

Hamartiology: What the Bible Says about Sin

Part One: Ryerson Notes¹

1. Introductory Comments

When Adam sinned, his entire family lost its moral ability to be holy. The typical human being is no longer a proper representative of God. And man's privilege of communing directly with God has disappeared. To understand how we got this way, we must review some of the material from Segment Eight of this study: *Biblical Anthropology: What the Bible Says about Man* (pages 120-131 of this syllabus).

2. Adam's changed condition

- The technical term to describe Adam's original moral condition is "unconfirmed holiness."
 - He was made in God's image, which includes holiness. Genesis 1 tells us that man was created in God's image. Elsewhere the Bible declares that our God is a holy God. Adam was holy – that is, separated from evil – because he had never committed any sin.
 - He was pronounced "very good" in Genesis 1:31.
 - He was treated as morally responsible. Look at how God speaks to him in Genesis 2:17: "Don't eat of the tree in the midst of the garden. If you eat of it, you will surely die."

Adam was unconfirmed in holiness, because he had never faced a test, he had never had to choose between good and evil.

- But once Adam's condition changed – once he fell into sin – the result was death. I don't think I understood that for a long time. You read that story in Genesis 3 and you think, "God said Adam would die, but Adam sinned and he didn't die. Did God lie or just make a mistake?" Follow this:
 - Adam's _____ death began immediately.

¹ Excerpts from the transcript of "Man from God's Vantage Point," sermon delivered by the author to Centerville Grace Brethren Church, October 30, 1988.

Genesis 3:19 tells us that the aches and pains that eventually get the best of every one of us began in Adam's life the very day that he sinned. And Genesis 5:5 is one of the saddest verses in the Bible: "So all the days that Adam lived were 939 years, *and he died.*"

There's a little-known story of Solomon over in First Kings 2:36-46 that illustrates this. Solomon warned some of his captured enemies that as long as they stayed in a certain town, they could live. After a couple of years, two of the men started to assume that Solomon had grown lax in his warning, so they ran from the protected city. Solomon learned of their escape and sent his army to catch them. Just before their lives were snuffed out, Solomon asked, "Why didn't you believe the word of the king?"

Just because Adam didn't keel over dead the moment he sinned, that's no reason to conclude that God had forgotten the curse.

-- More importantly, Adam's _____ death *did* happen instantly.

That's really what the Bible is describing in Genesis 2:17, and the effects were dramatic:

- Instantly Adam became separated from God. Isaiah 59:2: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and God." It happens every time. Ephesians 4:18: The blackness of our hearts excludes us from the life of God. Until we get to heaven and get a taste of face-to-face communion with Christ, we'll never know how much that separation from the Lord hurt Adam.

- His nature became depraved, bent, twisted, warped.

Paul's complain in Romans 7:14-15 is the classic example of what it means to be depraved. To be depraved is to feel an unexplainable compulsion to do something that you know is wrong. Depravity is one of the horrible signs of Adam's spiritual death.

-- Spiritual death was passed to the _____.

David laments in Psalm 51:5, "I was already full of iniquity when my mother conceived me." Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all else, and desperately wicked." Ephesians 2:3: "We were all by nature children of wrath."

Romans 5:12: “By one man death has spread to all men.” First Corinthians 15:21-22: “In Adam all die.”

When you and I came into being, we were already sinners from the beginning. That is because the father who gave you physical life was a member of a dead family; because *his* father was a member of a dead family; because as far back as our family goes, to Adam himself, every person born into this family has been spiritually dead.

Part Two: Comments on Grudem’s Chapter 24, “Sin”

1. Under “A. The Definition of Sin,” refer to Grudem’s footnote #1, page 491. He describes Strong’s definition of sin as “selfishness ... a fundamental and positive choice of preference of self instead of God,” and concludes that “when Strong defines ‘selfishness’ in this unusual way, his definition is not really inconsistent with Scripture,” but that “he uses the word *selfishness* in a way in which it is not commonly understood in English, and therefore his definition of sin is frequently open to misunderstanding.” I suggest that Strong’s *Systematic Theology*, first published in 1907, and his definition of selfishness in particular, reflect a nuance of American language perhaps more common over 100 years ago. Grudem’s lengthy critique of Strong on this point is unnecessary.
2. Under “B. The Origin of Sin,” refer to Grudem’s paragraphs at the top of page 493, in which he demonstrates that the sin of Adam and Eve “is in many ways typical of sin generally.” He then suggests that our first parents responded to temptation by concocting erroneous answers to three basic questions: What is true? What is right? Who am I? I commend Grudem for this excellent treatment of the Eden scene, which lends itself to a powerful sermonic and devotional application.
3. In the same section mentioned above, note the last paragraph on Grudem’s page 493, beginning, “Finally, we should note that all sin is ultimately irrational.” This writer’s experience with marital counseling includes numerous cases in which a husband has been unfaithful to his wife, and the wife – understandably devastated and angered – demands that he answer the question, “Why did you do it?” And the wife is often frustrated that the husband cannot seem to give an explanation for his infidelity. I have counseled the wife in such cases in this manner: “Your husband may not be able to answer because he honestly cannot think of a logical reason why he started down that path of sin. There is no logic in sin. When we open the front door of our hearts just a crack and allow the enemy of our souls to enter with his lies, in that moment all logic disappears out the back door; and nothing we do from that moment will make any sense.” I applaud Grudem for his insightful paragraph affirming this view of sin.

