

CHAPTER 10.

SIN OFFENDS GOD

“Nobody is perfect.” Almost everyone has said something like that at some point in his or her life. Have you as well? In fact, people are usually willing to admit—whether sooner or later—that they make mistakes. They may even be willing to describe their mistakes as sins.

Does this mean, though, that we all properly understand our sinfulness? Is it sufficient to admit that we are not perfect? What does someone need to know in order to comprehend the depths of our sinfulness? And why is it so important to know about our sinfulness? After all, isn't this a rather dark and depressing doctrine? We will be exploring these questions in this chapter.

To begin with, we should establish the difference between having guilt feelings according to our conscience and properly understanding our sinfulness according to God's Word. Even people who do not believe in the Lord still feel guilty about certain things. Their conscience accuses them of selfish deeds and foolish desires. The apostle Paul also speaks about this in Romans 2:14–15. There he acknowledges that even though some people have not learned about God's law from Scripture, they still do some of the things required in that law. For example, many unbelievers also honour their parents, which is in accord with the fifth commandment. When this happens, says the apostle Paul, “they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience

also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Rom 2:15).

However, there are problems with guilt feelings generated by our conscience. The first problem is that our conscience is not always reliable. Sometimes it exposes our wrongdoings; other times it overlooks them, or worse yet, it helps us make up excuses for our iniquities. The second, and even bigger, problem with our conscience is that, even when it works properly, it only leaves us with the feeling that we did something wrong. It does not teach us *why* it is wrong. Also, it does not teach us *how wrong* it really is. Therefore, to have a proper understanding of our sinfulness we need something more than our consciences. As the Canons of Dort remind us, the human conscience, which is part of the light of nature, still leaves a person far away from “arriving at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion” (3/4.4).

By contrast the law of God teaches us what the conscience of man cannot divulge to us. The apostle Paul explains, “Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin” (Rom 7:7). In the first place, the law tells us about *God’s* standards for right and wrong, which are far more stringent than our standards. The apostle goes on to comment, “For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Rom 7:7). Society does not tell you that coveting is wrong. In fact, our consumer society almost makes you feel as if coveting is a civil obligation! However, the law of God says coveting is sin. Second, the law of God makes it clear that when we sin, we are—above all else—offending God. True, sin hurts our neighbour. Yes, by sinning we also wound ourselves. Yet, beyond that, we need to come to the point of echoing David’s words in Psalm 51:4 and saying to the LORD, “Against *you*, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” The law of God requires us to confront that uncomfortable reality.

At the same time, when we learn about our sinfulness from God’s law, we are also on the path leading to the knowledge of God’s saving grace in Christ. “Christ is the end of the law” (Rom 10:4). In other words, if

we carefully follow the truth of the law, we should end up at the goal of confessing that Christ, not the law, is our Saviour.

SIN IS A MANY-SIDED MISERY

In Scripture the Holy Spirit uses a number of different words to describe sin. The word *sin* itself (Luke 15:21) has to do with missing the mark. In his law the LORD has set a certain goal or target for our daily living. When we sin, our conduct is like an arrow that misses the target and falls to the ground. In addition to sin, Scripture also speaks of *transgressions* (Mic 7:18) and *trespasses* (Rom 5:15). God's law is not only a goal at which we should aim, but it also provides boundary lines for our desires, words, and actions. However, when we step beyond those God-given boundaries and wander off into the wilds of wickedness, then we are guilty of transgressions or trespasses.

Sin is further described as *disobedience* (Rom 5:19). This term highlights the lack of proper listening that often accompanies sin. Instead of listening, eagerly and obediently, to God's commands, the sinful heart often has selective hearing. It takes what it likes from the Bible and conveniently turns a deaf ear to the rest. When this is left unchecked, disobedience is the kind of attitude that will lead to *rebellion* (Num 14:18). This is another word for sin, which demonstrates that sin is not always a regrettable weakness. Sometimes it is done deliberately and defiantly (Num 15:30), in spite of better knowledge. This is the spirit of rebellion. Rebellion can easily give birth to a spirit of *lawlessness* (2 Thess 2:7). A lawless person is someone who wants to cast off all restraints. He finds the commands of God burdensome and restrictive. To him they are like a straitjacket, and at the first opportunity he wants to rip off the straitjacket and cast it aside. Obviously, the outlook of the lawless one is diametrically opposed to the attitude of the psalmist who sings that the commands of the LORD are "sweeter also than honey and drippings from the honeycomb" (Ps 19:10).

