

FALL : BROKEN

sunday school module four

“You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” - C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters

Satan & Demons.

Any discussion of sin has to begin with Satan. Satan was the first created being to rebel against God and was the catalyst for sin coming to earth. From the beginning, Satan and his legion of demons have been a primary cause of sin and rebellion in the world and tireless sowers of dissent against God. So, who is Satan? How did he come about? What are demons? What is their activity in and power over the world? We will discuss this and more in this section.

According to historic Christian theology, demons are created beings that began as angels, but at some point chose to rebel against God to pursue evil. 2 Peter 2:4 says, “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.” Jude 6 describes a similar scene, saying, “the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.” These two New Testament references, though admittedly vague, supply Christians with the bulk of their theology about Satan and demons. Demons, were once angels but because of some sin were cast from heaven as punishment. Though it’s not entirely clear what that sin was, the section in Jude that says, “angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling” suggests that pride may have come before their fall.

The Old Testament adds to our theology somewhat. Isaiah 14:12-15 in particular, which says,

“How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’
But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the far reaches of the pit.”

Though this chapter is primarily about an earthly king, it is common for the prophets to weave double meanings into their written works. This section in particular hints at such a thing because the scope of Isaiah’s description exceeds what is realistic to apply to even the most ambitious human kings. If this does indeed describe Satan and the demons descent from Heaven, we can learn a few things and confirm others. First, it does seem to be safe to say that it was pride that ultimately undid Satan. He wanted to “ascend to heaven”, set his “throne on high” and make himself “like the Most High”. This was the ultimate power grab and it cost Satan his place in heaven and will eventually cost him his life. The titles, “Day Star” and “son of Dawn”, denote a pretty significant place of honor in heaven before his fall.

Satan’s current activity can be seen across the narrative, most often in moments of temptation or accusation. Satan literally means “adversary” in Hebrew, and he appears as such throughout the Bible. Job 1:6 depicts Satan appearing before God to accuse God of going easy on Job. 1 Chronicles 21:1 says that Satan “stood up against Israel” and Zechariah 3:1 says that Satan accused Joshua the high priest to the angel of the Lord. More broadly, Satan and the demons actively work against the good creation of God and his saving work. He lies, deceives, murders, obscures the truth, tempts, confuses and outright attacks the people of God in order to deter them from following God.

Sin.

A good definition of sin is *"the failure to live as God created humans to live; which includes actions, thoughts, motives and desires"*. Sin is an internal, heart-level reality that manifests itself both internally (in terms of motives and desires) and externally (actions and words). This is important because it means that the problem is not primarily an "out there" problem that can be fixed by changing one's circumstances or influences, nor can it be contained by mere discipline. Sin begins in the depth of a person's heart and creeps its way out into the light. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously describes the complexity of sin this way, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Sin is not so much a unique thing unto itself, created by Satan as an unholy antidote to God's goodness but rather it is the undoing of Shalom. Sin is derivative, a perversion of God's created work and not a new thing unto itself. As we saw in the previous module, God created the world to be in perfect harmony with himself and itself. Humans were made to flourish because of their unique relationship with God and their calling to create and cultivate creation. Humans are perfectly suited for both of these things and still, in spite of sin, find their greatest flourishing when they are most connected to God and actively pursuing their mandate to cultivate culture. Sin, then, is anything that disrupts this arrangement. Sin is anything that disconnects mankind from their intimate, love relationship with God or that prevents them from caring for and cultivating God's world.

Original Sin.

In Genesis 1-2, God created the world in perfect harmony and he called it "very good". All was as God intended; humans lived in vulnerable, intimate and trusting relationship with God and they perfectly lived out their mandate to cultivate God's world. It would seem to us that they had everything they could have ever wanted. Genesis 3, however tells the story of the "Original Sin", the first moment of human dissatisfaction and its devastating consequences.

