. Man tends to act in a way which denies his dependence upon God, thinking of himself as unique and not bound by the rules.

Man is a *natural* creature with a *supernatural* destiny.

Supernatural does not mean spooky, but superior to natural. For example, if your ten-year-old child chooses the smaller of two apples and gives his playmate the larger one, he is acting *supernaturally*. It would have been *natural* for him to keep the bigger one.

In his natural condition, Man is not totally depraved, but he is insufficient and disordered in himself and in his relations with other people and other things.

Original Sin does not refer to the role that sex plays in human birth.

About 1881, my grandfather moved to south Florida. He was a young man of twenty without “two coins in his pocket to rub against each other,” as he put it. But he became wealthy. However, when he was 68 years old the Great Depression wiped him out. I was born in 1929, the year the depression began. Granddaddy had nothing left to pass on to the next generation. So there was no fortune for me to inherit.

Original Sin refers to what we *fail* to inherit—*fellowship with God*. We fail to inherit it because it is not “in the family” any more. The doctrine of Original Sin is based upon the fact of the unity of the human race. Because man is social, sin is also social.

Because we are members of the same humanity as our fallen ancestors, the old Adam, we are born into a condition of separation from God.

Christ is the *new* Adam, the new Mankind. In the Virgin Birth of Jesus, God makes a fresh start on a new humanity, so he does not use the agency of a human father.

But he does use a remnant of the old humanity, the maiden Mary, to be the mother and to provide the physical and genetic material for the new Adam, who does inherit fellowship with God.

We are born into a sinful and disordered society whose constant temptations and exaltation of false values tip the delicate balance of our wills in favor of evil.

Disordered society frequently confronts us with choices between greater wrongs and lesser wrongs. This makes it impossible to avoid *evil* even though we may avoid sin and guilt. And this involvement in evil gives us a sense of shame and a *feeling* of guilt. Thus we share the burden of society’s guiltiness whether we are individually guilty or not.

Often, in a given case, we cannot tell which possible alternative is morally right and which is not, because we don’t know all the facts or because it is a new situation. Nevertheless, circumstances require us to make a choice. And often we fail to choose the right course of action. Then we repeat the behavior until it becomes habitual. As a result, evil *habits* get established *before* we have a chance to make a rational choice.

And then habit makes us keep on sinning after we decide to stop.

Furthermore, at times we profit from institutionalized evil which we cannot change or avoid. And this only adds to our feeling of guilt.

THE DIMENSIONS OF SIN

The whole problem of evil and sin has two dimensions:

- *Vertically*, or in relation to God, sin is choosing separation or estrangement from God.

Sin is not so much a violation of God’s *law* as of God’s *love*, not so much the breach of his *commandment* as of his *fellowship*.

- *Horizontally*, sin is the choosing of disorder in one’s relation to the created order, especially in regard to the relation of means to ends.

For example, the real or proper end of shoes is foot health and comfort; that is the appropriate reason to make shoes. There are also other less primary reasons why people make shoes: to sell them, to make feet look fashionable, to make the wearer look taller or sexier, or whatever.

But when one of those secondary ends is treated as though it is the primary end, the result is disorder. And you get sore feet, corns, or you turn your ankle, or the shoes fall apart, etc. The cumulative effect of such disorder is that from time to time the children of shoemakers go shoeless, as in the Great Depression.

Sin occurs when one chooses to treat ends like means or means like ends, and evil—disorder—is always the result.

CHOICE

Since sin involves choosing disorder, the root of sin lies in personal wills, not in matter. Everything that God has made is good, and evil has no *independent* existence. It can only “exist” as a privation of good. Evil is a “crack” in existence. The crack in a vase is where the vase *isn't*.

It is the spirit that causes the flesh to sin, not vice versa. In other words, demons get into persons, not into bottles. The assassin is wicked, not the knife. Fornication is sinful, not sexual intercourse in itself.

Sins of the spirit are more deadly than sins of the flesh. Compare the attitude of Jesus toward the woman taken in adultery with his attitude toward the Pharisees.

- Mrs. McGillicuddy likes to get up early in the morning and sweep off her front walk. One morning, she sees Mr. Smith across the street coming home drunk. She says to herself, “Look at him, that no good so and so!”

Mr. Smith knows he is a drunk. But Mrs. McGillicuddy’s sin makes her feel *righteous*. Sins of the spirit usually masquerade as virtue, and so repentance from them is more difficult.

Behind every sin is some repudiation of God, such as:

Ignoring him, that is living as though he didn’t exist;

Defying him, that is doing something one is sure is contrary to his will;

Despising him, that is being contemptuous of God and righteousness;

Resenting him, that is being bitter against “fate” or circumstances or obeying unwillingly or sullenly;

Denying him, that is openly avowing disbelief.

Note: Each of these is an interior disorder which leads to an exterior disorder which is only a symptom of the real sin: the refusal and rejection of God.

So if I choose to do what actually is right, but I think it is wrong, I am still sinning. Or if I choose to do what actually is wrong, but I think it is right, I am not guilty of sin. Because the essence of sin is to *choose* to go counter to the will of God. To repeat what G. K. Chesterton said: “It is the road to *Heaven* which is paved with good intentions.”