This is only a short survey of the terms that Scripture uses for sin. More words could be mentioned. Yet this should be sufficient to show that

sin is much more than just making a mistake, as a student might make an error on his math test. All of us need to come to terms with what this *more* all includes. Our sins have direction; they have a certain evil-seeking tendency to them. They involve wandering off the straight and narrow path with the very real potential that we will stumble again and entangle ourselves in even more iniquity. In addition, our sins are much more than wicked actions. They also demonstrate a wrong attitude. It is an attitude that grates against both the law and the Lawgiver. No one can sin against the law without deeply offending the Lawgiver. When our pride is finally broken and we are willing to say from the heart, “I insulted the Most Holy and Almighty God by my sin,” then we are starting to come to grips with the depth of our own depravity.

Moreover, since there are so many deviant aspects to sin, it is not surprising that Jesus Christ had to suffer in so many difficult ways. He was frequently misunderstood, falsely accused, callously betrayed, unjustly condemned, and much more. So, the more we understand and acknowledge the wide extent of our own sinfulness, the more we will realize and value the vast breadth of our Saviour’s suffering for our sake.

However, in this analysis of the true depths of sin, we still have to take one more significant step. In order to do so, we need to look at not only the content of sin but also its context. The woman and man who sinned first, Eve and Adam, were created in the image of God. As we learned in the previous chapter, this meant that our first parents were God’s first human children. As his children, they also reflected the righteousness and holiness of their heavenly Father. So when Adam and Eve sinned they not only rebelled as creatures against their Creator, or as citizens against their King, but also as children against their own heavenly Father.

As any earthly parent can tell you, nothing pierces your heart quite as much as when your own child intentionally defies your explicit and well-meant instruction. When your own child is rebelling, it is no longer just a rule that is being broken; it is most certainly a relationship that is being marred. In the beginning, God the Father cherished Adam and Eve. He

took delight in them, and he saw in them a faithful reflection of his very own perfections, such as his justice and his compassion. But after the fall, that all changed—dramatically. Now, with a paternal heart weighed down with anguish (Gen 6:6), God the Father saw that his own children did not want to listen to him; in fact, they did not even want to meet with him anymore. They would rather run off and hide in the bushes than speak with their own Father (Gen 3:8). They would rather point the finger of guilt at others (Gen 3:12–13) than honestly admit to their Father what they had done wrong. Sin is always horrible, but when it is your own child who deliberately sins against you, that is far worse.

The LORD expresses the pain of his paternal heart in Hosea 11:1–9. There he first recalls all the tender love he has poured into the upbringing of his child, Ephraim, which is another name for the nation of Israel (vv. 1–4). Next, he laments how stubbornly determined his child is to walk away from him (vv. 5–7). Finally, just like an earthly father, so also our heavenly Father cannot simply disown his child. In spite of his child’s rebellious attitude, the heavenly Father cannot, and does not, give up on his son (vv. 8–11).

When sin is understood in this way, it can never be merely a moral, or ethical, matter. To be sure, it is that, but it is more. Sin also has a religious quality to it, and that religious aspect has a familial facet, which cannot be ignored. Sin fails to fulfil a moral duty, but it also manages to offend God by showing an appalling degree of dishonour for him and ingratitude for all the loving care that the heavenly Father has lavished upon us (1 John 3:1–3). Thus, once again, when our pride is broken and, like the prodigal son, we are finally willing to own up to our iniquity and say, “*Father*, I have sinned against you” (Luke 15:11–21), then we are truly coming to understand just how awful sin really is.

This familial facet of sin also sheds light on the appearance of God’s eternal *Son* as the Saviour. At least theoretically, we might ask, “Why did God the Father give up his own Son for us all?” (Rom 8:32). Why, for instance, did the Father not send the Holy Spirit to suffer and die for our salvation? The straightforward answer is as follows: since it was a

son and a daughter who sinned, it was the eternal Son who had to come and save from sin.

