

## **This I Believe – Ugh!**

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Genesis 9:26-27; Romans 7:14-20

*He also said,*

*“Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem,  
and let Canaan be his slave.*

*May God make space for Japheth,  
and let him live in the tents of Shem,  
and let Canaan be his slave.”* Genesis 9:26-27 (NRSV)

*For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.* Romans 7:14-20 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words. Open our hearts that your word might fall in and do it's work in us. And then, Lord, may we respond by opening our hands to give and serve and love. Amen.*

So, are people basically good or people basically sinful? Your call. We're going to move. Those of you who believe are going to be over here, and those over here are going to have a debate right here. That's going to be a great conversation. Is a baby that's born brand new spanking new newborn baby is that baby good or sinful? Hmmm...

Well, I don't know the answer, actually. I think various Christians have understood that a little differently. Here's what I do know. I have 11 grandchildren, and they're really good. Good grandchildren. Every one of them. But five of them are eight years old and four of those 8-year-olds are boys. And so, when we get together at the tree house for example sin sometimes reigns. It's there. It's like "Lord of the Flies." There's beating on one another with sticks here and there. Always wanting to restrain. We walked in one day and they were wrapping the little brother up in rope at the base of the tree house, even around his neck. It was nice. And they were going to - they thought if all four 8-year-olds hoisted him up on the pulley system, they could get him to the tree house. So, supervision is required of this group.

Here's my question. When did sin kick in? I know it was before eight. Was it five? Was it three? Was it terrible twos? I don't know.

But I'm a little bit ahead of myself. I want us to talk about human nature. And what has been the sort of breadth of understanding of human nature as best we can in a few minutes here. Over the centuries see where maybe you fall. I want to do it by talking about two people and three concepts.

The first person is Adam, and when we talk about Adam, we mean Adam and Eve. The first human beings. If you view that as a literal story in which Adam and Eve were real people who lived some thousands of years before Christ or whether you understand Adam and Eve to be a archetype to teach us some other truth I want to tell you it doesn't matter for our purposes today. We're talking about what we learn from Scripture about human nature. And in human nature in Adam what we find first is that they were created in the image of God. It's called the *imago dei*, that's the Latin term that almost every - I hesitate to say every because I haven't studied them all - but every Christian denomination, every Christian school of thought has understood that human beings are created in the image of God. And here's our Scripture - you heard it a few moments ago. It says, "Then God said, 'Let us make humans (literally '*adam*') in our image..." Now the word "human" there is translated in this one as "Humans." The word is *adam*, transliterated into English. So hence, we get the name Adam, but the word Adam is the Hebrew word for *man* or *mankind*. So, it depends on how you want to translate this. God created Adam in his image, or God created humans in his image. Almost every translation of the Bible uses either *man* or *mankind* or *humans*. But what I'm trying to say is that Adam is to be this archetype, this image of what it is to be human beings. So, Adam is created and it says, "...Let us make humans in our image (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in our image according to our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of

the sea, etc. etc. And then it says, closes this passage, "...So God created humans (literally 'the adam') in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26,27).

Twice in five verses it reminds us, we are created in the image of God, every human being is. When a baby is born, a parent looks at that baby and says, "Perfect. Just perfect. In God's image." What does that mean? It means that we create like God creates. We work like God works. We were put in the garden to till it and to keep it. We're in relationship like God is in relationship. "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helpmate for him." And most of all when God had finished creation and finished creating the human being God says, "And behold, it was ..." Not just "good" but "very good."

At that sense we are made in God's image. That's the first concept I hope you'll take hold of. But there's another thing we learn about human nature from Adam, and that has to do with sin. In Adam we have the first what is often called the original sin. God says, you know the story, "You can eat of all of these trees in the garden - but not that one. Don't do that." And sure enough Adam and Eve eat of that tree and the first sin has come to pass.

Now, what does that mean for us? Through the centuries this doctrine of original sin has meant that for most Christian denominations, not all, but most certainly. It has meant that sin is transmitted through the ages and because of that the notion is that every person is born in original sin. St. Augustine, the great theologian of the fifth century, he said, ...see, there's good, that's an example of that. Every child is ...No, I didn't mean to do that. But it is interesting. Augustine says that the first words from a child, the first sounds from a child, are "me...me...me." That's part of the sinful nature that comes with the child. You can buy that or not. I'm just saying that Christians over the ages have understood that sin was inherent in each human being—part of their nature.

