

-
Reflections on Repentance
God Reveals our Sinful Nature

^sSurely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Tell me, have you ever heard someone make a statement like, “He’s really not a bad person. He’s just made some bad choices.” In fact, maybe you’ve had that same thought about yourself. “I’m not really a bad person. I’ve just done some bad things on occasion.” Tell me, is that a true statement? Is it accurate to say that a person is not inherently bad, but sometimes makes bad choices? Or maybe you’ve heard people say that all children come into this world with basically a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, as it’s called. We are an “empty tablet.” In other words, human beings are neither good nor bad but are essentially neutral. And then, we are shaped by the people around us to do either good things or bad things. What do you think? Is that an accurate view of human nature?

Even though there are a lot of people who might espouse those views that, even though you and I may catch ourselves thinking that way, the fact is, that kind of thinking is wrong. You and I and the rest of mankind did not come into this world “*tabula rosa*.” We weren’t innocent as babes. We weren’t even born in a neutral state. No, when we were born, yes, even when we were conceived, we were thoroughly and completely corrupt.

How do we know that? I mean, can we run some kind of prenatal test to determine the moral condition of a baby? No, the only way we know the moral condition of a child before they are born is to let God tell us. And God does just that in our sermon text for today. Over the course of our midweek Lent services this year, we’ve been focusing on the words of Psalm 51. In this psalm, originally penned by David after he had fallen into the sins of adultery and murder, we’ve seen the impact that those sins had on David’s heart and the impact they had on the lives of others. Well, in the verse we have before us today, we’re going to see where such sins originate. This morning/evening, as we continue our sermon series entitled, “Reflections on Repentance,” we see that

God Reveals the Truth about our Sinful Nature

In Psalm 51:5, King David makes a rather revealing confession. He writes, *Surely, I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* With those words, the psalmist is confessing two important truths. First, he’s confessing that human life begins at conception. Isn’t that right? David identifies himself as a person, as an individual, as a moral being, not only at the moment of his birth, but rather, at the moment of his conception. He doesn’t say that he started out as a lump of flesh or fertilized embryo and later became a human being. No, he was somebody, he was a human being, he was alive, already at his conception.

But David has an even more important point he’s making. He’s not only confessing that he was alive at conception; he’s confessing what kind of spiritual condition he was in at the moment of his conception. David says that he was sinful from the time his mother conceived him. Now, don’t misunderstand. David is not saying that way he was conceived was bad. It’s not like he was conceived out of wedlock or something. No, the problem was who he was conceived by, namely, two sinners. Remember Jesus’ words to Nicodemus? Jesus said, “*Flesh gives birth to flesh.*” (*John 3:6*). In other words, sinners give birth to sinners. Just as David’s

parents passed onto their son all the genes that would determine his facial features, the color of his eyes, the color of his skin, they also passed on the one thing that would determine his spiritual condition. They passed on what's called "Inherited Sin", or more often, "Original sin."

Now sometimes, when we use the word "Original Sin", it throws people off. They think, "Well, the original sin—wasn't that the sin that Adam and Eve committed in the Garden of Eden when they ate the fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?" Wasn't that the Original Sin? While it's true that Adam and Eve's rebellion against God in the garden of Eden was the very first sin, the term original sin refers not to their act of disobedience, but rather to the impact that their sin had on every human being since the fall. Or to put it another way, when you hear the term Original Sin, think "the sin I've had since the time of my origin."

Now, that concept of Original Sin is sometimes described as having two components: 1. Inherited corruption. And 2. Inherited guilt. What does that mean? Well let's go back to the Garden. When God created man and woman on the 6th day of creation, he created them in his own image. That doesn't mean that they looked like God physically. God doesn't look like anything. God is a spirit. Rather, it means that Adam and Eve were created in a state of perfection. They were without sin. They knew exactly what God wanted them to do, they were delighted to do it, and they were able to do it. You might say that they were in perfect harmony with God and each other—to the point that the Bible says "*the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Genesis 2:25)*"

Now, when it comes to that state of perfection that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden, the early church fathers applied to our first parents the term *posse non peccare*. Literally that means they were "able to not sin." In that state of perfection, in the image of God, Adam and Eve were able to not sin. But you know what happened. When they were tempted by the Devil, they chose to disobey the one command that God had given them. And just like that, our first parents lost their perfection. Suddenly, their mind, their will, their very nature became spiritually corrupt. And I don't mean a little impaired. It's not that they were 95% good instead of 100% good. No, from that moment on, their human nature was diametrically opposed to God. No longer did they see God as their friend. Suddenly they saw him as their enemy. And their actions proved it. When Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden, they didn't run toward him, they ran away from him. They tried to hide from God. They were filled with shame—because they had lost the image of God.

