



## Reviewing the Basics

### (3) “What Does it Mean to be a Sinner?”

Romans 3:9-20

Romans 5:12-21

Ephesians 2:1-7

Rev. Jerry Hamstra  
Riverside ARP Church  
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So far in our series of sermons called “Reviewing the Basics” we have considered the fact that Jesus send his church into all the world with a message calling for repentance for the forgiveness of sins and we saw that that implies Jesus’ claim to authority over every human being in the world. Last week we considered the question “Why does God make such a big deal about sin?” In that sermon we looked at God’s command to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden and we saw that God makes it very clear that he is the one who makes the rules and human beings have been created to keep God’s rules or commands. We saw that failure to do so is rebellion against God and insisting on deciding for ourselves what is good and evil.

This evening we will consider the question, “What does it mean to be a sinner?” That question was partially answered in the last sermon, but the focus this evening will be different. In the last sermon I wanted to show something of how wrong it is to sin against God so we might understand why sin is such a big deal in the Bible and in Christianity. This evening we will focus on the predicament we are in because we are sinners. Adam and Eve sinned against God and we have sinned against God. What does that mean for us? The Bible is a message of salvation. What exactly are we saved from, if we are believers? You can’t understand or appreciate the message of salvation unless you

understand why we need to be saved in the first place. So, what does it mean to be a sinner?

Now the Bible uses the word “sinner” in a variety of ways. Quite often in the Old Testament it is used for people who are not even trying to please God as opposed to the righteous – people who are trying to please God. The righteous are never perfect, but they are sometimes contrasted with sinners. Also Jesus and the gospels use the word “sinners” and often they are referring to people who know that they are sinners as opposed to people who think they are righteous. My point is that the word “sinner” in the Bible does not always mean exactly the same thing.

But sometimes when the Bible uses the word “sinners”, it is referring to everyone without exception. In 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul, “that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” Here the word “sinners” is used to refer to everyone. And the Bible makes it very clear that we are all “sinners” in the sense that we all break God’s law. No one who has ever lived, except Jesus, is free from sin. We are all disobedient to God in one way or another. And this is the main point of the first passage that we read as our Scripture reading, Romans 3:9-20.

Here again verses 9-10, “What then? Are we Jews better off? No not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: None is righteous, no, not one;” The term “under sin” means “under the power of sin.” We will explore more fully what that means in a moment, but for now it is enough to see that Paul is claiming that every single person in the world is a sinner. There is not one person, except Jesus, who is without sin. Paul also quotes from the Old Testament where it says, “None is righteous, no not one.” The word “righteous” has to do with one’s standing before God’s law. Jesus was righteous because he perfectly kept God’s law, but no one else has ever done that. So the Bible is very insistent that every human being expect Jesus is a sinner – he or she has broken God’s law.

So one thing that being a sinner means is that we are guilty of breaking God’s law. We are all guilty before the law of God. And if we are guilty, we are liable to punishment. That idea is familiar enough to us. We have laws that are set in place by the government and if we break them we

are liable to whatever penalty is attached to the particular law that we have broken. Well the same applies to God's law. When we break God's law, we are guilty, and we deserve punishment.

However, the penalty for breaking God's law is much more severe and serious than the penalty of breaking a human law. We saw some of that last week, when we saw that the penalty that God attached to breaking his commands is death. We also saw why that penalty is so severe. It is because breaking God's law is rebellion against God. It is rejecting God's rule over us. It is insisting that we will decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. And so it is wanting to be gods ourselves in the sense of deciding for ourselves what is God's business to decide. Sinning against God is a very serious matter and so the penalty of sin is also a very serious matter.

Now some of the penalty of sin is experienced in this life because true life in biblical terms is living in a loving and obedient relationship with God. So we miss out on the fullness of life – life as it was meant to be lived – if we are living in sin. But the ultimate penalty is hell. Paul speaks of this in Romans 2:8-9 where he says, “[F]or those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil....”

Jesus spoke more about hell than any other person in the Bible. Jesus cared so much about people that he gave his life – he experienced hell himself – so that those who trust in him would not have to experience hell. And so we must understand that Jesus' frequent warnings about hell are motivated by love and concern. He is not being mean by speaking so much about hell. In Matthew 5:29 Jesus said, “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” In Matthew 10:28 he said, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” In many places he refers to the place of eternal punishment as “that place [where] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In many places Jesus refers to hell using the term “eternal

fire.” Jesus used all the power of language and imagery to convey the absolute horror of eternal punishment.

Paul also uses the strongest of language to speak of this in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 where he speaks of the day “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might....”

One of the aspects of the biblical answer to the question, “What does it mean to be a sinner?” is, to be guilty of breaking God’s law and it means to be deserving of the absolute horror of eternal punishment. And as we have seen, the Bible and particularly Jesus himself, speaks forcefully and graphically about the terrible reality of hell. One of the things that it means to be a sinner is that this is what we all deserve. And one of the things that salvation means is being saved from hell – being saved from eternal punishment.

