

Sin as Evil Disposition

by Charles Ewing Brown

Charles Ewing Brown preaches about the hindrances to social progress, using Plato's ideal state as an illustration of how human desires and sinful tendencies can corrupt even the noblest intentions. He emphasizes the inborn perversity of human nature as a challenge that has troubled dreamers of human welfare for centuries, pointing out that while science can pave the way for a utopian society, it cannot change the hearts of evil men who seek power for selfish gain. Brown urges listeners to consider the doctrine of inherited sin, exploring the concept of indwelling sin and the impact of Adam's fall on humanity's nature and propensity towards evil.

Description

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Transcript

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 thumbnailUrl: "" hasTranscript: true oneLinerSummary: "The sermon explores the concept of sin as an inherent evil disposition in humanity, tracing its origins from Adam's fall and its implications for society today." sermonType: "teaching" topics: - name: "Original Sin" slug: "original-sin" - name: "Human Nature" slug: "human-nature" bibleRefs: - text: "Genesis 6:5" bookId: "GEN" chapter: "6" verse: "5" - text: "Psalm 51:5" bookId: "PSA" chapter: "51" verse: "5" - text: "Ecclesiastes 7:29" bookId: "ECC" chapter: "7" verse: "29" - text: "Matthew 15:19" bookId: "MAT" chapter: "15" verse: "19" - text: "Romans 3:10" bookId: "ROM" chapter: "3" verse: "10" - text: "Romans 5:12" bookId: "ROM" chapter: "5" verse: "12" - text: "Romans 7:17" bookId: "ROM" chapter: "7" verse: "17" - text: "Romans 7:24" bookId: "ROM" chapter: "7" verse: "24" - text: "Ephesians 2:3" bookId: "EPH" chapter: "2" verse: "3" - text: "Ephesians 2:12" bookId: "EPH" chapter: "2" verse: "12" outline: - heading: "I" points: - "Introduction to the concept of sin as an evil disposition" - "Historical perspectives on sin from Plato to modern thinkers" - "The nature of human depravity and its implications" - heading: "II" points: - "The change made by Adam's fall" - "The loss of the moral image of God" - "Consequences of sin for humanity" - heading: "III" points: - "The teaching of the Apostle Paul on inherited sin" - "Distinction between consequence and penalty of sin" - "The necessity of

understanding human nature for reform" - heading: "IV" points: - "The role of science in addressing human depravity" - "The limitations of idealism without moral transformation" - "Call to action for personal and societal change" faq: - q: "What is the main argument of the sermon?" a: "The sermon argues that sin is an inherent evil disposition in human nature that has been passed down through generations since Adam's fall." - q: "How does the sermon relate Plato's ideas to Christian doctrine?" a: "The sermon uses Plato's views on human nature to illustrate the historical struggle with understanding human depravity and the challenges of achieving an ideal society." - q: "What does the sermon say about the consequences of Adam's sin?" a: "Adam's sin resulted in the loss of the moral image of God in humanity, leading to a pervasive tendency toward sin and separation from God." - q: "How does the sermon define inherited depravity?" a: "Inherited depravity is described as the tendency toward sin that is passed down from Adam, affecting all of humanity and leading to inevitable sinfulness." - q: "What is the significance of understanding human nature according to the sermon?" a: "Understanding human nature is crucial for effective social reform and for addressing the root causes of sin and evil in society." quotes: - "The evil passions and the sinful desires of men's hearts turn the dream of earthly Utopias into a nightmare of corrupt and vicious civilization." - "Evil is not merely a by-product of unfavorable circumstances. It is so widespread, so deep-seated that one can only conclude that what the religions have always taught is true." - "When human nature lost the image of God and power to live holy it became depraved and bent into crooked and abnormal forms." applicationPoints: - "Recognize the pervasive nature of sin in human behavior and society." - "Seek personal transformation through understanding and addressing one's own tendencies toward sin." - "Engage in community efforts aimed at moral and ethical reform based on a sound understanding of human nature." keywords: - "sin" - "evil disposition" - "human depravity" - "Adam's fall" - "inherited sin" - "moral image of God" - "consequence and penalty" - "social reform" ---

SOMETIMES HINDERS SOCIAL PROGRESS

Four hundred years before Christ, Plato, the greatest of Greek philosophers, dreamed of an ideal state of human happiness. There people would live in temperance and simplicity. This is the way he imagined them:

And when they are housed, they will work, in summer, commonly, stripped and barefoot, but in winter substantially clothed and shod. They will feed on barley meal and flour of wheat, baking and kneading them, making noble cakes and loaves; these they will serve up on a mat of reeds or on clean leaves, themselves reclining the while upon beds strewn with yew or myrtle. And they and their children will feast ... wearing garlands on their heads, and hymning the praises of the gods, in happy converse with one another. . . . But, said Glaucon, interposing, you have not given them a relish for their meals.