The story begins with the "serpent", described here as being "more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord had made", approaching Eve with a question. He said, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" Already, the serpent is trying to deceive Eve because he is intentionally misquoting God. God had told Adam and Eve that they could eat from any tree in the

garden except the one in the middle called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the serpent certainly knew that. Eve's response was also incorrect, she said, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" As far as we know, God didn't say anything about touching the tree and it's unclear why Eve added that idea, but clearly she was already being deceived by the serpent. The serpent goes on to convince her that, not only will she not die if she eats the fruit but that it will actually make her wise like God, "knowing good and evil". Commentators disagree about whether or not this was a lie, since eating the fruit did result in Eve more fully understanding evil. Either way, it was clearly an attempt on the serpent's part to entice Eve to eat the fruit that God had forbidden. He preyed upon that part of every human that desires to be more, that desires to know and control like God does. Eve wanted to be like God and so she rebelled against his created order and, in so doing, introduced sin to the world for the first time.

This one moment has had a cascading effect throughout history. Adam and Eve introduced corruption to a previously incorrupt world and through that one sin, corruption spread to every inch of creation. Paul describes this cascading effect in Romans 5:12 by saying, "just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." Paul blames Adam for the encroachment of sin and death into the world and into every human heart and mind. Further, he says in verses 18-19, "Therefore as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Paul continues his train of logic to include, not just sin and death, but also condemnation and what theologians call a "sin nature". Because of this, all humans are born with a propensity towards sin that, combined with the sinful world in which they live, results in certain condemnation.

The Nature of Sin.

The simplest way to think about sin is as a failure to follow God's commands and law. This is no doubt true but perhaps misses some of the more emotional or affective reasons why people sin. Eve's sin is, I think, representative of much of human sin since. She was tempted by the serpent to believe that God didn't have her best interest in mind, but was instead reserving glory, power and wisdom for himself. She responded to that temptation by grasping for something that God did not design her to experience. She was made in God's image to reflect his glory, walk in loving relationship with him and to cultivate his creation. She wanted something more, she wanted to be like God. And in so doing she disobeyed God's command and allowed sin to enter the world.

Sin is disobedience, to be sure, but it is also reflective of the hubris of mankind to strive for the one thing they cannot have. Satan appealed to Eve's pride, which motivated her to disobey God. Her desire to be like God was the sin that motivated her act of disobedience. This may seem like splitting hairs but it's important to understand the depths of sin's effect on humanity if we are to overcome it. The desire to be like God lies in the heart of every human. Our aspirations for safety, control, honor, glory and power are unquenchable. They move us away from God and towards ourselves. Humans rebel against God by replacing him with idols that promise the things their hearts want most and at far smaller costs. Humans want all the power and none of the sacrifice. The design of God from the beginning depended on human willingness to trust that God was enough, that he loved them deeply and had designed the world to work for their greatest flourishing. The temptation of the serpent cast doubt on all of that and continues to, to this day.

Consequences of Sin.

It's important to note that sin cannot change the essential nature of the relationship between God and a person. There is nothing a person can do to make God love them more and there's nothing they can do to make God love them less. God loves all people the most he will ever love them and sin does nothing to change that. The greatest expression of love that could be imagined was the cross, where "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us". Even in the depths of our sin, Christ died, expressing unconditional love that wasn't prevented by our sin, nor could be increased by our righteousness.

This doesn't mean that there are no consequences for sin. There are two important ways in which sin impacts our lives. The first is our relationship with God. Even though our sin doesn't ultimately affect the nature of our relationship, it does have an impact. Just like when a child disobeys their father, God is displeased when we sin. Again, similar to a human parent, the behavior of the child doesn't affect their love for him or her but their actions have the power to please or displease. A good parent is happy when their child acts rightly because it both shows appropriate respect to the parent and moves the child down the path towards flourishing. Conversely, disobedient behavior both shows disrespect to the parent and is ultimately destructive for the child. God, like the parent, finds joy in our obedient flourishing and sorrowful anger in our disobedience and disrespect.

The second category of consequence is the natural result of our decisions. Lying has detrimental consequences that truth-telling does not. Does that mean that there are never repercussions for our

right actions? Of course not, we are surrounded by other people who are prone to sin and sometimes our truth-telling causes someone else to sin against us or our truth-telling reveals sin that was previously hidden. Overall, truth-telling has fewer negative results than lying does and this goes for all sin. Our sinful decisions to live outside of the way God designed us to live will have natural consequences. When we steal, we may experience punishment for it and lose the trust of those around us. When we commit adultery, we could lose our family and the respect of those we love. There are very real consequences for sin that don't reflect a change in our relationship to God, but do reflect the fact that God considers us his children. When my children disobey, they receive consequences that are both the natural result of their sin and also my chosen way to discipline them. God is no different, he allows our decisions to bear their natural fruit and, at times, disciplines us for our sin, so that we might learn and grow.

