

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. Last time we started to discuss sin, which is the most important aspect of human nature since the fall. We noted that there are three main components to the doctrine of sin: its cause, its nature and its definition. We then noted that even though the original creation was entirely good, Satan sinned and then successfully tempted Adam and Eve to sin as well. And we then stated the biblical doctrine of original sin; which is that Adam's sin caused him to have a sinful nature, and that everyone who is descended from him by the ordinary means of reproduction inherits this sinful nature.

Dr. Spencer, it is often argued that it is unfair of God to allow Adam's sin to affect anyone other than Adam himself. How would you respond to that charge?

Dr. Spencer: Well, there are a number of things that can be said in response to that charge. James Boice correctly claims in his *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, that "the fact that Adam was made a representative of the race is proof of God's grace."¹

Marc Roby: Now, how is that fact proof of God's grace?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first of all, Boice points out that Adam knew he was representing all of his descendants. And, as any father or mother knows, we are far more careful when the welfare of our children is at stake than we are if it is only our own welfare that is at stake. Boice says, "what could be better calculated to bring forth an exalted sense of responsibility and obedience in Adam than the knowledge that what he would do in regard to God's commandment would affect untold billions of his descendants."²

Marc Roby: That's a good point, although I don't know that Adam was thinking about "untold billions of his descendants." It seems far more likely that he would think about his own children. And even they weren't born yet.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, but Boice's point is still good. And it has also been pointed out by others that God had placed Adam in a perfect place, the Garden of Eden, and had bountifully provided for his every need. In other words, the circumstances under which Adam was called to obey were the best possible circumstances, those which were most conducive to his actually obeying. In addition, no great effort was required for him to obey since the command given to him was very simple and clear, he only had to refrain from eating the fruit of one tree. Everything else was available to him. This again illustrates God's grace.

Marc Roby: The circumstances were certainly arranged to make it as easy as possible for Adam to obey, which makes his rebellion all that much more terrible.

¹ James Boice, , *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 206

² Ibid, pp 206-207

Dr. Spencer: And I think we can reasonably conclude, based on the character of God, that Adam was the best possible representative we could have had. We shouldn't think that we would have done any better.

Marc Roby: I know I wouldn't want to make that claim.

Dr. Spencer: Nor would I, to do so would be to call God a liar since he says that his ways are perfect, which must include his choice for our representative. And Boice points out another important aspect relating to Adam's representative role. He says that "the representative nature of Adam's sin is an example of God's grace toward us, for it is on the basis of that representation that God is able to save us."³ And he then quotes from Romans 5:19 where Paul wrote that "just as through the disobedience of the one man [which, of course, refers to Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [which refers to Jesus Christ] the many will be made righteous."⁴

Marc Roby: That verse alone makes it pretty clear that God's relating to us through the mediation of a representative is, ultimately, very gracious. If it weren't for representation, there could be no salvation. If someone thinks it is unfair to be represented by Adam, then to be logically consistent, that person should also not want to be represented by Jesus Christ. But there is no salvation possible outside of Christ.

Dr. Spencer: And there is a lot more that could be said, but this is not properly part of the topic of anthropology, so I will defer further discussion along those lines to a later session. For now, let me just say one more thing about the cause of sin. Because Adam represented us, we share in his guilt and punishment. Part of that punishment consists in our being born with a sinful nature. The fact that Adam's sinful nature is passed on to all of his natural descendants explains the universal nature of sin. We all sin because we are, by nature, sinners.

Marc Roby: I have never met the person who is an exception to that rule.

Dr. Spencer: Nor have I, nor will either of us ever meet that person in this life because there are no exceptions among Adam's *natural* descendants. We are all sinners.

We do have a free will, meaning that we make real choices for which we can be justly held accountable. But as we discussed in Session 84, our will chooses according to our desires. And because we have a sinful nature, our desires are sinful. We may do things, and many people often do, that are in accordance with God's law and are, therefore, good. But unregenerate men never do anything from a heart that desires to obey and please God, so even their outwardly good deeds

³ Ibid, pg. 207

⁴ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

are sinful because, as we're told in Proverbs 16:2, "All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD."

Marc Roby: The idea that we all inherited a sinful nature from Adam is not something that many people will readily accept.

