5The Effects of Sin

**Are We Sinners By Birth Or By Practice?**

Rom. 13:12b-14

Introduction:

1. Are we sinners by birth or are we sinners by practice? Are we able to turn away from sin or are we unable?

2. Men have answered these questions in a variety of ways. While our primary interest is in what the Bible says, it is good for us to survey what men have thought. In some ways their thinking mirrors our thinking. We see questions that have been raised in our minds that were also raised in theirs.

3. We may or may not agree with their conclusions, but we understand something of the difficulty of understanding the meaning of the biblical text.

4. In this study we will survey some more of the history. Look explicitly at what the text of Scripture actually says and try to draw some reasonable conclusions without going beyond what the textual evidence actually demands.

Discussion:

I. Already in our study we have briefly reviewed the issue as expressed in the Pelagian/Augustinian controversy that occurred around A.D. 400. Jacob Arminius and John Calvin popularized the issue during the Reformation.

A. Those known as “the church fathers,” those living just after the days of the apostles

(A.D. 100ff) and whose lives in some way touched the lives of the apostles, believed

in free-will.

1. “Free-will” is not a term used in Scripture, but it describes the idea that people

have the “free-will” to choose to do evil or to do good.

2. These “church fathers” views might be summarized as follows:

a. Rejection of free-will is a view of heretics.

b. Free-will was a gift given to man by God.

c. Man has free-will because he is made in the image of God and God has free-

will.

3. Augustine was a Manichean before he accepted Christianity.

a. The Manichean’s taught that man was powerless to overcome evil until

liberated from the flesh by death.

b. They believed that the material world was under the dominion of evil and man

is powerless to overcome evil as long as he is held captive by the evil body.

c. You can see how Augustine was biased in his thinking and struggled to deal

with the powerfulness of evil.

d. It is a very real issue. Paul (and I struggle with it) struggled with it. Paul wrote:

“The good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not

want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one

doing it, but sin which dwells in me” (Rom. 7:19-20).

B. John Calvin (1509-1564) credited his theology to Augustine.

1. Calvin was a Frenchman associated first with Roman Catholicism.

2. He converted to the Reformed tradition in the late 1520’s or 1530’s.

3. Acted as a Reformer in Geneva, Switzerland.

4. Huldrych Zwingli began the Reformed tradition in 1519 in Zürich. So Calvin

was a member of the second generation of the Reformed tradition.

5. His teachings became known as Calvinism.

C. Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) was a Dutch theologian, also from the Protestant

Reformation period.

1. His views became the basis of Arminianism and the Dutch Remonstrant

movement.

2. A controversy began when Arminius was teaching on the Epistle of Romans in

1591. He taught that man did not have to live in bondage to sin. He was

labeled as teaching Pelagianism, but Arminius believed that man needed help

to do right and Pelagius believed that men could do right on his on.

3. Arminius believed that unregenerate man could feel conviction and desire

salvation. Over time he developed opinions on grace, predestination and free

will that were inconsistent with the Reformed doctrines of Calvin.

4. The Remonstrants, the followers of Arminius presented 5 points of

disagreement with Calvinism.

a. Predestination is conditional and not absolute.

b. Atonement is a universal intention.

c. Man cannot of himself exercise saving faith.

d. The grace of God is necessary to regeneration and awakening.

e. Believers are able to resist sin and are not beyond falling away.

5. The Calvinists responded with 5 points of their own.

a. Total depravity.

b. Unconditional election.

c. Limited atonement.

d. Irresistible grace.

e. Perseverance of saints.

D. The two extremes . . . and others . . .

Pelegius vs. Augustine

Arminius Calvin

Others dot the spectrum between the extremes. Ex. See Geisler, Systematic

Theology, p. 785-7866, charts identifying four major views including

“Moderate Calvinism.” Geisler identifies himself as a “moderate” Calvinist.

E. Arminius’ views are held by those in Wesleyan traditions, Methodism, Church of

England, General Baptists, Holiness, Charismatic, Pentecostal Movements.

“Mourners bench,” and “praying through” concepts come out of this

perspective.

F. Do you see what people are struggling with?

1. Are men able or unable?

a. If men are unable, it is unfair of God to call on us to do something

that we are unable to do. So, they have God act to enable them.

b. If men are able, this does not seem to take seriously the power that sin

has over us.

2. Are they partially able? If so, to what degree?

3. Pelagianism says you can obey God. Arminianism says you can cooperate

with God. Moderate Calvinism (Norman Geisler) says you can cooperate

with God (ex. Southern Baptists, Free-will Baptists). Strong Calvinism says

you can’t cooperate with God (ex. Reformed churches, Presbyterianism,

Primitive Baptists).

II. There is another area of concern in this discussion. Are we guilty because of Adam’s sin or because of our own sin?

A. Pelagianism says you are not guilty because of Adam’s sin; you are guilty because

of your own sin.

B. Arminianism says you are guilty by reason of your own sin as you participate with

Adam.

C. Moderate Calvinism says you are guilty by reason of Adam’s sin and your own.

D. Strong Calvinism says you are guilty by reason of Adam’s sin and your own.

E. Guilt is a legal and judicial term which implies criminal responsibility before the

court (Matt. 5:21-24).

