

Major Bible Themes

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CHAPTER XXV

SIN: ITS CHARACTER AND UNIVERSALITY

Being one of the greatest and most determinative facts in the world, sin, like the other important facts in its class, is not only a major theme of the Word of God, but it is the subject of almost endless human speculation. Sin is a fact to be accounted for. The failure of human speculation as compared to the finality of divine revelation on this theme should be familiar to all. Since the fact and effect of sin reach back into the unknown past and on into eternity as qualifying factors of all human experience, we should not be surprised to discover that, even with the aid of divine revelation, we confront some mysteries which are insoluble to the finite mind.

I. HUMAN SPECULATION

1. It was the belief of the Ancients and continues with many until now that sin is merely sensuousness. The body was thought to be the occasion of all temptation and the executor of all evil desire. This was a feature of Plato's philosophy, and the suggested cure of sin was to weaken its instrument; hence it was taught that the body should be despised and neglected. But the worst

of human sins -- avarice, envy, pride, malice, cruelty, self-righteousness, unbelief and hatred of God -- are wholly sins of the soul and are not related to the body.

2. It is claimed by so-called modernists that sin is merely finiteness, or that which is incident to imperfect development. As men creep before they walk, so they sin before they learn righteousness. The fall, therefore, was upward. If this theory were true, the cultured and civilized would be more righteous than the ignorant; a world war could not be begun by the most educated nation on earth; and Satan, who is "full of wisdom" (Ezk. 28:12), must be as holy as he is wise. By this theory, the blame for sin is subtly transferred from man to God.

3. That sin is merely selfishness is the claim of others. It is true that selfishness is sin; but it is far from sufficient to say that sin is merely selfishness. Those who seek to establish this theory -- and it is often presented by earnest advocates of God's truth -- say that since the chief commandment is to love God, so the chief sin, and root sin, must be to love self. But, again, there may be no selfishness in unbelief, malice, or hatred of God.

II. THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF SIN

While various sins are defined in the Word of God, we conclude from the teaching of the Scriptures that sin is any want of conformity to the character of God, whether it be in act, disposition, or state.

Sin is sinful because it is different from what God is; and God is holy because holiness is infinitely desirable. Holiness is an eternal fact. Should God desire to be sinful He would not thereby make sin to become holiness nor holiness to become sin. However, though holiness is an unchanging virtue, we are not dealing with an abstract virtue, but rather with the living God who has caused these things to be. Sin is always against God (Psa. 51:4; Luke 15:18). To sin is to be unlike God, therefore it is to displease God.

Sin cannot rightfully be limited to those things merely which are contrary to the revealed law of God; at best we can know but little of all that God is. Sin, therefore, goes beyond all laws and includes all that is not in conformity with the character of God.

There are four distinct classifications of sin, which, in turn, form the basis of the divine condemnation of mankind.

1. Sin Which Is Imputed (Rom. 5:12-18).

Imputation means to reckon over to, or to attribute something to, a person. The original Greek word occurs eleven times in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. There are three major imputations set forth in the Scriptures: (a) the imputation of Adam's sin to the race, on which fact the doctrine of original sin is based; (b) the imputation of the sin of man to Christ, on which fact the doctrine of salvation is based; and (c) the imputation of the righteousness of God to those who believe on Christ, on which fact the doctrine of justification is based.

Again, imputation may be either (a) actual, or (b) judicial. Actual imputation is the reckoning to one of that which is antecedently his own. Though He might righteously do so, yet because of

the reconciling work of Christ, God is not now imputing to man the sin which is antecedently his own (2 Cor. 5:19). Judicial imputation is the reckoning to one of that which is not antecedently his own (Phm. 1:18). Though there has been disagreement as to whether the imputation of Adam's sin to each member of the race is actual or judicial, Romans 5:12 clearly states that the imputation is actual, since in the federal-head representation, Adam's posterity sinned when he sinned. The next two verses are written to prove that this is not a reference to personal sins. (See Heb. 7:9, 10.) However, verses 17 and 18 imply that this imputation is also judicial where it is stated that by one man's sin judgment came upon all men. Only the one, initial sin of Adam is in question. Its effect is death -- both to Adam and directly from Adam to each member of the race. The divinely provided cure for imputed sin is the gift of God which is eternal life through Jesus Christ.

2. The Sin Nature (Rom. 5:19).

Adam's one initial sin caused him to fall and in the fall he became an entirely different being, depraved and degenerate, and only capable of begetting posterity like his fallen self. Therefore, every child of Adam is born with the Adamic nature, is ever and always prone to sin, and, though this nature was judged by Christ on the cross (Rom. 6:10), it remains a vitally active force in every Christian's life. It is never said to be removed or eradicated in this life, but for the Christian there is overcoming power provided through the indwelling Spirit (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16, 17).

Though both imputed sin and the sin nature are the direct result of Adam's one, initial sin, it is important to distinguish between imputed sin which is the immediate cause of death in the case of each individual person, and an imparted sin nature which is received by inheritance and remains a vital force for evil throughout this life.

3. The Judicial State of Sin.

By a divine reckoning the whole world, including Jew and Gentile, are now "under sin" (Rom. 3:9; Gal. 3:22; Rom. 11:32). To be under sin is to be divinely reckoned to be without merit which might contribute toward salvation. Since salvation is by grace alone and grace excludes all human merit, God has decreed, as regards their salvation, all to be "under sin," or without merit. This judicial reckoning is evidently limited to this age of grace, since of no other age could it be said that there is no difference in the divine estimation of Jew and Gentile (cf. Eph. 2:12, 13, with Rom. 9:4, 5). This estate under sin is remedied only when the individual, through riches of grace, is reckoned to stand in the merit of Christ.

4. Personal Sin (Rom. 3:23).

This form of sin includes everything in the daily life which is against, or fails to conform to, the character of God. It is that form of sin concerning which men are conscious and, being also universal, there is but one cure -- divine forgiveness and justification through Christ.

QUESTIONS

1. What importance should be given the fact of sin?

2. Of what value is human speculation regarding sin?
3. Name and define three human theories respecting sin.
4. Why do these theories fail?
5. What is sin?
6. Why is sin more than a violation of God's law?
7. Name the four major aspects of sin.
8. Name the three great imputations.
9. What is actual imputation?
10. What is judicial imputation?
11. Is the imputation of Adam's sin actual or judicial?
12. What is the penalty of Adam's sin?
13. Define the beginning, character and cure of the sin nature.
14. Define the phrase "under sin" and explain its present application to Jew and Gentile alike.