But not only did they lose the image of God, so did their children. The Bible tells us that when Adam and Eve gave birth to children, those children were not born in the image of God. No, quite the opposite. When the Bible records the birth of Adam's son Seth, what does scripture say? *Then Adam had a son in his own likeness, in his own image.* In other words, Adam and Eve, and their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren were no longer *posse non peccare*. They were all *non posse non peccare*. In other words, they, and the entire human race, were now "*not able to not sin.*" The entire human race lost the ability to stop sinning. That's what God meant when he said at the time of Noah, *Every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. (Genesis 8:22)* It's true. Every human being from the moment of their conception is morally corrupt.

But it's not just a sinful nature that has been passed down to us from Adam. We've also inherited Adam's guilt. Or to put it another way, because Adam sinned, you and I and the rest of mankind are now under God's just condemnation. Isn't that the point that Saint Paul makes in Romans 5:12, when he declares that *sin entered the world through one man (namely, Adam), and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all have sinned.* In other

words, Adam has made us all sinners, and therefore, we will all die. Or to put it another way, even before we could say our first swear word, or grab a toy from our little brother, or have a meltdown in the middle of the grocery store, we were by nature, already under God's condemnation. We were guilty from the time of our conception.

If you think about it, that's a pretty bleak picture, when you realize that from the get-go, we're behind the 8 ball. We're born thoroughly corrupt. We can't stop sinning—which could easily lead to one of two responses. We could either flippantly say, “Well, I guess it doesn't matter how much I sin, because I can't stop anyway.” Or we just throw our hands up in despair when we realize that we have no hope of saving ourselves from eternal separation from God.

But there is one other option. And that is, to repent. That is, to acknowledge with King David, “I've been a sinner since I was born, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Or to put it another way, “Sin is not just something I do. It's something I am. It's a condition that permeates me; it infects every part of me. It's what Adam's sin has done to me.”

But here's the good news. Just as surely as Adam's sin got charged to the account of every human being, do you know what else got charged to our account? St Paul tells us in Romans 5:17, *For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!* And again, in verse 18, *Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.*

Do you hear what Paul is saying? He's saying, if it's true that God could charge the sin of one man, namely, Adam, to the account of all mankind, then it's also true that God can charge to our account the perfection of one man, Jesus Christ. If in Adam, all are declared guilty, then in Christ all are declared not guilty. That's the point that Paul makes in Romans 5:19, *For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*

You realize, that's the basis for what is called the doctrine of universal justification. The very same people who are declared to be sinners and therefore deserve to die, are the very same people whom God is declared to be righteous for the sake of Jesus' perfect life in their place, and who will therefore live forever. 1 Corinthians 15:23 says it well. *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*

The only question is, who gets to enjoy the life that Christ has won for us? Who gets the benefit of the righteousness that Christ offers? The answer: those who believe it. Those who believe that God has given us this incredible gift of Christ's righteousness. And you realize, even the faith to believe in that gift is a gift from God. Whether God gave you that gift of faith when you heard the good news of God's love for you in Christ in the words of holy scripture, or whether God gave you that gift of faith through the washing of holy baptism, the impact is exactly the same. God has given you a New Man. He gave you a spiritual nature that is 100% holy, a nature that not only wants to do God's will but actually is able to do God's will. In fact, as a Christian, that's your new identity. What does Scripture say? *If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.*

My friends, you realize, that's what allows us to make an accurate assessment of ourselves and the people around us. I can say, “By nature, I'm not a good person who simply makes some bad choices. No, by nature, I'm a really, really, bad person. I have a mind, a heart and a will that is thoroughly corrupted by sin. That's why I make bad decisions.

But here's the far more important thing. I also have a God who loves me. Christ has

redeemed me. He's bought me back with his blood to make me right in God's eyes. He's given me a new man that has the power and the ability to do what is good and pleasing to God. My friends, that's why God had David confess the truth about his sinful nature. It's why David confessed, "*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time of mother conceived me.*" You see, it's only when we admit how truly bad our nature is, that we realize how truly good God's nature is. In his unfathomable love and mercy, God has done everything to make us holy and righteous in his eyes, all so that we can be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. This is most certainly true. Amen.