INHERITED SIN

The inclination to sin started with Adam and Eve, but it certainly did not end with them. This same sinful nature was found in their children, Cain and Abel. In Cain the sin of jealousy and anger even welled up to the point that he murdered his own brother (Gen 4:8). From Cain, and later Seth, sinfulness was passed down to the next generation, and from them to the generation after them, and so on, right up until the new generation being born today. This transmission of sin from one generation to the next is called *inherited sin* or *original sin*. The Belgic Confession describes it in this way: “It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother’s womb” (Art 15).

Not surprisingly, this doctrine of original sin has been criticized. For the most part, the criticisms can be grouped into two categories. The first criticism protests that some kind of injustice is being done here. The key question is: why should we suffer today for something that Adam and Eve did thousands of years ago? After all, does not the LORD himself say, “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezek 18:20)? The second criticism focuses on the teaching of the sinfulness of babies, yes, even infants in their mother’s womb. This teaching seems to be entirely counter-intuitive. Everyone who has snuggled a newborn in her arms knows this. If there is anyone on earth who is innocent, surely it is an infant. If there is any place on earth that is free from the influence and power of sin, surely it is inside a mother’s womb. So, how can the Belgic Confession suggest that sin infects even infants in the womb?

Let us begin with the second criticism. From the start we should admit that the doctrine seems counter-intuitive. To some it may even appear to be completely illogical. However, and this is the key point, it is Scriptural. When our eyes look at a newborn babe, we see innocence. But when the Lord views that same child, he sees what we do not see: the inherited sinful nature that already resides in the heart of that infant. For

instance, King David speaks openly about this after he has been found guilty of adultery and murder. In his prayer to God he says, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5). Moreover, Job demonstrates that logic can cut both ways. If there is a sinful father and a sinful mother and together they have a child, why would we expect that the child is suddenly sin-free? Job put it this way: “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one” (14:4). With a slightly different emphasis, the prophet Jeremiah makes a similar point. He writes, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer 13:23). Indeed, sin is not only something we learn later on in life; it is also part of our very nature from conception onwards (Eph 2:3). In this way, acknowledging original sin involves a test of our faith: even though little babies do not look sinful, on the basis of God’s Word we confess them to be so.

The answer to the first criticism is a bit more involved. The first step is to acknowledge the deep-seated character of sin. As noted above, sin is not merely a mistake; it is also a persistent attitude and a stubborn inclination. This sinful inclination may not immediately manifest itself in all kinds of grievous and evil deeds, but it is still there. A newborn infant does not (yet) hit his older sister or call her nasty names. However, the inclination toward selfishness and jealousy is already there at conception (Ps 51:5), and it is there by way of inheritance.

The second step is to remember that God created Adam and Eve in his image. Therefore at creation it was *like Father, like children*. As God was righteous and holy, so were his first human children. However, then, by their own foolishness, Adam and Eve sinned, thereby exchanging righteousness for unrighteousness, and holiness for uncleanness. Yet, as we know, there was also an image and likeness relationship between Adam and Seth (Gen 5:1–3). Consequently, after the fall, it is also *like father, like child*. Only now the father and spiritual template is Adam, the *sinful* Adam, and the child is Seth. Seth is in the likeness of his earthly father, and since his earthly father is corrupted with sin, he will also mir-

ror that corruption in his own life. This pattern of inheriting the sinfulness of one's parents continues from generation to generation.

On the one hand, the doctrine of inherited sin makes it abundantly clear just how tragic the fall into sin really was. On the other hand, this doctrine also serves as the dark background against which the bright splendour of the incarnation shines. Every baby born into this world has been sinful except one: the baby Jesus. He alone is the Holy One (Luke 1:35), conceived and born without sin (Heb 4:15). His sin-free conception and birth covers over our sinful conception and birth (LD 14). In this way a fuller understanding of sin once more gives us a deeper appreciation for our Saviour.