Now, other Christians have believed that sin was not inherent in everyone's nature but was inevitable. In other words, original sin means that just like Adam was free to follow God or to turn away from God, each one of us, every child, every human being, is free to either turn toward God or turn away from God. To be obedient or disobedient. And so that original sin, we each sort of re-create that original sin with our own decisions. So, they would say that sin is not inherent, but it is inevitable. In other words, we all sin.

Here's what I've finally come to believe - it doesn't matter. That's a distinction without a difference. Because the truth is "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And it's part of who you are and who I am that we're sinners. That we have sinned.

Now we can understand sin is often understood in different ways. It literally means "to miss the mark," and the word in Greek is a word that means "To miss the mark." In Hebrew it means "to fall short of a goal" so it's so interesting both have similar images. It can be described in a number of ways. It can be described in legal terms like "You broke God's law." You were disobedient and broke God's law. God said, "Don't eat that fruit," Adam ate the fruit, that's sin. You have a picture of breaking sin is breaking rules. You can define sin in relational terms. I tend to be in that camp myself. That sin is relational. That means that sin has to do with breaking a relationship with God. I was created to be in relationship with God but what happened was that I've chosen not to be. I have rebelled against God and turned away from God. And so, the relationship is broken.

As soon as Adam sins and Adam and Eve sin, what happens? Well, all of a sudden, they realize they're naked, and they hide from God in the garden. They hide from God, and God says, "Where are you?" Wow - so sin is that sense of us rebelling against God and separating ourselves from God because we want to be on our own. Sin can be defined that way. And by the way, it's not either/or -it's both/and for most of these.

Or sin can be defined in social terms. We live in a sinful world. That all the problems, the difficulty, the brokenness in our world sin and death is how the Bible explains it. It is a result of Adam's original sin and our participation in what comes after. That as sin entered the world everything got messed up. So you turn on the television and you don't watch the news more than five minutes before you think to yourself, "What a mess. What a mess." You read the paper, you look at the world around you, you see some people have all the privilege and some people born into a place where there's no privilege. You see injustice around us all around.

Dorothy Sayers was one of the more progressive and prophetic teachers and authors and preachers of the twentieth century, and in 1944, she was preaching at Oxford University. It was right in the middle of the Second World War, and she was preaching about sin and how sin has entered all of the world around us. And into the nations and into the culture and all of a sudden a bomb drops right - it's 1944 and London's under attack and the bomb drops right there in the university. And after the tumult kind of dies down, she continues her lecture on sin. She says, "See." Very straightforward. "See."

I tell you I often think "what a mess." It's as if God created, I've heard this image from someone else and I like it. It's an idea of a piece of aluminum foil that gets all crumpled up. You try to get it flattened out, and it looks shiny and clean again. But no matter how hard you work at it, it's just such a mess. And you can't figure it out, and you think, "I'm just going to have to get a new piece of aluminum foil because this one is irredeemable."

So, when we talk about human nature, we have this picture of being good first, created in the image of God. And then sin, brokenness, enters the world, and that image of God becomes distorted and broken. But thankfully, that's not the end of the story. I said there'd be two people we would talk about, and one was Adam. And one is Jesus.

You know when you study the history of the church one of the things that kind of strikes you is that people are martyred and excommunicated and put in prison for things that seem like...humm. For one example one of the great heresies of the church is some people said that Jesus was half divine, half human and others said that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. The half and half people got thrown in prison. I thought... hmmm that seems like kind of a majoring on the minors to me. So, we believe Jesus is fully human. He's a fully human being. And he is for us the model of what it means to live as a human being. As the man.

St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 says it this way: "Just as sin and death..." This is a paraphrase..." "Just as sin and death entered the world with one man, so life and salvation enter the world with one man. Jesus." He says, "Just as you and I bear the image of the man of dust - Adam - you and I bear the image of the man of Heaven - Jesus." We have that opportunity to accept the grace of God and allow Christ to be alive within us and take us over. If you wanted to start with good - humans are good - then broken - humans are broken - and then there is a sense that humans are re-created. Are restored. Are redeemed. Are made right again in Jesus Christ.

