

Mankind & Sin: *Diagnostic That Breeds Hope* Ephesians 2:1-3

"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins..."

Introduction: SIN. It's a word that everyone has heard, all have felt the effects of, some churches refuse to mention, and that most do not know what to do with. Some will categorize sin as admitting you are not perfect, but definitely not deserving of punishment or wrath. Sin is like getting a parking or speeding ticket: we know its kind of wrong, but *if* we get caught, we'll simply pay the fine (or fight it in court) and move on. Others will fight to *downplay* sin as negative thinking that should be avoided, since people already feel bad enough about themselves. Still others will think of sin as *bad symptoms* of something wrong in our life: *guilt, emptiness, purposelessness, and meaninglessness* are sins of low self esteem or being victims of environmental circumstances.

In a survey that highlighted how Americans view their sin taken in 2017¹, about 2/3 of those surveyed would say they were sinners at some level, and only 5% would be ok with how they were currently, with the majority saying they would like to amend their ways. What is not surprising at all is that though a **majority admitted everyone sins a little**, they simultaneously believed that most people are good by nature (some are bad eggs, but that is a small sample for sure). This is what we call the "Princess Bride" theology of sin (also called Semi-Pelagianism), where people are NOT born sinful but are good by nature, or even if they are sinful, they are slightly alive!

Our current culture has found a way to try to deal with the effects of sin, and it is as **inconsistent** as it is **hopeless**. In today's so called "Cancel Culture", what you said, did, or posted in the past that could have been acceptable then, but is NOT acceptable now, must be cancelled. There is no room for disagreement or differing ideas, but if you do something now or DID something in the past that does NOT line up with cultural sentiment in the present, it means you must be **completely rejected, shamed, and have your reputation destroyed**. **Cancel culture** hangs on to the sin and gets rid of the person, leaving no room for compassion, mercy, grace, forgiveness, or restoration. This is merely a **symptom** of a godless attempt to deal with sin, by focusing on OTHERS wrongs and viewing self through the lens of victimhood. Again, sin is admitted but only in others, is so offensive it must be cancelled, and the loudest voice plays judge and jury. This is not only false, it is a scheme and ploy of Satan to keep people afraid and unable to actually deal with the very real issue of sin itself.

In a day where we are scrambling for diagnoses, we must make sure we have a proper diagnosis of our own sin, where it comes from, how it limits us, and where hope truly comes. In order to treat any disease or malady and assign the right medication, we must know what we are dealing with. I remember when Erin went in the ER for her stroke, they had to determine whether it was a clot or a bleed, since the medication would either bust the clot and help her live or speed up her blood and cause her to bleed out. Proper diagnosis is everything, so that life giving treatment can be applied.

Sin: The Plight of All Mankind

As we look at one of the clearest passages we have on the issue of sin and its effects, we note the clarity we gain.

¹ bpnews.net, "Survey highlights: Americans view of Sin", August 15, 2017.

*"And you were **dead** in your **trespasses and sins** in which you once walked, **following the course** of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience --- among whom we all once lived in the passions of the flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were **by nature children of wrath**, like the **rest of mankind**."*

Ephesians 2:1-3

There are a few observations to make here:

1. Sin breeds or produces death - Romans 6:23 tells us that the wages we receive from sin is death, but here death is a state of being. We know that God created Adam and Eve perfectly, enjoying uninterrupted union with God, intimate relationship, and unhindered fellowship because sin was no present. However, after Adam refused to stop the deception of his wife (Genesis 3:1-6), and he himself ate from fruit of the forbidden tree, mankind was plunged into death, both **physical and spiritual** (Genesis 3:18-24), as they would now return to the dust of the earth and were ushered out of the Garden, no longer enjoying a face to face relationship with God. We are all **born into sin**, since we are all offspring of Adam (Rom. 5:12), and thus all are born still-born spiritually, which means we are alive in the body but void of spiritual life and unresponsive to the person and will of God. We are part of the **walking dead, zombie-like** in our existence.

2. Sin makes us unable to respond to God

We often illustrate this death when we talk to young people by bringing in a dead fish and ask questions about what that fish, which has been gutted and put on ice, can and cannot do. It is quickly realized that the fish does not have a mind or will of his own, and if thrown into a river or stream would be at the mercy of the current that carried it. It could not swim against the current, could not course correct, but would simply end where the river took it. That is the nature of those who are not **born again**. Before we are able to acknowledge Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3), we were carried along by the course of the worldly culture where we lived. That is why people are swayed by what they hear or how they were educated and indoctrinated. **Satan** has real, though delegated, authority and power over the world, and he is at work to produce **systems and philosophies to bind people** in their own mind, appealing to the **passions of their flesh and desires of their mind and body**.