Overcoming Sin.

There is no simple formula for overcoming sin in your life. Humans are surrounded by temptation at every turn and, even in the absence of specific temptation, have an internal compass that constantly points us in the direction of selfishness and rebellion. Fighting sin is just that, a fight. And like any fight (that you intend to win), it will take preparation and a strategy. Below is the outline of a simple, Biblical process that, if applied faithfully and prayerfully, can aid a Christian in overcoming sin in their lives. This is not a promise of purity, but a battle plan, which gives you far better odds of winning than no plan at all. In each step below, the Holy Spirit has to work. No human plan can do the work of the Spirit, but the good news is that the Spirit is already doing this work, whether you like it or not. This doesn't mean you shouldn't engage the Spirit in prayer and ask specifically for him to reveal sin in your life and enable you to defeat it, but be assured that he is already doing so, because it is the job given to him by the Father.

Step 1: Cultivate the Good.

Any attempt to overcome sin that is primarily reactive is destined to fail. We cannot only be prepared to react to temptation or learn how to recover from sins already committed. The first step to overcoming sin is daily cultivating a commitment to the good life that God created humans to experience. Ephesians 2:10 explains that we were made for a certain way of life, saying, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which he prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." We were made for a way of life that is God-honoring and reflective of our creational design. We were very literally made for "good works", made to love God and our neighbor. It is the daily pursuit of our humanity that lies at the heart of overcoming sin.

What does it look like to Cultivate the Good? At bare minimum, it looks like a daily devotional time. Each and every day we are inundated with messaging about what matters in the world, what is the path to flourishing, and companies are spending billions of dollars trying to convince us that their products are the keys to their vision of the good life. If we aren't intentional about the ideas we want in our heads, the world will happily supply them. God has given Christians spiritual practices that root us in the truth each and every day. Each day, we should study the Bible and pray to remind ourselves of the truth, to learn more about God and his world and to open our eyes to the most meaningful things in our world.

One of the greatest weapons of the enemy is the distraction of trivialities. Our world is filled with things that don't matter very much (if at all). Our phones light up a thousand times a day with information that doesn't *matter* in any ultimate sense. If we aren't careful, our lives can be overcome with things that don't really matter and in the process allow the things that do matter to be crowded out by the trivial. A daily time in the word and in prayer remind us that there is a depth of meaning that undergirds reality. Weekly worship and community surround us with the voices, language and encouragement that serve as an eco-system for the things of God to be able to grow in our hearts so that the quiet voice of God can be heard above the cacophony we encounter every day in the world. We have no hope of resisting evil in a particular moment if we haven't prepared ourselves for battle ahead of time. Spiritual disciplines like Bible study, prayer, solitude, listening, and community gird us up so that we are prepared when the enemy attacks us with temptation.

Step 2: Repent

This may seem simple and there is certainly a way to repent that is simple, and ineffective. Shallow repentance simply names the sin and asks for forgiveness. This is useful as far as it goes but it is not a step towards overcoming the power of sin in your life. Deep repentance has the power to root out sin but the amount of power it wields over sin is equal to the depths to which you are willing to repent. Put simply, this means that we need to repent, not just of the sin but of the reasons why we sinned. The work of deep repentance is the process of turning over the rocks in our heart that hide the real reasons why we act selfishly and rebelliously. As hard as this work can be, it's not complicated. It is simply asking a series of "why?" questions until you get to root causes.

Lust is an easy example. Often the reason a man will look at pornography has little to do with just naked lust. Most often, it's connected to power or control. A man wants to be in control, to feel

powerful and desired and most pornography feeds these needs. It portrays beautiful women doing exactly what the men want them to do and they *seem* to enjoy it, which makes the man feel wanted, desired. It's not enough to simply repent of watching pornography, or even just to name lust as the cause. It goes deeper than that and if you never turn healing attention to those causes, they will never be healed and the disease will spread.