ACTUAL SIN

Original, or inherited, sin is the inclination toward iniquity that lives inside all of us. Actual sin occurs when that evil inclination becomes a malicious action of the heart, mind, tongue, or body. For example, by nature we are all inclined toward jealousy. However, when a toddler sees that his friend has a toy car he wants, that inclination turns into an actual jealous desire in his heart: he wants to grab that toy, even though it is not his car. Next the sinful desire leads to sinful thoughts. The boy supposes that if he can just wait a moment until his friend has turned his head the other way, he will be able to lay hands on that shiny car. Then the sinful thoughts manifest themselves in sinful actions. The boy implements his plan. He patiently waits, first thirty seconds, then sixty seconds, and yes, no sooner does his friend glance briefly out of the window than he snatches up the toy car and runs away with it. In brief, this is how sin can be dissected. This process is also described by James when he writes, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (1:14–15).

Actual sin may be committed against any one of God's commandments, primarily revealed in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17; Deut 5:6–21). But it is never as simple as sinning against one commandment only. More often than not, sin is a web of wickedness, and many different

transgressions stick to that web. To return to the example above, the boy's sin begins as an instance of jealous covetousness, which is a sin against the tenth commandment. That soon leads to snatching away the toy car, a form of stealing, which corresponds to the eighth commandment. In so doing, he is disobeying his parents, who have undoubtedly taught him not to snatch toys away from other children. This disobedience is sin against the fifth commandment. Moreover, even though he may not be aware of it, his jealous, covetous actions also disgrace the LORD whose name he bears and must uphold. This is sin against the third commandment. So, as this small example illustrates, sin has a habit of spiralling from one command to the next, leaving a trail of broken laws behind it. In fact, the apostle James goes so far as to say that "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (Jas 2:10).

This close unity of the commandments is also emphasized by our Saviour Jesus Christ when he compressed the Ten Commandments into only two: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:37–39). In this way "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:10). Every sin that can be named involves a lack of love for God, and many sins also involve a lack of love for our neighbor. For this reason the Catechism identifies the core of sin as being an inclination to hatred (LD 2, Q&A 5). Hatred is a strong word, but by the same token sin is an awful reality. To love God is to avoid sin, but to indulge in sin is hatred toward God. Once again, sin is not merely a moral fault; it is a religious offence against the God who made us and maintains us.

The Roman Catholic Church divides actual sins into two categories: venial and mortal. Venial sins are less severe. While they may hinder a person in his spiritual progress, they do not merit everlasting punishment. Mortal sins are more severe. They deprive a person of God's grace and deserve eternal death. For those who commit mortal sins, God's grace can be restored only through the sacraments, especially penance and the mass. Is it right to classify sins according to their severity? In

fact, the Saviour from sin, Jesus Christ himself, teaches differently. He said that even one angry outburst such as “you fool!” makes one liable to the fire of hell (Matt 5:22). Thus, sin is not easily pigeonholed into categories of greater or lesser. Rather, we need to recognize that all sin is worthy of being punished by God’s curse (Gal 3:10), and it is only through repentance and faith in the crucified Christ that all sins are forgiven (1 John 2:1–2).

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

So far we have learned that sin is a many-sided, inherited iniquity which deeply offends God the Father Almighty. Yet someone might ask, “Is there not still some good in human beings?” After all, your unbelieving neighbour may also help a sick widow living next door by bringing her a meal. Indeed, there are people from many different religions who freely volunteer many hours of their time for good causes. Simply put, Christians do not have a monopoly on charity. So does this not prove that there is a mixture of good and evil in everyone?

Let us first turn to Scripture, the source of all sound theology. In the days of Noah, before the Flood, God surveyed the spiritual landscape of the society of that time. The result was not good. “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). This is called total depravity. It refers to the fact that all of a person’s faculties—his heart, his mind, his body, and his soul—have been corrupted by sin. For this reason you might even call it pervasive depravity. There is no little, purely holy corner tucked away in the human soul. Total depravity also refers to God’s revelation that the totality of the world’s population is infected with sin (Rom 3:10). All who are human beings, and all that human beings are, have been contaminated with sin (1 John 1:8).

