

ROMANS 5:12.

Sin entered the world through one person, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, inasmuch as all sinned.

What do you expect to read or hear about in the news headlines? Theft, robbery, fraud, violence, shootings, murder, affairs, an alphabet soup of sexual preferences and practices, political battles, protests, terrorism, and so on. Why is this? Popular opinion would say that something happened in the lives of the people involved in these activities that prompted or even forced them to such behavior. In other words, the fault is their surroundings and environment. If they had had a better upbringing or better opportunities, their better nature would have prevailed and they would never have resorted to such behavior.

While a person's circumstances do tell part of the story, God has something else entirely to say in his word about the primary reason for all this evil, and what he has to say is the subject for this first sermon in our Christian doctrine series. What we want to consider today is one of the most important doctrines or teachings in all of the Bible. Understanding this doctrine helps you better to understand yourself and the world around you and helps you better to appreciate God's grace in Christ Jesus. The doctrine I am talking about is **original sin**.

1. The Image of God

In order to understand original sin, we have to understand the image of God. When God was making his plans for the creation of Adam and Eve, he said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." And then he did that: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1).

Now God as God is spirit. He is not flesh and blood; he has no physical form or shape. So when he says that he made Adam and Eve in his own image, he is not saying that he took a mirror in one hand and a sculpting knife in the other. He is saying that he made them to look like him in spirit or in soul. In other words, the image of God does not have to do with the organs of the body; it has to do with the organs of the soul.

Our soul is the core of our life. When our soul leaves our body, we cease to live. So what are the organs of the soul? What are the spiritual characteristics of our life which would mean that we had ceased to live if we lost them? It is probably simplest to name three organs of our soul. We have our reason or intellect. We have our emotions. And we have our will.

Our reason or intellect is the organ by which we are able to analyze our own existence and the world around us.

Our emotions are the organs by which we are able to feel—like, dislike, pleasure, pain, happiness, sadness, etc.

Our will is the organ by which we are able to make decisions and take action.

If we lose these organs, we cease to live. You cannot identify them in a photograph, x-ray, or operating room. They are part of our spiritual existence. These are the organs of our soul.

So when God says that he made Adam and Eve in his image, he means that he made Adam and Eve's reason and intellect, emotions, and will similar to his own. They *reasoned* and thought about things the way God thought about them. For instance, what God thought about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that he planted in the middle of the Garden of Eden was

this: This is a bad tree for Adam and Eve to eat from and they should stay away from it. If they eat of it, they will surely die. Adam and Eve thought the same. What God thought about the rest of his creation was this: It is my extremely good and beautiful creation, and it all exists for mankind's use and benefit. Adam and Eve thought the same.

They *felt* about things the way God felt about them. God didn't just think that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was bad for Adam and Eve to eat from. That was also the way he felt. If he were to see Adam and Eve looking at it longingly or taking a bite of it, he would feel disgust, pain, and anger. God didn't just know that his creation was good; he felt tremendous awe and satisfaction over it. Adam and Eve felt the same. When they saw the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they not only cognitively processed that this tree was bad for them to eat from and that they should stay away from it, but their emotions were in harmony with those thoughts. They had no desire to go near its fruit and play with fire, so to speak.

And they *made decisions* and took action the same way God would have in their shoes. Since they knew the world was created wonderfully by God, they treated it with respect and worked it and took care of it. Since they knew the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was bad for them to eat from, they stayed away from it or walked passed and did not touch or eat its fruit.

The Bible elsewhere calls this image of God true righteousness and holiness—living in perfect harmony with God's order and law. We could call the image of God original righteousness.

2. The Fall into Sin

But then something terrible happened. First, there was rebellion in heaven, led by one of God's angels. We don't know what his original name was; a passage in Isaiah (14:12)¹ suggests that it might have been Lucifer, but we don't know for sure. But eventually he received names like the devil, Satan, and Beelzebub. The Bible doesn't say much about the unsuccessful rebellion; it simply says that a number of angels sinned and abandoned their home in heaven, and as a result, God prepared hell for them (2 Peter 2; Jude). In one passage, the apostle Paul suggests that perhaps the devil's first sin was conceit or pride, thinking he was more than God had made him to be or wanting to be more than God had made him to be (1 Timothy 3). Whatever the case, he led other angels astray also.

And misery loves company. The devil immediately realized that if he could not defeat and overthrow God himself, the next best thing would be to destroy the apple of God's eye, humanity. So he possessed a serpent and went to tempt Adam and Eve to sin. We often picture the serpent wrapped up in the limbs and branches of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but remember, Adam and Eve most likely never went all that close to it until they fell into sin. So more likely the devil came in serpent-form to tempt them in another part of the garden, perhaps somewhere in the general vicinity of the forbidden tree in the middle.

