

Sermon Given by

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“We rebel”

My text for today is a verse from just a little further on in Romans 3: verse 23 ***‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’***. And I think it was more or less the very first verse of the Bible I was pointed to as a newly converted Christian aged 16 by a teacher at school – and it was the first verse I learned off by heart.

It is one of the foundational truths of the Christian message – although naturally one which doesn’t appeal to us. So let’s pray together for God’s help as we consider what the Bible says on this important topic.

Lord we pray that you would open our eyes to the teaching of your word this morning. Show us afresh ourselves – and show us afresh our Saviour. We pray it for Jesus’ sake.

We began a new series last week looking at six foundational building blocks of the Christian message. We started by considering Creation – and in the Week of Prayer for Christian unity, perhaps it is worth acknowledging that the idea that God is the maker of heaven and earth is one that finds expression in all the Ancient creeds of the Christian Church.

Christians of all persuasions have always believed it – it isn’t the preserve of a narrow, eccentric minority sect of Christians; in fact if anyone doesn’t believe in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth, they forfeit the right to be considered Christian in any normal sense of the word.

But this week we move on to a doctrine that is only mentioned obliquely in the creeds; the universal sinfulness of the human race. When we planned the series, we wanted to help answer the question ‘What do we mean by the doctrinal position called evangelicalism?’ Because these labels are a bit of a mystery to many.

And human sin and rebellion is a doctrine which is given prominence by evangelicals. It is plainly taught in the Bible – so it should be widely acknowledged; but such is the influence of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s thinking for the last 250 years – the thinking that deep down human nature is basically good – that many people, including professing Christians, don’t give it the high importance that the Bible does. So it has become one of the distinctive marks of evangelical, gospel Christianity. In many churches this note is rarely heard, indeed it is almost silent.

We need to go back to the early pages of the Bible for the seed-bed of this teaching – so let’s turn to Genesis 3 verse 4-5 for my first heading this morning: **The essence of Sin.**

4 "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. 5 "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

At the end of Genesis 2 – all was lovely in the garden: man and woman in open friendship with each other and together with God. At the start of Genesis 4 there's the record of the first murder. What has happened in between? Well, just picture the scene...

The woman is out having a pleasant stroll – taking in the sights, breathing in the smells. She notices the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the very moment when Smoothy the serpent sidles up in his sunglasses: 'Hi'. 'Hello', she says. 'Isn't it all great?' he says, 'But have you ever tasted the fruit of this tree?' 'No way', says Eve. 'Why ever not?' he asks. 'We're not allowed.' 'Go on with you,' he says, 'and you look such a grown up girl as well.' 'No', she says, 'if we touch it we'll die'.

And the garden rings out with his laughter. 'You can't be serious, Eve – let me tell you what will happen if you eat this: you'll be like God! Not bad, eh? Able to make up the rules and live as you please. Of course he told you not to eat it, the rotten spoilsport. But if you eat this fruit, you can decide what's good and evil; you make the choices about what's right and wrong for yourself – you'll be like God.' And she just can't get the words out of her head: 'I'll be like God; I'll be like God; I'll be like God.'

That is the attitude which is the essence of sin. At it's heart it is driven by a desire to be God. Which is actually stupid – because the man and the woman were already like God – in his image. They had full authority in the garden, except in one area. There was that one tree in the middle of the garden from which they couldn't eat – an unmistakable reminder that God was to be central and that they ruled under him. He knows good and evil, in the sense that he decides what goes.

This of course is why, if you remember how that first temptation went, Satan began by discrediting God's word: 'Did God really say: don't eat from the trees in the garden?' What a temptation – because it is so flattering to imagine that God's word is subject to our judgement. Don't you think we like that idea of having casting vote on what God has or hasn't said? But how can we possibly sit in judgment on God's word like that. You would have to be **God** to do that.

And that is the temptation – the essence of sin – not so much to be a law-breaker, as to be the Law maker: to refuse to allow the God who made me and the God who owns me the option of legislating in his world – to decide myself.

So sin is first and foremost a relational thing: it speaks of a relationship of rebellion against God, rejecting his right to run our lives: it is to do with our attitude, before it concerns our actions.

This is vital to remember when we are dealing with the typical morally respectable British Middle Class. Most people when we use the word 'sinner' think we're speaking about psychopathic child-killers or power-crazed terrorists or dictators. And measured against that

standard most people compare pretty favourably. But humanity's problem is not so much that we do wrong things. It is that we ever have a heart to do them.

Even if just in one area I reject God's rule in my life, still it means that by reserving the right to decide how I will act in that area, at heart I am a rebel: even if I choose to stay within his standards at every other point.

That's **the essence of sin**.

Let's move on to a second aspect of the Bible's teaching on this point: **the extent of sin**.

Let's turn to Psalm 14 and the first three verses¹ ***The fool ^[a] says in his heart,***

"There is no God."

***They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
there is no one who does good.***

² ***The LORD looks down from heaven
on the sons of men
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.***

³ ***All have turned aside,
they have together become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.***

Verse 1 begins with a recap of our first heading. The essence of sin is, like a fool, to say: 'There is no God'. So we can replace him: I'm in charge. The other verses I read from Psalm 14 spell that out in two ways. So I have two sub-headings.

i) **the extent of sin – through the whole human race.**

You can hardly miss it in those verses: verse 1 says 'there is no one who does good'; verse 3 says:

***All have turned aside,
they have together become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.***

This is the universal condition of the human race.