CLASSIFICATIONS OF SIN

There are various classes of sins:

First there are *material* sins and *formal* sins:

A material sin is an action which is intrinsically wrong because it violates the natural order of things. For example, it is a material sin to kill a human being. However, there are times when it must be done to avoid an even greater evil. In those circumstances no real guilt results, although one may feel very guilty.

A formal sin is any action committed with a sinful intention. It is only formal sin which makes one guilty—whether one feels guilty or not.

There are also *mortal* sins and *venial* sins:

Mortal sin is sin in a serious matter, committed with the full knowledge of the consequences and with the full consent of the will.

Mortal sin always involves some form of malice toward God and leaves the soul in such a condition of separation from God that should such a person die without repenting, he would “go to hell.”

Venial sin is sin committed in a trivial matter or in ignorance of the true nature of the act or committed without the full consent of the will.

It is called venial because it merely wounds the person who does it; it only “opens a vein.” but if even a vein remains open long enough, the person can still bleed to death. So venial sins, unrepented of, can have a serious cumulative effect.

A single drop of water will not make a hole in a slab of stone, but if it is repeated long enough, it can. The Grand Canyon reminds us of the power of prolonged erosion. Venial sin is *moral erosion*.

And then there is *habitual* sin:

Habitual or *besetting sin* is a disposition toward a particular sin as a result of a history of yielding to a particular temptation. It can be the result of doing something repeatedly in the mistaken belief it is not sinful only to discover later that it is sinful after the habit has gotten established. Or it may be the result of some natural defect. It can be very difficult to estimate the degree of guilt in such cases, but in the long run the damage to the soul can be great.

There are *personal* sins and *corporate* sins:

Sin may be *personal* and *individual* or it may be *corporate* and *social*. Every personal or individual sin has corporate effects. And every corporate and social sin has personal and individual effects.

Finally there are sins of *omission* and sins of *commission*:

Some actions are right and obligatory, and so it is wrong not to do them. Therefore, there are sins of *omission* as well as sins of *commission*.

Note: The point of these classifications is not to label specific actions but to help us understand the nature of sin. In the last analysis, only God has the perspective to judge which is which. Furthermore, it really is not healthy to be preoccupied with your own sins.

THE PARABLE OF THE FOUR SONS

Once upon a time there was a man with four sons in grade school. The first day after they moved into a new two-storey house he told them never to bounce their ball against the side of the house.

That afternoon, the first one to get home from school is Johnny. He has been goofing off and has forgotten his father's instructions. He sees the ball in the yard, so he picks it up and throws it against the side of the house. And it breaks a window. And then he remembers what Daddy said. So he goes off and gets involved in a computer game, hoping to forget what is going to happen when his father gets home.

Next, Frank gets home. He sees the broken window, and he remembers what Daddy said. But he throws the ball anyway. And sure enough he breaks another window. So he goes off to play, hoping to forget what will happen when Daddy gets home.

The third son is Alec, the Smart Alec. He sees the broken windows, and he remembers what Daddy told them. But he bounces the ball any way. And he keeps on bouncing the ball until he gets tired of it, *without* breaking a window! Then he wanders off, thinking how much smarter he is than his old man.

Finally Willy gets home. He wants to bounce the ball against the house, but he is afraid to. And he resents his father's rule. "Aw I never get to have any fun!"

Well, when Daddy gets home that evening, the first two boys hate to come inside because they know they are going to get spanked. But the last two don't mind because they don't expect to get spanked.

However, if you could look in the window and watch the family at supper that night, you would see that the first two boys, Johnny and Frank, the ones who got spanked, are now enjoying their father's company. But Alec, who has no respect for their father, and Willy, who resents his authority, do not enter into the joy of their father's company.

Johnny's disobedience was venial; he forgot.

Frank's disobedience was like mortal sin: he deliberately rebelled.

Alec's disobedience was mortal even though he didn't break a window.

Willy's obedience was done in a spirit of resentment, and so it was just as deadly as if he had

actually broken a window.

Note: Alex and Willy were not as fortunate as Frank, because Frank was forced to face the fact of his disobedience and deal with it. As a result he was reconciled to his father while the other two were not. It is not necessarily a good thing to “get away with” our sins.

GROWTH

Growth in righteousness—in the likeness of God—involves becoming aware of the sins we have been committing all along of which we were unaware. A primary duty of all of us is to try to increase our understanding of what our duty really is.

The more clearly we see God, the more clearly we realize our own imperfections. What is most wrong with me often is something of which I am least conscious.

The real meaning of the prayer of Jesus which he said while they (and we) were crucifying him is: “Father, forgive them for not knowing what they are doing!”

MAN’S DILEMMA

A person gets his moral standards from his experience in society. And society derives its morality from its members. It takes a righteous society to produce righteous individuals. But it takes righteous individuals to produce a righteous society.

Left to ourselves we have no hope. Our only hope is for God to intervene and offer a fresh start.

The good news is that in Jesus Christ, God has done exactly that!

Next week our subject will be “Redemption: The Old Covenant.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Is there disorder in your life?

If so, do you contribute to it? And why?

Why don’t you stop?