True, I replied, I had forgotten; of course they must have a relish -- salt, and olives, and cheese, and they will boil roots and herbs such as country people prepare; for a dessert we shall give them figs, and peas, and beans; and they will roast myrtle-berries and acorns at the fire.

And with such a diet they may be expected to live in peace and health to a good old age, and bequeath a similar life to their children after them.

Yes, Socrates, he said, and if you were providing for a city of pigs, how else would you feed the beasts?

But what would you have, Glaucon? I replied.

Why, he said, you should give them the ordinary conveniences of life. People who are to be comfortable are accustomed to lie on sofas, and dine off tables, and they should have sauces and sweets in the modern style.

Yes, I said, now I understand: the question which you would have me consider is, not only how a State, but how a luxurious State is created; and possibly there is no harm in this, for in such a State we shall be more likely to see how justice and injustice originate. In my opinion the true and healthy constitution of the State is the one which I have described. But if you wish also to see a State at fever-heat, I have no objection. For I suspect that many will not be satisfied with the simpler way of life. They will be for adding sofas, and tables, and other furniture; also dainties, and perfumes, and incense, and courtesans, and cakes, all these not of one sort only, but in every variety; we must go beyond the necessaries of which I was at first speaking, such as houses, and clothes, and shoes: the arts of the painter and the embroiderer will have to be set in motion, and gold and ivory and all sorts of materials must be procured.

True, he said.

Then we must enlarge our borders; for the original healthy State is no longer sufficient. Now will the city have to fill and swell with a multitude of callings which are not required by any natural want; such as the whole tribe of hunters and actors, of whom one large class have to do with forms and colors; another will be the votaries of music -- poets and their attendant train of rhapsodists, players, dancers, contractors; also makers of divers kinds of articles, including women's dresses. And we shall want more servants. Will not tutors be also in request, and nurses wet and dry, tirewomen and barbers, as well as confectioners and cooks; and swineherds, too, who were not needed and therefore had no place in the former edition of our State, but are needed now? They must not be forgotten: and there will be animals of many other kinds, if people eat them. [34]

Then Plato goes on to show how the natural passions and desires of men will multiply and grow. The country will become too small and then the neighbors' lands must be annexed, causing war. Thus one by one, Plato shows how men's desires grow up, and by their feverish demands for more than justice and temperance will admit, they tend constantly to cancel the plans of idealism. The evil passions and the sinful desires of men's hearts turn the dream of earthly Utopias into a nightmare of corrupt and vicious civilization, anarchy, and war.

We have not cited Plato's views because we agree with them in detail, by any means, but because they furnish an illustration of the fact that the inborn perversity of human nature has been an insoluble problem for those who have dreamed dreams of human welfare for the last 2,400 years.

Present-day idealistic dreamers base their plans for a bright future upon the present achievement and the promised development of science. It is true that science does point the way by which a race of good, just, and unselfish men could create an earthly paradise, but, unfortunately, science is not able to show how evil men can create such a desirable world; for when evil men obtain the secrets of power that will level the mountains and make the desert to bloom they use that power to seek to enslave their neighbors, and instead of leveling the mountains they level the fairest cities, and instead of making the desert bloom they destroy the culture and arts and the most precious blossoms of the civilization of mankind which have developed through a thousand years.

We sympathize with all the dreams of a better world. We long for that land of abundant comfort and beauty which science could provide, but we believe we are justified in directing attention to, and spending thought

upon, the problem of changing men so that their hearts will be prepared to work together in building a world of peace and justice.

This approach makes it necessary for us to study the nature of man's singular perversities. What is there about him that makes him fiercer than any living animal? Why does he tend to change love into lust, to cast himself down from honor to infamy, to substitute rapacity for justice? Why does he tend to pervert government to despotism and to desecrate high office by the foulest of graft and corruption? Why does he seek to divert the wealth of a state, which would make all of its citizens prosperous, to a demonic effort to enslave neighboring states and peoples? Why does man degrade and defile every high and beautiful instinct of human nature? Why does he defile his own family life with tobacco, liquor, profanity, hatred, jealousy, and marital infidelity? Why does he profane the church with hypocrisy and prostitute its holiest offices to greed? Why does he make the State an instrument of torture for millions of his fellows?