People make fun of fire and brimstone preachers. That is very, very foolish. No doubt preachers have not always gotten the biblical emphasis right. It may be that some preachers have over-emphasized the dangers of hell. But I’m quite sure that more preachers have erred in not mentioning hell enough in their preaching. It is quite a prominent theme in the Bible. It is not hidden away in a few obscure texts. It is a vital and significant part of the message of the Bible. And these warnings are motivated by love and concern. Warnings are given so that the danger may be avoided. One of the reasons that the message of the Bible is so serious and so urgent is because eternal punishment is unspeakably awful – beyond words – and so utterly final. That is why John the Baptist warned people to “flee from the wrath to come...”

What does it mean to be a sinner? It means that we are guilty of breaking God’s law and it means that we are in danger of eternal suffering in hell after we die. These truths are utterly basic to the message of the Bible.

But there is more that must be addressed to give the biblical answer to the question, “What does it mean to be a sinner?” What we have covered so far has to do with our status before God. To be a sinner is to have the legal standing as guilty and the legal standing as deserving of eternal punishment. These are matters of status, of legal standing. But being a sinner according to the Bible also has to do with our nature. Being a sinner does not only have to do with our legal standing before God’s law, it also has to do with the kind of people we are. It describes what we are like. It has to do with our nature – what we are like. We are sinners. We are sinful.

This is a very important distinction. It is so very important because it helps us to understand what we need in order to be saved and it helps us to understand what is accomplished in salvation. Our status needs to be changed. In order to be saved our status needs to be changed from guilty to not guilty – from guilty to righteous. But we need more than a change in status before God’s law. The kind of people we are needs to be changed. Our nature needs to be changed. We need to be changed from people who are inclined towards evil to people who are inclined towards obedience. We need inner transformation so that we love different things. So it is not only our standing before God’s law that needs to be changed. WE need to be changed as well. And the first step in understanding that is to understand something of what it means that we have sinful natures – that we are sinners.

Now one of the ways that the Bible speaks of this is to teach that we are born spiritually dead. That ties this whole issue with the penalty for sin that God first announced to Adam in the garden of Eden. God told Adam that if he would eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he would die. And that is what happened. Adam died spiritually the moment he sinned against God. He became a sinner in his very nature. It was no longer natural for him to obey God. It was now natural for him to disobey God. And this is one of the meanings of death in the Bible. It is spiritual death. It is being dead to God. It means being twisted away from God rather than towards loving God and keeping his commands.

And one of the things that the Bible teaches is that we all inherit this deadness from Adam. We are all born dead in sin. We are all born with

sinful natures. We are all born sinners. The book of Genesis hints at this already when it speaks of Adam as a father. In Genesis 5:3, we read, “When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.” This verse means two things. It means that Adam’s offspring were still made in the image of God, but it also means that they were born with sinful natures like Adam.

Roman’s 5:12-21, which was our second Scripture reading, makes this connection unambiguously. Verse 12 says, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned....” “[D]eath spread to all men because all sinned.” Adam was our representative and when he sinned we were all caught up in that sin. The Reformed tradition has often expressed this by saying that we sinned in Adam. Adam was our representative when he sinned and so we are born dead in sin.

Verse 19 of Romans 5 says the same thing using slightly different language. “[B]y the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners....” What this means is that the whole human race is born with sinful natures. Adam has passed on his sinful nature to all his posterity. This is behind the language that David uses in his prayer of repentance recorded in Psalm 51. Psalm 51:5, David confesses, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” David is not saying that his parents were sinning in the love-making that resulted in his conception. He is saying that he was a sinner from the moment of his conception. He is saying that he had a sinful nature from the moment of his conception.

Now it is natural for us to protest at this point. Why am I born in sin because of Adam’s sin? It does not seem fair or just. But that is part of the nature of things. Children are inevitably affected by things that their parents do or fail to do. Our connections with our parents is such that they pass both good things and bad things on to us – whether that is genetically or as a result of their lives. This is just part of the way things are. And yet God insists that he is righteous and holy in all his ways. We can be sinned against by other people, but we are never sinned against by God. There is mystery here to be sure, but we can never accuse God of treating us unfairly.

And – it is the same kind of connection that God uses to save us. Romans 5:12-21 also teaches that by Christ's obedience believers are made righteous. The whole of verse 19 says, "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." It may not seem fair that we are born in sin, but we must trust in the goodness of God and these kind of questions always must be considered in the light of the lengths that God went to save us. He gave his own Son to death for us. Jesus gave his life for us. We do not have answers to many of the questions that we are inclined to ask, but we do have indisputable evidence of God's goodness and love. And that is the place where we find rest.