Paul says, "It is no longer I who live but Jesus Christ who lives in me." Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. Everything old is gone; everything is being made new." We are being transformed as human beings to be like *the* human being, the model human being that lives as a child of God and that is Jesus. The Christian word for this is sanctification, comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. But that is our opportunity.

So, what does that mean for us as human beings? I think it puts us in a place where we live in an inner struggle. About how we will live. What part will we live out of? I think when Paul in this passage that we read from Romans, it's so interesting when Paul gets personal and speaks in the

first-person singular. "I" He says in Romans 7, we read it a few moments ago. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...." I've titled this sermon "Ugh!" because I think that's right where he goes, "Ugh! I do the very thing I hate - Ugh!" Then near the end he says, "...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Ugh! Within each one of us, there's this conflict, this inner conflict that we struggle with.

When I die and they do my funeral, I want whoever is the speaker to say, "He never said a bad word about anyone. He only said good things." That's what I want them to say. But that's not going to happen. Because as much as I want to be that person, as much as my value system says, "I'm going to see the very best in everyone...I'm going to have compassion for everyone." When I read the text messages I send to my friends that are snarky about other people all the time I think, "Ugh!" I am not living that person. When I read the Scripture and hear the radical call on my life to take up my cross and follow Jesus to turn away from materialism and greed, and anger and need for affirmation and all of those things that are there. And I see that radical call on my life to live a simpler life I realize that horse feels like it's left the barn. How can I become that? How can that be? Ugh! But really within each one of us we have that inner struggle.

In reading again the writing of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and I've shared with you before his more famous line from *The Gulag Archipelago*. He said, "The line between good and evil does not run between two persons or two parties, or two classes. The line between good and evil runs right through the center of every human heart." And that's a beautiful phrase. It has more power when you read all of the context. Because what he says is that ...He was a decorated war hero but he made negative comments about Stalin and so he was sent to the work camps - the gulag. He was a committed Christian, a Russian Orthodox Christian, and he was sent to the gulags, and he said, "I watched myself become so cruel. I became cruel to the people around me. I would lay in bed at night and think what's happening to me. Why is this happening?" And that's when he quotes this line between good and evil is in every human heart.

He said, "I made a decision there I had a choice I could make. About which I was going to claim and what was I going to be." He goes on to say, "That's why I say bless the prison camp, no one understands why I say that but bless the prison camp. It was there I understood that I had good and evil within me and I had to decide which I was going to live by."

I think that's such a powerful picture. He goes on to say by the way I thought this was interesting that he felt Shakespeare got evil wrong. Because in Shakespeare's characters all the bad guys knew they were bad. They knew they were doing bad things. He said, "Most people who are doing evil think they're doing good. "I thought, "Hmmm, that's probably true."

So, we have within us this inner conflict. And I want you to think about it this way. Within you you have both Adam and Christ. Both the man of dust and the man of heaven. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer says... I love this. He says, "There are only two basic temptations in the Bible. One was the temptation of Adam and he failed the test. One was the temptation of Christ, and he passed the test. So when temptation comes to knock at my door, I send Christ to answer it." When we have to deal with that inner conflict, we have the ability to live out of that Christ that has been put within us.

When we look at one another, when we look at ourselves, we have to recognize that all parts of that human being and what it means to be human are within us. Image of God? Sin, brokenness, and the Christ who can live within us. And out of whose identity we can live.

*Let's pray together. Lord God, we look, and we know that you created us out of love. We know, God, that we fell short. That each one of us has sinned and fallen short of your glory. And God, we know that you are offering to us the opportunity to live a different way. To live out of the Christ that's within us. To grow and become what you want us to become. We pray, God, that you would be at work in our lives, that you would open ourselves to be able to see our brothers and sisters in the same way we look at ourselves. And recognize that you are still at work within all of us. And you're not finished yet. We pray in the name of Christ, our Lord, Amen.*