But what about the unbelievers who help a widow or volunteer at a hospital? It is true that these people do things that are good and right “in natural and civil matters” (CoD 3/4.4). However, this civil righteousness cannot stand before the judgment throne of God and count in any way as spiritual or eternal righteousness. As the Heidelberg Cate-

chism explains, “the righteousness which can stand before God’s judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God, whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin” (LD 24, Q&A 62). The reason that we are inclined to think that there is a mixture of good and evil in people is that our eyes are not nearly as holy as God’s eyes, and our standards of righteousness are far lower than his divine requirements. God is holy, holy, holy, and even after the Flood the LORD still announced that “the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21).

DENYING TOTAL DEPRAVITY AND DIMINISHING CHRIST

Not everyone agrees that human beings are totally depraved. One example is Pelagius, a British-born monk who moved to Rome and lived in and around that area from the end of fourth century on into the beginning of fifth century. Denying the doctrine of original sin, he felt that babies are born into this world with a spiritually clean slate. If later on in life these infants grow up into children who sin, then this sin is something they learned by imitating others rather than by inheriting it from their parents. This false teaching about sin has consequences. Since Pelagius taught that everyone began with a clean slate and everyone has a free will, his constant emphasis was on making the right, godly choices in conduct and speech. While it is certainly laudable to live a holy life, Pelagius set the cross of Christ off in shadows, for in his view man with his free will was already capable of living the holy life, and the work of Christ was needed only to fill in the gaps.

For many, Pelagius was too optimistic about human nature. It is actually hard to deny that something is wrong with human beings already from a very young age. However, instead of confessing total depravity, the Roman Catholic Church as well as others have adopted a watered-down version of Pelagianism, also known as Semi-Pelagianism. This view maintains that instead of being born with a clean slate, human beings are by nature spiritually sick individuals. They need help; they need the medicinal grace provided by Christ in the sacraments. Yet once this help is given, salvation becomes a co-operative effort: human beings do

what they can from their side, while God does the necessary remainder in Christ. Neither Pelagianism nor Semi-Pelagianism does justice to the Word of God. Through the apostle Paul, Christ himself teaches that “you were *dead* in the trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). This is far different from being born with a clean slate or being spiritually sick. Dead is dead! Those who are spiritually dead need much more than spiritual help and guidance. They need nothing short of a spiritual resurrection. Thankfully, “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:4–5).

Suggested Readings: Psalm 51:1–12; Hosea 11:1–9

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. List some ways in which you personally tend to diminish the full sinfulness of your sins. Discuss ways in which we can all better grasp the totality of our depravity.
2. What is the light of nature? What can this light do? What can it not do? Canons of Dort 3/4.4 will be helpful.
3. Someone says to you, “I’m sorry, but I just cannot understand how a baby can be sinful even before he can walk or talk.” How would you respond? Use Scriptural passages and, if you can, confirm your answer by referring to practical experience.
4. List at least three ways in which a deeper understanding of sin leads to a deeper appreciation of Christ our Saviour. Since a deeper understanding of sin leads to a deeper appreciation of Christ, why do we still have such a strong habit of trying to cover up our sinfulness?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. The Lord Jesus Christ maintains some very strict standards in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, in Matthew 5:28 he says, “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” At first glance this seems unjust. Is not the actual sin of adultery far more

serious than a few fleeting and lustful thoughts? Why does Jesus Christ preach in this way?

2. Parenting is a challenge. Often dads and moms have to repeat the same warnings over and over again (e.g., “Johnny, how many times have I told you to stop pestering your sister!”). At times parents are also shocked at the disrespect with which their own dear children can treat others. How does the doctrine of original sin help parents come to grips with this? Also, how do we ensure that original sin does not become an excuse for tolerating ungodly behaviour in children?
3. Read Romans 3:9–18. All in all, it is a scathing indictment of how sinful human beings are. Yet the same apostle Paul who wrote those words also said in 1 Corinthians 5:1–2 that pagans sometimes have a higher sense of morality than people in the church. How do we fit these two passages together? In the final analysis, how *total* is total depravity?
4. In James 5:16 we find this exhortation: “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” Do we do this enough? Is it always appropriate to confess our sins to others, or are there times when we should keep it between God and ourselves? And what is the best way to confess sins to each other? To whom? How often? In what level of detail? How do we prevent confession of sin from turning into juicy gossip and ruining reputations?

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