4. Under “C. The Doctrine of Inherited Sin,” refer to the paragraph on page 495 which begins, “In response, three things may be said....” Grudem is grappling with the question, “Does God condemn us to death because we are members of a fallen race, or because we commit individual acts of sin?” He rightly deals with this question, in part by suggesting a dual trigger for our condemnation: both our “inherited guilt” and our acts of sin. I have illustrated this same dual trigger in this manner: At the final judgment, God will say to each sinner, “In Adam all die. Because you are children of a condemned race, I am sending you into eternal punishment.” Some may hear this judgment and reply to the Judge, “That isn’t fair! You can’t condemn me for Adam’s sin. I demand that you let me prove that I am better than Adam was and worthy of acquittal!” – to which God will respond, “All right, have it your way. Let us open the books and examine your deeds. Look, you have sinned repeatedly, proving that I am justified in condemning you to death.”

I am grateful to D. James Kennedy for a helpful illustration which punctuates this latter point.

Just suppose that a person sinned only ten times a day or even five – or even just three. Why, he would practically be a walking angel! Imagine if not oftener than three times a day did he think unkind thoughts, or lose his temper, or fail to do what he ought toward God and man – he would be a pretty fine person, would he not?

Even if he were this good, he would have over 1,000 transgressions a year! If he lived to the average age of seventy, then he would have 70,000 transgressions. Think what would happen to an habitual offender in a criminal court with 70,000 transgressions on his record!²

5. In the same section, under point “a. In Our Natures We Totally Lack Spiritual Good Before God,” page 497, Grudem notes that “every part of our being is affected by sin – our intellects, our emotions and desires, our hearts (the center of our desires and decision-making processes), our goals and motives, and even our physical bodies.” The identification of the heart as the seat of desires and decisions is a core tenet of biblical counseling as opposed to secular psychology. Edward Welch, in *Blame It on the Brain?*, has postulated that “the brain cannot make us sin,”³ because (as the Lord Jesus has taught) “the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders” (Matthew 15:18-19).

² D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, revised 1977), p. 30.

³ Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), pp. 49f.

6. Also on page 497, Grudem highlights another pillar of biblical counseling when he states that “unbelievers are in a state of bondage or enslavement to sin, because ‘everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin’ (John 8:34).” Biblical counselors are trained to use terms like “addict” and “addicted” sparingly when describing major struggles with sin. These terms are employed liberally by psychologists to explain the seemingly inescapable nature of certain unacceptable behaviors: drunkenness, compulsive gambling, sexual promiscuity, uncontrollable urges to steal, etc. Labeling such behaviors as “addictions” often leads to the conclusion that the behaviors are the result of a medical condition and therefore leave the patient absolved of culpability for his/her actions. The biblical counselor, by contrast, uses terms like “slave,” “bondage,” “chains,” and “prisoner” to describe the condition of a person struggling with “besetting” or “entangling” sins (Hebrews 12:1).⁴ Again, the focus is not on the influence of the brain but rather the heart as the source of behaviors which are clearly regarded as sin.
7. In the section titled “D. Actual Sins in Our Lives,” (beginning on page 498), Grudem develops the question, “Are Infants Guilty Before They Commit Actual Sins?” The author wrestles with a very difficult and often emotionally-charged issue, and he does so with a thorough exploration of pertinent Scripture texts; yet he stops short of convincing answers.
8. In his segment called “Are There Degrees of Sin?” Grudem deftly handles the Roman Catholic heresy of “venial” vs. “mortal” sins. Yet on page 504, when criticizing those in the church who say, “We are all guilty of sin, so we have no business meddling in anyone else’s life,” he neglects the opportunity to refer to Matthew 7:1-5 and the full-bodied application of the “judge not” passage.
9. “5. What Happens When a Christian Sins?” includes a paragraph on page 505 that begins, “When we sin as Christians...” This paragraph raises an often-neglected point: the damaging effect of sin upon the Christian’s fruitfulness in ministry. Too often this instructor has had to point out this principle to a Christian leader who is struggling with a scandalous sin issue and yet refuses to step out of ministry and concentrate of rebuilding his/her personal walk with Christ.

It is not the intent of this instructor to critique every issue presented in Grudem’s chapter on sin. The comments above are meant to supplement the textbook with personal observations regarding the subject matter.

⁴ See also Grudem’s use of Romans 6:16 on page 505.

Recommended Reading

Boettner, Loraine. *Roman Catholicism*. Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974.

Kennedy, D. James. *Evangelism Explosion*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1977.

McClain, Alva J. *Bible Truths*. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1979.

Ryrie, Charles C. *Understanding Bible Doctrine*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1983.

Stott, John R. W. *Basic Christianity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971.

Welch, Edward T. *Blame It on the Brain?* Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998.

Wells, David F. *Revolution in Rome*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972.

Assignments for Next Segment (“The Doctrine of Salvation, Part One”)

1. Read Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, chapters 31-35.
2. Answer one or more of the “Questions for Personal Application” at the end of each chapter, and be prepared to share and discuss your answers in class. Or compose a question of your own (which relates to the subject matter in those chapters), research the topic, and be prepared to share your answer with the class.