Why has man always acted so perversely? What hope have we that he will ever cease this manner of life? We believe that the historic Christian church has always had the answers to these questions. Some of its teachers may have on occasion gone to extremes in expounding the Christian doctrine of depravity, but in the heart of that doctrine there lies a truth so sound and incontrovertible that it deserves the careful study of people of our times.

INDWELLING SIN

Just as there is opposition to the Christian doctrine of individual and personal guilt and sin, so there is also even wider opposition to the accompanying Christian doctrine of sin as inherited depravity, or race sin. Bear in mind that the term sin as used here in such expressions as inherent sin" is used accommodatively to describe this corrupt and depraved nature as sin, because it comes originally from the act of sin in the beginning of the race and because it is characterized by an active tendency to sin. Paul used it in this connection and so did the Christian teachers of the ages.

It is a common observation of mankind that acts of sin tend to become habit, or disposition to sin, and this habit tends to form a certain, definite sinful character. This tendency toward sin, or personal depravity, is such a common experience of mankind that it needs no argument to prove it. The question now before us is whether such a tendency toward sin is capable of being transmitted by heredity. Is there such a thing as "race sin" or "inbred sin"? Here again we have the testimony of all the ages expressing the common belief of mankind that human nature has in it some hereditary element of depravity which tends to propagate itself anew in every social environment which man can devise.

Plato wrote: "But the point which I desire to note is that in all of us, even in good men, there is a lawless wild-beast nature, which peers out in sleep."

Many other citations from famous authors could be given. Even Kant (1804) -- whom the electrical genius Steinmetz pronounced the greatest metaphysician who ever lived -- was a believer in the doctrine of original sin, which he called "the radical evil" of human nature. Dr. C. E. M. Joad, of the University of London, formerly an atheist, in his book *God and Evil* says: "Evil is not merely a by-product of unfavorable circumstances. It is so widespread, so deep-seated that one can only conclude that what the religions have always taught is true and that evil is endemic in the heart of man."

Perhaps the modern psychologists have given the strongest scientific testimony to the correctness of the traditional doctrine of original depravity. Sigmund Freud and other profound researchers in this field have,

as they believe, uncovered a very nest of unclean and evil beasts in the subconscious mind of human nature, and it is a most fascinating study to follow them in tracing an evil tendency from the cellar of the human soul disguising itself as something good and beautiful in order to thrust its evil face into the daylight of the conscious mind.

This psychology has passed through the fires of criticism to a point which gives assurance that its major results will endure as permanent principles of a scientific estimate of human nature. Man is undoubtedly corrupt, judged from any elevated moral standpoint. His depravity, like breaches in the stone wall of an ancient castle, runs clear down to the foundations of his life.

A study of depravity is one of the most practical importance. An architect seeking to build a large structure must know the strength of his material; and if he learns that all of his steel beams are fractured in one way or another and he cannot get other material in their place, but must use them, then he must redesign the height, size, and form of his structure. Likewise all politicians, statesmen, social reformers, philanthropists, and lovers of mankind would do well to understand the strength of human nature as revealed by history, science, psychology, and the study of the Holy Scripture.

THE CHANGE MADE BY ADAM'S FALL

This teaching on depravity is best understood by a survey of the conditions of Adam's probation, his tragic fall, and the dismal heritage which he left to mankind. The Bible says that "God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions" (Eccles. 7:29). Paul says that "by one man sin entered into the world" (Rom. 5:12).

Everything in that early world, including man, was good (Gen. 1:31). Man lived in a world that knew no sin and he enjoyed dominion over all the lower animals and over all nature (Gen. 1:28). Moreover he enjoyed fellowship and communion with God.

The old-time theologians exalted the intellectual ability of Adam. He was, they said, of a giant mind, more able and mighty than any of his fallen descendants. The later theologians have scoffed at these views, regarding Adam as having been very low indeed in the scale of mental development. Adam's intelligence rating must have been a very high and worthy one, living as he did in perfect innocence and holiness and in the very fullness of the powers with which God created him. Moreover, there is no proof that he did not spend considerable time in this state.

The reason his state was so excellent was because he was made in the image and likeness of God: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1:26-27).

Of what did this image consist: "And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Col. 3:10).

Here the distinctive character of this image is the power to know. And surely in it does man far transcend the beasts. Again we read, "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and TRUE HOLINESS" (Eph. 4:24).

In these two texts we have the double character of the divine image. It was a reflection in finite form of the infinite character of God. In the first text the image is intellectual knowledge, as of a free and conscious spirit; and in the second text we see the moral nature of God as righteousness and true holiness. These

two phases of the divine image are sometimes called the natural and moral image of God. The moral image of God was one that man could and did lose, namely, righteousness and true holiness.