So, one of the things that being a sinner means is that we have sinful natures – that we are born spiritually dead. We will think a little more of what that means.

Ephesians 2:1-3 is an important passage on this subject. In those verses Paul is describing the Ephesians before they were saved and in so doing he is describing all of us before we are saved. This is what he says: "And you were dead in 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 our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

That is a very clear description of what it means to be dead in sin; what it means to have a sinful nature. We are "dead in trespasses and sins." If we are living for ourselves instead of living for God we are dead in trespasses and sins. If we are insisting on our own freedom in any area we are dead in trespasses and sins. To be a sinner is to be dead in trespasses and sins. And if that is true of us we are following the prince of the power of the air, which is the devil. We might be very nice people. But if we are deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong and not ordering our lives by the law of God, we are followers of the devil. People who are dead in trespasses and sins are ruled by their passions – they live in the passions of their flesh. Their desires rule them instead of God's will. What they want is more important to them than what God

wants. And such people are “children of wrath.” As we live our lives from day to day the wrath of God is upon us if we are not saved.

Now that is not very pretty. The biblical description of what it means to be a sinner is pretty awful. But it is true and so we must take it seriously. But as I have been saying, it is also necessary to understand and appreciate salvation and you see that clearly in this passage, Ephesians 2, which describes so vividly what it means to be spiritually dead for it also describes wonderfully one key aspect of salvation which is to bring us from spiritual death to spiritual life. We read of that in Ephesians 2:4-5. “But God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, make us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved....”

You see, the wonder of God’s love and the wonder of salvation is seen in the light of the awfulness of our sinfulness. That is part of the reason that it is so important to take the time to dwell on what the Bible says about our sinfulness. Of course, it is important to dwell on our sinfulness because the Bible has a lot to say about it and what it in the Bible is automatically of first importance because the Bible is God’s message to us. But the Bible highlights the contrast between how bad sin is and how bad we are because we are sinners with the wonder of God’s love for us. That is what we see in Ephesians 2:4-5. Right after telling us what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins, Paul speaks of God being rich in mercy and of the great love with which he loved us. That is amazing love because it is such a contrast with how awful our sin is and with what we deserve. We deserve hell. But in the gospel God comes to us with rich mercy and great love. That is wonderful news about a wonderful God.

This passage also contrasts the deadness in trespasses in sins that we are apart from salvation with the life that God gives to those he saves. The passage says that God “made us alive together with Christ.” We will look at that more closely in a later sermon, but for now notice God’s answer to the fact that we are dead in trespasses and sins. He makes us alive. We are raised from the dead just as Christ was raised from the dead. It means that the same life that brought Jesus from the dead



brings us from spiritual death and will eventually bring us from physical death as well.

This reflects wonderfully on God. Earlier in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul used the phrase, “to the praise of his glorious grace.” That kind of language comes from understanding how terrible sin is and how terrible it is to be a sinner and then in the light of that how unspeakably wonderful God is in his love for sinners and his marvelous grace in saving us from our sins. The true worship of God is born in understanding how awful and how desperate our situation is as sinners against God and how incredibly amazing God is in his grace and mercy towards us.

And of course Jesus is at the heart of salvation. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Jesus so loved his Father and sinners that he willingly suffered and died in our place. Paul in Romans 5:7-8 says, “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This is the amazing thing about God’s love. It is for such bad people. It is for such undeserving people. It is for sinners. You can’t really sing of God’s marvelous grace if you do not understand how terrible it is to be a sinner.

There is one more thought that follows from this and that is that that we are completely helpless as far as salvation is concerned. That means that God must make the first move. This follows from the fact that as sinners we are dead in trespasses and sins. We are dead. Dead people cannot make themselves alive. Dead people cannot contribute to being made alive. Being made alive is something that happens to us if it is going to happen at all. The language of Ephesians 2:4-5 is very clear. We were dead but God made us alive.

This part of salvation is not a cooperative effort. Once we have been made alive, there are things that we must do, but until we are made alive, we are just plain dead and dead people have nothing to do with making themselves alive. God does it. And he does it alone.

Now this does not mean that if we are unsaved we should not be seeking salvation. We usually do not know exactly when God makes us alive. We only come to know that by the signs of life such as an awareness of our need of salvation and a desire to be reconciled to God and so on. But the very important point to see here is that salvation is all about being saved – it is not about saving ourselves. God gets all the credit. We get none.

And certainly one of the fruits of being made alive by God is that we begin to embrace the perspective that we experience the greatest joy and satisfaction when we delight in giving glory to God instead of ourselves. Then our desire will be the same as John the Baptist when he said of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

That is life in biblical terms. We are truly alive when we come to see that it is not about us; it is about God and his glory. That is the abundant life that Jesus came to bring.