Gossip is another good example. Why would God call out gossip so often? It seems like a benign sin, comparatively speaking. Well, what is at the root of gossip? Often, it's comparison. One person talks poorly about another because they are secretly (or not so secretly) jealous of something the other person has or does and it makes the gossip feel insecure. Gossip is a way to level the playing field by pointing out the ways in which the other person has failed. Deep repentance requires a person to think about how they are defining human value, both their own and the victim of their gossip. Both pride and insecurity find their root in the same place, an over-importance of the opinion of other people. This same root leads people to both inflated and deflated senses of themselves, but the real sin is the desire to locate value in something other than God.

So far, we have talked about the internal things that need to be identified and repented of, but there is an external reality as well. For most sin, our internal deficiencies have to be triggered by outside stimuli. We call these temptations and while they aren't the root cause of our sin, they matter a great deal. An old baseball coach once said, "there are no excuses for failure, but there are reasons." Once in a while, grizzled old coaches have some wisdom and this is one of those times. External temptations aren't the root cause of sin, they aren't excuses for our sin. Whether it's scantily clad women, regulators turning a blind eye, or the opportunity for a secret conversation, there are temptations all around us that Satan uses to trigger those internal weaknesses that he wants to exploit. We have to be aware of the kinds of situations that might make us particularly vulnerable to temptation and "flee from (those) temptations".

There is a kind of repentance that has to take place externally as well. Even though most temptations are not, in and of themselves, sinful they are opportunities for sin and it shows a lack of wisdom when we allow ourselves to be in these situations. Beyond wisdom even, it demonstrates a lack of seriousness about overcoming sin. An alcoholic cannot seriously say that want to overcome their addiction if they spend time in bars. They are knowingly walking towards temptation, while saying they want to overcome their sin; it's just hypocrisy. So we must repent of the times we walk towards temptation and make a real commitment to do otherwise. Repentance literally means "to turn away".

It's not enough to just name our sin and say we're sorry. That's important but real repentance goes beyond this and requires a real turning away from our sin, both internally by identifying the real causes and externally by intentionally avoiding the people, places and experiences that trigger our internal desire to sin.

Step 3: Believe

Jesus first words in the gospel of Mark are, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Gospel." This is the core message of Jesus throughout the gospels; a new time is here, the time of the Kingdom, and the right response to this is to turn away from your old way of being and to believe, to pursue this new way of being call the Gospel. This was not only Jesus' primary message, it is also the way to find life in this world. Repentance is only half the battle, once we turn away from sin, we have to turn towards something. If we aren't thoughtful about this turning, we will simply turn from one sin to another. Jesus implores us to turn from sin and towards the gospel. In order to ever more fully overcome sin, we have to reorient our lives around the truth and pursue the end for which we were made.

You'll notice that both of these last two steps, Repentance and Belief, are rooted in the first step. We cannot identify sin or move intentionally towards the truth if we don't know what they are. Cultivating a connection to the gospel allows us to recognize when we are far from it and, like a compass that ever points north, we know where the Gospel is for us to pursue.

For this final step, there are two parts to it. The first flows from step two. Once we have identified some of the root causes that moved us towards sin and have repented of believing the lies that undergird them, we need to identify the truth that was obscured by those lies. For instance, in our example of gossip, if our gossip is the result of a desire to be valued (which is God-given) but we are locating our value in the eyes of people around us, we have to move towards the right version of that desire. In that moment, we have to tell ourselves the truth, that our value is secure because of the word of our maker. He made us "very good" and there is nothing that sin can do to diminish our value, nor is there any accomplishment that can increase it. We are exactly as valuable as we have always been, because of God, not because of us. Or in the case of pornography, if the root cause is a desire for power or glory, we have to choose to pursue the truth the God himself is deserving of all glory and that our attempts at glory are actually an attempt to steal glory from him. Our desire to be important, desired and powerful are no different than Eve's sin in the garden, we are trying to supplant God instead of just being the humans that we were made to be.

A final point to be made is this: this last step of pursuing the truth has to be a decision we make. Part of overcoming sin is simply deciding to stop allowing sin to have footholds in our lives and choosing to be responsible for our decisions. If we truly hate sin, we need to act like it. We need to prepare ourselves for temptations, arm ourselves with all the resources we will need to overcome it and then simply decide to fight. We have to take responsibility for our decisions, be accountable and choose to pursue the good in every part of our lives.