The natural image of God, the capacity for knowledge, by which man became a living soul and attained to human personality, was not destroyed; and it is that image, together with some faint traces of the moral character of God, which makes man capable of salvation. The natural image of God, even to this day, is man's possibility of surmounting his prejudices and passions and rising to a thought which in its broken and finite way is like the majestic thought of God. "I am thinking God's thoughts after Him," declared Kepler ecstatically as he worked out the motion of the planets by the methods of science.

Possessing the image of God, Adam had dominion over the animals, over nature, and over his own natural body so that his emotions, appetite, and instincts were all free from the disease of sin. He also had access to the tree of life. Undoubtedly Adam's body was naturally mortal to some extent, like that of the lower animals. Nevertheless, he lived in the spiritual atmosphere of eternity in such fellowship with God that surely his body would eventually have taken on immortality and enjoyed glorification just as the bodies of the saints will enjoy it at the resurrection. The tree of life was a symbol of this divine medicine of immortality.

This is the sense in which death came upon all men. As a result of sin, man was barred from access to the means of physical immortality. And this consequence of sin was made so sharp that the body was not able to partake of the full benefit of the atonement in its rescue from physical death until it had fulfilled its appointment to death. Paul said he was waiting for "the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body," in the glory of the resurrection (Rom. 8:23).

Some have regarded the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge as being a trivial ordinance. It is evident that this prohibition in itself did not fully describe the central law of holiness and mutual love between God and man. It was simply a positive command, reasonable in its purpose, easy to fulfill, and yet furnishing man a very mild and simple test at the beginning of his probation.

The simplicity of the provision may be regarded as being well adapted to the kindergarten stage of man's moral and spiritual education. Undoubtedly, if he had passed that test successfully he would have ascended step by step to loftier and more perilous heights in which, had he proved faithful, he would have advanced to nobler and more complex conflicts out of which, if faithful, he would have emerged a moral and spiritual giant -- a worthy son of God. And there is no doubt that he would have transmitted a fine character to his children.

That the natural image of God, meaning the spiritual nature of human personality, cannot be destroyed is the verdict of Scripture: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: FOR IN THE IMAGE OF GOD MADE HE MAN" (Gen. 9:6). In other words, even the fallen men who live after Adam retain the natural image of God and, consequently, a sacredness inheres in their personality. "Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made AFTER THE SIMILITUDE OF GOD" (James 3:9). It is the possession of this natural image of God which makes all doctrines of annihilation false and proves the immortality of the human spirit.

THE EFFECT OF THE FALL

When Adam received the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, he was warned that "in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." This death was primarily a death of separation

from God. In other words, the loss of the moral image of God befell Adam in the day that he ate the forbidden fruit.

It is also evident that the sentence included physical death. But Adam continued to live hundreds of years after that time, therefore we believe that immediate death was suspended on account of the universal grace coming to all men through the atonement of Christ, which instituted for Adam and for mankind another probation. The first probation was for Adam as the head of the natural human race. The second probation was under the second Adam, Christ.

However, part of the consequences of Adam's sin followed swiftly and tragically. He was excluded from the Garden of Eden and introduced into the toil and sorrow of the lower region of life. If, as we believe, the Scripture teaches the moral image of God was in righteousness and true holiness, then we must see that possession of that image implies a distinct desire and tendency to love and serve God. Just as it is natural for fish to swim in the sea, for birds to fly through the air, and for the wild fowl to move southward in the autumn, so it is an instinct of man's soul to reach out toward God in loving fellowship and humble obedience.

The loss of the image of God planted an opposite tendency in man's soul, and Adam transmitted that tendency to all mankind. After he lost the image of God, "Adam begat a son in his own likeness" (Gen. 5:3). That is, in the image of Adam, and not in the image of God.

THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

That a sinful nature was inherited by all men from Adam is the plain teaching of the Apostle Paul. Remembering that the word sin is here used in an accommodative sense as describing a tendency toward sin, and that death for innocent infants is not a penalty but a consequence of the sin of Adam, we follow Paul's argument: "Death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12). It came even over them "that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression" (5:14).

Thus we see that when man sinned he lost something essential out of his nature; he lost the image of God in the sense of moral likeness to God. This deprivation made it impossible for him to live a good and righteous life, just as the loss of one leg makes it impossible for a man to walk.

But this loss led also to depravation, just as the loss of teeth out of the jaw of a growing child makes the jawbone grow into an abnormal shape. When human nature lost the image of God and power to live holy it became depraved and bent into crooked and abnormal forms, contrary to the original intention of the Father.