1. Guilt involves a wrong relationship with God’s law.

2. Guilt and guilt feelings must be distinguished.

a. Guilt involves a legal standing.

b. One may feel guilty when he has violated the law or he may not. One may

feel guilty because he feels like he has violated the law when in fact he has

not.

c. Feelings are subjective. Guilt is objective.

3. So the question here is not about feelings but about whether one is punishable

as a violator of the law. Calvinism says you are guilty and punishable by death

for Adam’s sin. **Question:** Was Jesus guilty and punishable by death for

Adam’s sin? He is descended from Adam (Lk. 3:38).

F. One thing is for sure; we are accounted guilty because of our own sin.

1. James 2:10: “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he

has become guilty of all.”

2. Rom. 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.”

3. My sin has created a debt. Matt. 6:12: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have

forgiven our debtors.”

4. I realize that I cannot make up for my sin and also realize that I am held

responsible (Ezek. 18:4, 20; Jer. 17:10; Rom. 14:12). I am unworthy and

undeserving of life. I am helpless (Rom. 5:6).

5. If I am guilty for Adam’s sin there is nothing I can do about that. But for my

own sin I can be responsible. I may not be able to do everything right, but I can

try. I would like to think that I could accept it if God offered me the gift of life

(Rom. 6:23). I think this is what most believe, even if they are Calvinists. I think

this is what motivates people like Geisler to define a “moderate Calvinism.” He

wants to cut some slack for those who want to accept responsibility and who

want to do better. Even in our judicial courts we do not hold people guilty of

what they did not personally do. If we being evil know how to treat people fairly,

how much more the God of heaven treats people with fairness.

6. The passages that are used to support the idea that we are guilty for Adam’s sin

do not necessarily imply this. That’s why the controversy has continued. The

fact of the controversy for over 1600 years suggests that there is no conclusive

evidence of us being guilty for Adam’s sin. Yet, all are agreed that we are guilty

of our personal sin. This is the clear testimony of Scripture.

III. What the text of Scripture actually says reveals the powerfulness of sin over us. If Calvinism teaches us anything it teaches that sin has had, and still has, a powerful effect over us. With this the words of Scripture agree and it is a matter that all need to give serious attention.

A. God told Cain, who apparently had freedom to choose right or wrong, “If you do

well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is

crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen. 4:7).

1. “It’s desire is for you.” Cf. 1 Pet. 5:8: “The devil prowls around like a roaring

lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him . . .” Sin desires us and it will

consume us, but we must master it.

2. Sin is powerful. Do not underestimate it.

3. We can master it. Not by our own strength. God was trying to empower Cain.

The whole point of his sacrifice was God’s forgiveness. And God is counseling

him regarding sin.

4. God is not saying that Cain is unable. But neither is He discrediting the

powerfulness of sin.

B. God said of those of Noah’s day, “that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was

only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). But not everyone was like this, “Noah was a

righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). The earth

was corrupt and filled with violence (Gen. 6:11-12). But with God’s help Noah was

saved. Not because he was sinless. He offered sacrifices for his sins. He trusted

in God for forgiveness.

C. We are “sick” and “wounded” by sin (Isa. 1:5; Jer. 17:10).

D. We are “bad trees” and produce “bad fruit” (Matt. 7:15). We have “evil hearts”

(Matt. 12:34; 15:18-20; Lk. 6:43-45).

E. We are “give over to lusts and degrading passions to a depraved mind” (Rom. 1:24-

32; 2 Tim. 3:8).

F. Consciences become seared (1 Tim. 4:1-2). Evil men proceed from bad to worse

(2 Tim. 3:13).

G. We are darkened in understanding (Eph. 4:18).

H. Held captive by the devil to do his will (2 Tim. 2:26).

I. Enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:6, 16-20).

J. Helpless (Rom. 5:6).

K. We are marred by sin. Like Adam we are vulnerable to the sickness and not only

vulnerable all of us are infected. We are not so powerful that we can heal

ourselves.

L. God has acted by means of the cross to save us (Rom. 5:6-11, 12, 15, 18).

“The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus

our Lord” (Rom. 6:23), “to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

M. Let us not think then that we can overcome the powerfulness of sin on our own

strength. Let us not think that by some mere logical development of ideas that we

can overcome the powerfulness of the sin that so easily entangles us (Heb. 12:1).

N. Let us take seriously Eph. 6:10-17.

O. Without the grace of God; without the power of God to salvation; without Christ

the payment for our sin we are dead. We are sin sick and helpless, but not so

helpless that we can’t accept the gift of God. God gave His only begotten Son,

that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

Conclusion:

1. Are we sinners by birth or are we sinners by practice?

a. All are agreed that we are sinners by practice.

b. The Scriptures do not teach that we are guilty by birth.

2. Are we able to turn away from sin or are we unable?

a. Sin is very powerful. We are sick and wounded. Let us not underestimate this so

that we think we can extricate ourselves by our own power. Personally, I think we

are too dependent upon our own abilities and not nearly dependent enough on the

power of God. We think we don’t need much help. This is a reflection of our

“darkened understanding.”

b. We like to think of ourselves as better than we are. The more we recognize our

vulnerability the more we depend on the Lord; the more we recognize our weakness

the more consideration we give to His word; the more we recognize our sickness

the more thankful we are for the Great Physician who bore our sickness and carried

our pains, by whose scourging we are healed (Isa. 53:4-5).

3. Would you turn from your sin, in faith, and repentance, and be healed?