Dr. Spencer: I am well aware of that. But we are examining what the Bible teaches, which is truth, not what man will readily accept. And that completes what I wanted to say for now about the cause of sin.

Marc Roby: I do have one question on this topic that some of our listeners may be wondering about though.

Dr. Spencer: What question is that?

Marc Roby: How is the sinful nature transmitted from parents to children? Since sin has to do with moral choices, it is clearly caused by our spirit, not our physical body. But where does our spirit come from? In Zechariah 12:1 we read, "This is the word of the LORD concerning Israel. The LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him". But, if God gives each new person his or her spirit, and the spirit is sinful, doesn't that make God the author of sin?

Dr. Spencer: Well, this question is interesting, but I don't want to spend a lot of time on it since the Bible does not give us enough information to form a firm answer. I would agree with your statement that if God creates each new spirit that seems problematic since our spirits are sinful. But, Wayne Grudem, for example, disagrees. He says that "there does not seem to be any real theological difficulty in saying that God gives each child a human soul that has tendencies to sin that are similar to the tendencies found in the parents."⁵ Now I disagree with his logic, but I would not want to be dogmatic on the point.

In one sense of course God is the one who makes us. Not just our spirits, but our bodies as well. In Psalm 139:13 the psalmist is speaking to God and says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." I think this is speaking about the whole person, not just the spirit. But we all know how babies are made. In one sense God can be said to do it, but he uses a human mother and father as secondary agents.

Marc Roby: And so, Zechariah 12:1 doesn't necessarily imply that the spirit is somehow different from the body in that regard.

Dr. Spencer: I certainly don't see any reason to draw that conclusion. But with regard to the larger question, there have been great theologians on both sides of the debate. Some, like Calvin favored the idea that God created each spirit individually. That view is called creationism. Others, like Luther and Jonathan Edwards, favored the view that we inherit our spirit from our

⁵ Wayne Gudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 485

parents, which is called traducianism. And, while I think that traducianism is the most likely answer, I would never be dogmatic about this at all.

Marc Roby: Very well, let's not spend any more time on it then.

Dr. Spencer: Alright. Then let me continue with our outline of the doctrine of sin. The second component I mentioned is the nature of sin. And the biblical view is that man is totally depraved.

Marc Roby: And that terminology is, of course, easily misunderstood.

Dr. Spencer: Not only easily, but frequently misunderstood. So, let's be clear about what we mean and what we don't mean. To say that man is totally depraved does *not* mean that he is as bad as he can possibly be. Rather, total depravity means that there is no part of man that is unaffected by sin. Every part of our being is corrupted, so perhaps a better term would be pervasive depravity. But we are stuck with the existing term because it has been in use for so long that we really can't avoid it. The really important point is that we not think we have some faculty, whether it be our reason, our will or anything else, that is unaffected by sin. But I want to put off further discussion of total depravity until we have given our definition of sin.

Marc Roby: Which is the third component of the doctrine that you mentioned, so please go ahead.

Dr. Spencer: Let me start by quoting the answer to Question 14 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It says, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."

That answer mentions two kinds of sin. First, it said sin is "any want of conformity unto" the law of God. This is often called a sin of omission – simply meaning that we didn't do something we were obligated to do. Second, it mentions "transgression of" the law of God, which is often called a sin of commission – in other words, we do something that we are forbidden to do. In both cases, this definition makes it clear that it is the law of God that establishes what is and is not sin.

Marc Roby: And all sin can be seen, at its core, as being rebellion against God's rule.

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly right. At the end of the day, every sin, no matter how small, is a way of saying to God that you are independent and do not need to come under his rule.

Marc Roby: Very well. What about the laws that men make?

Dr. Spencer: We should almost always obey them. The laws of God are, of course, more important and trump the laws made by men, but so long as the laws made by God's delegated authorities are proper, it would be sin to violate them.

Paul tells us in Romans 13:1-2 that "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

Marc Roby: When you say those laws must be “proper”, do you mean they must be fully consistent with the Word of God? Or do you just mean that they must not directly contradict the word of God by commanding us to sin?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me first say that we absolutely must *not* obey any law of men that commands us to sin. In Acts Chapter Five we read about the apostles being arrested for preaching the gospel. They were put in jail overnight to await their appearing before the Jewish ruling council of elders, called the Sanhedrin. But, during the night, an angel of the Lord set them free and commanded them to go to the temple courts and preach the gospel. So, at daybreak, the apostles obeyed.