Now here we must remember something important: Even though the rebellion of these angels was horrible, Adam and Eve still had everything they needed to easily overcome the devil's temptations. Nowadays, as we will see, when the devil and his demons tempt us, they

¹ The Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate, has *lucifer* in this verse, which literally means "light bearer," where most English translations have "morning star."

have a powerful ally inside of us. When you see a sign that says, “Don’t touch,” even if the devil is nowhere near you, your natural instinct is still to disobey and touch. Adam and Eve had no such evil instincts; they had no such ally for Satan. They were still in the image of God. Imagine an enemy soldier—strong and well armed, but just one soldier—approaching a fort on a plain in order to kill everyone in it. But the fort is heavily armed with many powerful long- and short-range weapons and soldiers who are vigilantly on the lookout and highly skilled in the use of those weapons. If that one enemy soldier succeeded in his task, the soldiers stationed in the fort would have no one to blame but themselves.

That’s what happened in the Garden of Eden. Despite the fact that Adam and Eve were perfectly armed to resist the temptations of the devil, they instead listened to the devil’s attacks on God’s word and God’s goodness. And before you know it, their *reason* and intellect starts malfunctioning. It starts analyzing the forbidden tree in a wrong way, starts thinking that it is in fact good for them to eat from. Their *emotions* start malfunctioning. They feel good about the tree and its fruit, are drawn to it, and desire it. The Bible describes these malfunctions when it says that “the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom” (Gen. 3:6). All that’s left is for their *will* to malfunction, to listen to the malfunctioning intellect and the malfunctioning emotions and to decide to take the fruit and to take the action of eating it.

And we do well to note that when Paul says here that sin entered the world through one person, the person he is talking about is not Eve, even though that is the person to whom the devil directed his tempting questions. Paul does say elsewhere that Eve was the one deceived, but when he talks about sin actually entering the world here, he makes clear later that the person through whom that happened is the head of the family, Adam. How can Paul say that sin entered the world through him? Because the Bible tells us that he was standing there with his wife the entire time and did nothing (Gen. 3:6). The first sin was not action, but inaction. It was not a sin commission, but a sin of omission. We have to remember that when we are examining and analyzing ourselves. We cannot simply ask ourselves, “Have I done anything wrong?” but we also must ask ourselves, “Have I failed to seize opportunities to do what was right? Have I been silent when I should have spoken up?”

3. Original Sin

What happened when Adam and Eve fell into sin could not have been more devastating. A couple chapters later in Genesis, Moses says this: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’ When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image, and he named him Seth” (Gen. 5:1–3). We heard Jesus say in the Gospel of John that “flesh gives birth to flesh.” We sang with David in Psalm 51, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” No more image of God, not in the proper sense of that term. Now all humans would be conceived and born in Adam’s fallen image. Original righteousness was gone, and what we call original sin, or the sin of origin, or inherited sin, took its place.

What exactly is original sin? What exactly is the image of fallen Adam? Some have described it merely as a lack of original righteousness. Imagine if you ordered a cup of orange

juice and instead received an empty cup with nothing in it. That's how some picture original sin. God created Adam and Eve with intellect, emotions, and will in perfect harmony with his own, and that is how he wanted all humans to be; that's how he "ordered" them, so to speak. But since the Fall, whenever a new human being is conceived, it's like he's receiving an empty cup instead of what he ordered.

But actually, original sin is worse than that. Paul says, "The mind of the flesh"—that is, the mind with which all humans are conceived and born—"is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, for it is also not able to do so" (Rom. 8:7). And we heard not only before the Flood, but also after, when the only people on earth were Noah and his family, members of the Church, that "every inclination of [mankind's] heart is evil from childhood" (Gen. 6:5; 8:21). If I drop a pen on my hand as my hand is slanted, the pen must follow the incline and go down. So too, from the moment we are conceived, as thoughts hit our heart, so to speak, they can only go in one direction, and it is not a God-pleasing one. So it isn't as though God has received an empty cup; it's as though he's received a cup of noxious liquid emitting poisonous fumes. Thus original sin is truly sin and deserves eternal punishment in hell. We heard Paul say it here: "Sin entered the world through one person, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, *inasmuch as all sinned.*"

This also, by the way, affects the way we talk about free will. If I were to ask you: "True or false? Humans are born with a free will."—how would you answer? In my experience, people commonly answer yes, we are born with a free will. And to a certain extent, our power to decide does remain intact. As a baby, I can decide whether to eat this food or that, or throw it on the floor. As a boy, I can decide whether to ride my bike or to play baseball or football. As a teenager, I can decide whether to attend college, and if yes, whether to attend this college or that. As I young man, I can decide whether to marry or remain single, and whom to marry. I can decide whether I want to eat at home or eat out, which restaurant to eat out at, and whether to order a steak or a burger. I can decide whether to buy a Ford or a Chevy or some other make.