This doctrine of inherited depravity does not contradict the justice of God and is not inconsistent with sound reasoning. Also, this inherited depravity does not in and of itself involve guilt. Infants are not guilty, but as they grow into adult life they invariably fall into sin through the depraved character of the nature which they inherit from Adam.

CONSEQUENCE AND PENALTY

Here it is necessary to show a distinction between consequence and penalty. Suppose a quarrelsome and contentious man should become involved in a brawl wherein he loses the use of one hand for life and for this brawl the judge sentences him to six months in jail. The sentence of the judge is the penalty for man's crime, but the lifelong disability of being a cripple is the consequence of his crime. The judge never

appointed the consequences and cannot remove them. On account of his being a lifelong cripple the man's children may suffer the disadvantages of poverty, ignorance, and much misery. This also is not a penalty for them, but a consequence of their father's sin.

The Apostle Paul shows that in the same way death is the consequence of Adam's sin. It passed upon all men even though individuals, i.e., infants among them, had not sinned the same sin as Adam himself had committed. However, the consequence of sin becomes a penalty in the child who accepts the transgression and the guilt as his own by an active choice upon reaching the age of accountability. By so doing he likewise accepts the penalty of sin.

Here it could be said that it is not just that an innocent child should suffer death as a consequence, whereas a wicked man suffers death as a penalty; but the child knows nothing of the misery and pain and fear of death which comes as a penalty to the adult sinner.

Paul compares the first Adam with Christ, who is the second Adam. "If through the sins of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offenses unto justification" (Rom. 5:15-16).

As is pointed out in *The Meaning of Salvation* (p. 122f), the justification of infants is conditional, just as their guilt is conditional: if, when they grow up, they accept the guilt of Adam's sin by participating in it, they become guilty and are participants in the guilt of race sin. If, on the contrary, they accept the justification in Christ, they may also receive that justification by faith in his atoning death. "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19).

"As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Cor. 15:22).

"The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit" (I Cor. 15:45).

"The sting of death is sin" means that although death is a consequence of Adam's sin upon all men, it is without sting except for those who have the conscious guilt of sin.

THE BIBLE TEACHES THE DOCTRINE OF INHERITED SIN

The Jews of Christ's time spoke truly when they told the blind man that he had been "altogether born in sins" (John 9:34), and it was Jesus who said "that which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6). Soon after man was expelled from the Garden of Eden "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart" (Gen. 6:5-6).

This does not mean that God repented as men do, but that since man had changed his attitude toward God, God automatically must change his attitude toward man. After the flood "the Lord said in his heart the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). David confessed: "I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). Christ taught that evil thoughts and a whole long catalogue of sins proceed out of the heart (Matt. 15:19). "Ye then, BEING EVIL, know how to give gifts unto your children" (Matt. 7:11), said Christ. In other words, he took it for granted that they were evil in their hearts. Paul said that "we have borne the image of the earthy" (I Cor. 15:49), meaning that we inherited the image of Adam. Christ told the Jews of his time, "Ye are from beneath; I am from above; ye

are of this world; I am not of this world" (John 8:23).

Christ was unique because of the fact that "in him is no sin" (I John 3:5). James calls this sinful nature lust: "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (Jas. 1:14-15). But for Paul it is "the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2); "sin that dwelleth in me; the law of sin" (7:17, 23). He also says that "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7) and that the heathen Ephesians before their conversion were "BY NATURE the children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). This does not mean that they were under the wrath of God as children; this is a Hebraism -- "children of wrath" means people under wrath.

Full proof that this sinful disposition is in children before they reach the age of accountability is given by Paul in these words: "I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came [that means when he became conscious of the commandments, SIN REVIVED, and I died" (Rom. 7:9). How could sin revive unless it was already in his heart in a latent form? This was the "SIN THAT DWELLETH IN ME" (Rom. 7:20), the "LAW IN MY MEMBERS, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to THE LAW OF SIN which is in my members" (Rom. 7:23). "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the BODY OF THIS DEATH?" (Rom. 7:24).

The body of death is the carnal mind, the inborn nature of sin. This fallen man is without God and without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12). Further proof of the sinful nature of all mankind is furnished by the sweeping statement of Paul in the quotation set down in the third chapter of Romans: "There is none righteous, no not one." And both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin, for, says John, "if we say we HAVE NO SIN, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." This undoubtedly refers to the inbred nature of sin and the sinful tendency which corrupts the lives of all mankind.

34 The Works of Plato, translated by B. Jowett, pp. 65-67

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