I wonder if you know statistically what the most dangerous sport known to man is. Not sky-diving or scuba diving, it's bowls. Apparently, there are more fatalities playing bowls than any other game!

There are lots of different ways of playing the game: in France, there's a flamboyant flick of the wrist, with Gallic flair, and the ball takes an aerial route. In England it's a matter of rolling the bowls along the ground and each one is weighted with a bias, so it will not roll straight.

Human nature is like that: in each of us there is a bias, a tendency to deviate from the straight path of God's way. The Bible says that when Adam fell, we **all** fell in him at the same time – that's in Romans 5:12. We became sinners and hence we all inherit a sinful nature – with the result in Psalm 14 verse 3 that **'all have turned aside'**. So in the human race not all suffer from colds, or cancer or cardiac scelerosis – but all have the sin disease. It is the one thing we can know about everyone we meet with absolute certainty. Sin spreads through the whole human race.

ii) **the extent of sin – through the whole personality.**

And Psalm 14 is absolutely clear on this: sin affects **our deeds**, for a start. So verse 1 says **their deeds are vile**. It stands to reason that if the root principle of our lives is rebellion against God, then as surely as night follows day, the fruit in our lives is disobedience: vile deeds follow.

So the Bible's logic is not what we might imagine. It does not say that we're sinners because we sin. No: according to the Bible, we sin, because we're sinners. Which is exactly what Jesus said: **²¹For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²²greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. (Mark 7:21-2)**

That list is like the filth at the bottom of a well: they are the foul things which bubble up occasionally from the hidden depths of our hearts. They are the deeds breaking the surface, and the smell when they do so is none too pleasant: to a holy God, our **deeds** are vile.

Psalm 14 also makes clear that sin affects **our aspirations**: twice in the opening verses he says – there is no-one who does good. So sin affects us not only in our active pursuit of evil, but also in our failure to do the good we should do. Not just the sins we commit, but the good things we omit to do – we fail to live up to our aspirations. And according to James 4:17 **anyone who knows the good they ought to do but fails to do it, sins**.

This of course is the great antidote to Pharisaic legalism – because we may be able to say 'I've not murdered'; 'I've not committed adultery' and so on. But how about measuring ourselves positively by this standard: 'Have I positively done the good I ought to have done?'

A great preacher at the turn of last century, Torrey, understood this well. On one occasion he was introduced to someone who wanted to be a church leader. "He was", says Torrey, "a splendid looking fellow".

"When he came to me, I said: 'You want to be a church leader: are you a Christian?' 'Why of course I am – I was brought up a Christian and I'm not going back on the training of my parents.' 'Have you been born again?' 'What?' 'Jesus says except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.' 'Well', he said, 'I never heard that before.' 'Did you know that you had committed the greatest sin a man can commit?' 'No I never did!' 'What do you think it is?' 'Murder.' 'You are greatly mistaken! Let's see what God says. And he turned to Matthew 22:37-8 and read: **'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.'** 'Which commandment is it?' I asked. 'The first and greatest'.

“Have you kept it? Have you loved the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind? Have you put him first in everything – in business, in pleasure, in social life, in politics?’ ‘No, sir, I have not.’ ‘What have you done then?’ ‘I have broken this commandment.’ ‘Which commandment is it?’ The first and greatest.’ ‘What have you done then?’ ‘I have broken the first and greatest of God’s commandments. I have committed the greatest sin a man can commit, but I never saw it before.”

And all of us are the same – we don’t do the good we ought – sin spreads through our personality and blights our aspirations.

And lastly under this heading – sin affects our minds as well. Did you see that in Psalm 14 verse 2: ***‘The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand’*** and are there? No: ***‘all have turned aside’***

So the minds that control our lives are skewed by sin – which means that intellectually we will always have a tendency to reject the truth.

That is true of the unbeliever as they marshal their reasons against becoming a Christian; but it’s also true of the Christian. Romans 12 verse 2 says that the continued ongoing renewal of our minds has to happen to us as Christians, because of sin’s legacy. So our minds, left to themselves, without the continual influence of Scripture, will be the reason any of us here will drift from Biblical Christianity over the years. Simply because sin means we have a vested interest in refusing to accept the truth.

Well it’s time for us to review the ground we have covered – and I want to include in that the truth we thought about last week as well. Last week we saw that God is the loving ruler of the world: he made the world and he made us as rulers of the world under him. But that that is not how things are now. And human sin is the reason why.

We all reject the Ruler God by trying to run life our own way without him – and that rebellion works its way through the whole human race and every aspect of our personality. We fail to rule ourselves or society or the world.

It raises the question: what will God do about this rebellion? It is much more serious than we can ever imagine and God takes it seriously to the extent that it must be dealt with.

We’ll consider next week one way of two that God can deal with sin – in hell when we die. But our communion now invites us to rest in the other way God responds to our sin: because for everyone who trusts in Jesus and follows him, the judgment they deserve was born by Christ at the cross.

That’s what we remember at communion: that he died so our sin, however black it is can be forgiven. And wonderfully that means that even though our sin is far worse than we can ever know; God’s love is greater than we can ever dare imagine.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)