Marc Roby: Which, of course, didn't sit well with the Sanhedrin.

Dr. Spencer: No, it didn't sit well at all. The apostles were again arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. In Acts 5:28 we are told that the high priest said to them, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.”

Marc Roby: And, by this reference to “this man's blood” they were, of course, referring to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. In any event, we read the apostles' response in Acts 5:29, they said, “We must obey God rather than men!” This is a very simple concept, but potentially with very serious implications. We have spoken at length about God's delegated authorities in the state, church and home in Sessions 28-33. God expects us to respectfully obey all legitimate authorities. But if they tell us to sin, they are no longer exercising legitimate authority because God has not given any delegated authority the right to sin or to command others to sin. And it is also possible for them to overstep the bounds of their delegated authority, in which case we have the right, but certainly no obligation, to disobey. Now, obviously, refusing to obey authority, even if you do it respectfully, can be costly.

Marc Roby: It certainly can. If, for example, we think about a German soldier in World War II being commanded to help in one of the extermination camps, it is easy to see that failure to obey that order would most likely cost him his life.

Dr. Spencer: That is clearly a very extreme and unusual example, but nonetheless true. If you were ordered to kill innocent people that would be an order you would have to refuse even if it cost you your life. But there are much less-extreme examples that come up far more frequently and, I might add, also pose far more difficult questions.

Marc Roby: Can you give some examples?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. Consider being a medical doctor in our current society. Suppose you have a patient come in for an examination and you find that he has a medical problem directly caused by homosexual behavior. If you are a Christian doctor, you might feel obliged to explain to the man that his medical problem is caused by his sinful behavior and that the best thing for

him to do is to stop that behavior. But that would get you in a lot of trouble with most medical groups and might even cost you your job if you did it repeatedly.

Marc Roby: Yes, that could definitely be a very complex situation.

Dr. Spencer: And here is where I would have to say that each individual Christian has to decide for him or herself. As far as I can see, it would not be a clear sin to just treat the person and say nothing. Or, perhaps, you could just explain how the particular behavior caused the problem and suggest that he change his behavior without making any statements about it being sin.

Marc Roby: Yes, doctors certainly tell people, for example, that they would be better off if they stopped smoking, or lost weight, or got more exercise.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they do that all the time. But those behaviors aren't as politically charged in our society and unless the doctor came across as insufferably condescending or judgmental it's hard to imagine such advice causing any trouble. In any event, I think each Christian has to make decisions about these difficult questions on his own. They can, and should, get counsel, if possible, from their elders to help them make a decision that honors God.

Marc Roby: And that brings us right back to the idea that it is God to whom we are ultimately accountable.

Dr. Spencer: That is the most important point. God is the one who defines sin, not man. He has delegated to the state, the church and the family the authority to make other laws and rules as necessary to regulate the orderly functioning of the state, church and home, and Christians are obligated to obey those man-made laws almost always. And those laws can change. Different countries, states, churches and homes have different laws and rules, but they can still all be proper and binding on Christians.

Marc Roby: And such delegated authority, unless abused, is beneficial to mankind in general and to God's church in particular.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, it certainly is. Christians would not be free to worship, live their lives for God's glory and tell others about Christ if they lived in the midst of anarchy. The orderly operation of the state, church and home are absolutely necessary.

Marc Roby: And if we go back to the apostles again, who lived under Roman rule, we have an example of Christians living under a government that was, at times, very hostile to them.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, extremely hostile at times. And yet, in Romans 13:5 Paul said that "it is necessary to submit to the authorities" and, in Verse 7, he specifically told us to pay taxes, which were extremely unpopular at the time, Israel was under foreign rule.

Marc Roby: I think taxes are unpopular anytime, anywhere! And we could note that Paul was in agreement with Jesus on that point. Jesus also famously told the people to "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" in Matthew 12:21.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. We are to keep the order straight. God is the supreme ruler. But we must obey all delegated authorities unless doing so requires us to disobey God. If we disobey an

earthly authority, the worst thing that can happen to us that we can be killed. But Jesus told us, in Matthew 10:28, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Marc Roby: Well, we are out of time, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, and we'll respond as best we can.