3. Sin places us under God's wrath

Sin means to "miss the mark", or error, an act of offense against God and His Law. Sin not only breaks God's law, it is an act of **rebellion and insubordination against Him**. As soon as Adam and Eve left the Garden, we begin to see culture set up that continually moved away from God. Anger, murder (Gen. 4:8), cities, poetry and music tainted by sin (Gen. 4:22-23), and vengeance were all hallmarks of the sinfulness of mankind playing out on his own. In fact, as generations multiplied, mankind did not get better but **progressively worse** with no self-correct, to the point that **"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually** (Gen. 6:5). This prompted Him to regret what He had made, and to do the unthinkable in our minds: *destroy the entire world with a flood, killing all of mankind BECAUSE OF THE PREVAILINGNESS OF THEIR SIN!* This is harsh, yet there was hope, since it was **Noah** that found grace in the eyes of the Lord, and through whom God saved he and his family along with mankind as a whole through the building of an Ark. But each time we see a **rainbow**, we are reminded of His promise of no longer sending a worldwide flood, but also that God is serious about exacting wrath for the sin of mankind.

4. Sin is pervasive and affects ALL people, Everywhere, for all time -

Sin does not leave anyone out, but is the reality for all people. In a sense, it is what unites us all together, regardless of ethnicity, geography, history, economics, language, or culture. The church at Ephesus was in no better shape than the rest of the world, except for the grace given to them by God through Jesus. Sin effects everything, from our culture, thinking, desires, and perception of truth.

Now, with all of this, lets dig in a bit more to some questions that naturally come out, and see how the Bible addresses and answers them:

What about the moral atheist, or moral practicing atheist, who is a good person but does not believe in God and sin the way the Bible describes?

- **There are no real atheists, since all people know there is a God and have a knowledge of the law** - Romans 1:21-32 lays out the case that everyone knows there is a God, they can see His power and attributes in Creation, have REJECTED Him, and are thus without excuse
- **The problem the moralist or practical atheist has in NOT Intellectual but moral** - Psalm 14:1-3 (and Psalm 53:1-6) state, *"The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God'. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who do good, not even one."* The problem people have with God is not that they cannot get their minds around Him, but that He demands new commitments to a new Master, and our hearts are corrupted and desire to do evil, or that which He does NOT want. Whenever I've discussed the gospel with someone at a philosophical level, a person wants to keep it there because they do not want to talk about their own morality because then the discussion gets personal and the issue of sin gets real.
- **There can be no moralistic righteousness since man is born unrighteous** - Romans 3:10-12 says, *"as it is written: None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."* Anyone who would point to the good that they do or have done falls short of the standard God has set. By nature, by birth, we are rebels, moving away from God and seeking our own satisfaction apart from Him.
- **Moralistic (practical) Atheism is the flavor of the day** - Both at an individual and corporate level, most in our culture believe they are good, are responsible to themselves first and God second (or third, or fourth, if at all). We see this as people look to government, or overthrow of power, or gaining control over narrative as ways to fix and solve the angst of their soul. Understanding this allows us to have compassion, love, and the impetus to help those living this way see the pathway to true righteousness, through Jesus Christ alone.

What does it mean that we are "born into sin"?

There is a theological term called **total depravity**, or to say another way, **pervasive depravity**, means that sin has affected our entire person and being, our body, intellect, and even our will. We have highlighted what this means in Ephesians 2, but we should also look at what this **DOES NOT MEAN**:²

² Paul Washers book "The Gospel's Power and Message" was extremely helpful for this list, p. 116-117.