But when it comes to the most important matters, matters of right and wrong, matters pertaining to our relationship with God, then we must realize that our free will is only a shell of what it used to be in the Garden of Eden, because by nature man can do nothing but sin against God. Even when he chooses to help someone instead of hurt them, he does so only for himself and not for God, which is idolatry and sin. Yes, when it comes to our relationship with God, we must maintain that humans by nature have no free will. Again and again, the Bible stresses that before God brings people to faith in Jesus, they are slaves to sin. Does slavery to sin sound like free will to you?

Do you want proof for original sin? I have heard it said that original sin is one of the teachings of the Bible for which there is plenty of sensory proof, if only we pay close attention and are honest with ourselves. Babies cry and scream if they don't get their way and if they don't get it now. Little children learn to say, "Mine" and "No," without having to be taught. They are told, "No, don't touch," and then they make their way over to the forbidden object when they think no one's looking, and they weigh their own selfish pros and cons of touching the forbidden object. And if it's too quiet in the other room, they've probably decided to touch it.

But the greatest proof is death, because death is the wages of sin. In Genesis, after Moses says that Adam had a son in his own image, and then he talks about that son having a son, and so

on down the line, there is a refrain that keeps repeating over and over again: “He lived so many years, and then he died. ...and then he died. ...and then he died.” And guess what? Even babies die. Sometimes they die before they’re even born.

4. The Use of Original Sin

The doctrine of original sin helps us to correct some common misconceptions. For instance, some people think that humans are born with a blank slate. Not so, as we’ve learned. The slate is already dirty from the moment one begins to exist. Many so-called Christian denominations hold to this blank-slate idea in effect. That is why they do not baptize people until they are older. Part of it is that they don’t understand what God says about baptism, but a bigger part of it is that they don’t understand what God says about original sin. They think that before children reach a supposed age of accountability, they do not commit sin, at least not sin worthy of death. If they die before they reach the age of accountability, they automatically go to heaven, they teach. And in teaching these lies, they have kept many little children who have died from eternal life.

Some people think that people are only sinful because they sin. That is, they are not sinful until they actually do something outwardly wrong. Not so, as we’ve learned. It’s actually the other way around. We sin and do things that are outwardly wrong because we are already sinful. It is a bad tree that produces bad fruit.

Many people think that mankind is basically good. This is the idea that many people have who blame evil-doing on a bad upbringing or bad circumstances. But not so, as we’ve learned. Mankind is basically evil. If mankind were basically good, then how could a child get bad parents in the first place? How could there be bad circumstances in the first place? No, safe, wealthy, and educated people simply commit safe, wealthy, and educated sins.

Many people think that mankind is getting better as time goes on, and this is consistent with the teaching of evolution. But not so, as we’ve learned. Jesus said that as the end drew near, wickedness would increase and the love of most would grow cold (Matt. 24). Mankind is not getting better, but worse. Point to technological advances as much as you want. For all the good things like the internet and smart phones have brought, they have brought just as much evil, because humans, who are by nature evil, will always find a way to make evil, selfish use out of them.

Many even so-called Christians think that mankind has the ability to draw near to God and please God on their own. Many so-called Christian churches will encourage you to make your decision for Christ. But it is impossible for slaves to sin to draw near to God, as we’ve learned. God is the one who must act. We cannot.

But perhaps the most common misconception among us is expressed more in our reactions than in anything else. Have ever heard a piece of tragic news and have shook your head and said, “How could that happen? How could that person do such a thing?” Then you do not yet fully grasp original sin. Bad news should never really surprise us as Lutheran Christians. This is the way humans are: We do the evil we are capable of doing to the extent that we are capable of doing it.

Boy, this has really been an uplifting and cheerful sermon, hasn’t it? Not at all. So why preach it? Because it’s the truth, friends. And unless we come to grips with this truth, we will

never understand ourselves or the world around us. But most importantly, we will never understand or appreciate what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We will never understand from what depths of depravity he has rescued us. We will never understand why Jesus had to be conceived by the Holy Spirit, instead of by a human father. We will never understand why he had to suffer so horribly for us as he did. We will never fully appreciate God's forgiveness. We will never fully appreciate how God has begun to restore his image in us once again through the gift of faith in his Son. And most importantly, we will never understand and appreciate his *grace*—that everything good he does for us is completely undeserved.

That's what we want to start talking about in the next sermon at the beginning of July—God's tender heart and his plan to save us, from our sins and in spite of our sins. May God help us to humble ourselves before him and to find the certainty of our salvation not in ourselves, but only in his Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.