- **It does not mean the image of God in man was totally lost in the Fall** (Genesis 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7) - This means that mankind is still high in value, thus we should fight to preserve life and uphold virtues like marriage as ordained by God.
- **It does not mean man has no knowledge of the person or will of God** (Rom. 1:20) - In fact, mankind know enough about God to stand condemned, to hate Him, blame Him, and fight against Him.
- **It does not mean that man has NO conscience or that he is totally insensible to good and evil** (Rom. 2:15) - Because the Law is written on man's heart and he knows good and evil. People live up to the light they know, and if their conscience is not seared, they know that doing good leads to advantage, less guilt and shame, and is more helpful in life.
- **It does not mean that mankind is incapable of demonstrating virtue** (2 Tim. 3:2-4) - Whole religions are based on being good, and many in this world has demonstrated valor, selflessness, and heroism who did NOT believe in God nor were reconciled through Jesus Christ. The issue is that this virtue is either out of self-love or love for others, not out of a love for God. I've often wondered how an unsaved married couple could live a lifetime together without Jesus and the Spirit's guidance, and the answer is there IS love, but not a love for God.
- **It does not mean all are as immoral as they could be, or are all equally immoral, or that all men indulge in every form of evil that exists** - (Rom. 7:23-34) This is really important. We are ALL capable of many sins and depths of depraved behavior that we would not want to talk about. However, though all stand condemned, all do not exercise the same level of sin. The moral neighbor who loves his wife and kids does not sin to the same depth as the dictator who orders the assassination of thousands. This is why we have such a hard time with how God judges in righteous justice, since we wish He'd grade on a curve. Yet, both stand condemned because of their sin.
- **It does not mean that mankind does not possess the resources to obey God** - God has given us a **will, intellect, and freedom to choose**. We are not robots but are free standing moral agents. Total depravity does not mean that man *cannot* submit himself to God because he *will not*, and *he will not because of his own hostility toward God*.

*"If man did not love or obey God because he lacked the mental faculties to do so or was somehow physically restrained, then it would be unfair for God to hold him accountable --- man WOULD be the victim. However, this is not the case with man. **His inability is moral and stems from his hostility toward God. Man is unable to love God because he hates God. He is unable to obey God because He disdains his commands. He is unable to please God because he does not hold the glory and good pleasure of God to be a worthy goal. Man is not the victim but a culprit. He cannot because he will not. His corruption and enmity toward God are so great that he would rather suffer eternal punishment than acknowledge God to be God and submit to His sovereignty. "***

Paul Washer

Finally, what is the limitation of sinful man, or "what can sinful man NOT do?"

1. We cannot **KNOW God** - (Romans 1:18-20)

2. We cannot **LOVE God** (Romans 1:20; 5:10)
3. We cannot **SEEK after God** (Romans 3:11; John 3:19-20)
4. We cannot **OBEY or PLEASE God** (Ephesians 2:4-5) "*We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like polluted garment (filthy rags). We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Isaiah 64:6)*
5. We cannot **REFORM ourselves** (Job 9:29-31; Jeremiah 2:22, 13:23) "*Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me,' declares the Lord.*" That is why **1 Corinthians 6:11 stands out!** God says we **were washed, were sanctified, were justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ! We could not do anything in ourselves to make ourselves righteous and thus acceptable to God, but had to have something done outside of ourselves TO ourselves.

Why is all of this so important?

1. We celebrate and worship knowing that we saved out of a desperate situation

2. We can be open about our sin since we know how deep the rabbit hole really goes. What do we say about "cancel culture"? They don't know how bad it really is. We are worse than we think we are, and deserving of wrath, but God in His great grace and love has saved us through Jesus Christ.

3. Evangelism is calling people from death to life, not simply to be better morally - This means that we cannot simply argue someone into life, or persuade them by our great argumentation. It must be an absolute, miraculous, Spirit filled, grace given transformation that only God can do. Only God can make the dead live, only God can breathe life into dead lungs.

"The good news is that the one and only God, who is holy, made us in his image to know him. But we sinned and cut ourselves off from him. In his great love, God became a man in Jesus, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, thus fulfilling the law himself and taking on himself the punishment for the sins of all those who would ever turn and trust him. He rose again from the dead, showing that God accepted Christ's sacrifice and that God's wrath against us had been exhausted. He now calls us to repent of our sins and to trust in Christ alone for forgiveness. If we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we are born again into new life, and eternal life with God."

For further reading:

Mark Devers book "**The Gospel and Personal Evangelism**" is a great, practical resource for your own life or small group, giving insight into the life of evangelism from a man who has to work at it just like the rest of us.

For further evaluation:

- Read through Ephesians 2:1-10 and Romans 3:10-12 - What do you observe about our sinfulness? What hope does God offer?
- Where do you see moralistic atheism in our culture?
- What is your response in worship to the reality that you were at one point dead in your sin?