

Overcoming Original Sin

Some years ago, I had parked my car, and I was just about to leave it when I noticed a young man on the other side of the parking lot. It was apparent that he was just passing through, but suddenly, quite randomly, he kicked out, smashing a side mirror off the car he was passing. From the way he was walking, it did not seem that he had a reason to target this particular car. I was too distant from him to identify him, and he was long gone before I had a chance to confront him, but I did wonder what made him damage someone else's property without provocation.

Augustine lived 1600 years ago, and he tells the story that when he was young, he and a friend decided to steal some pears from a neighbour's orchard. They weren't hungry and they didn't eat the pears. They didn't even like that particular variety of pear, but that didn't stop them from stealing a significant quantity. Why did they do that?

Augustine, who became a Christian and a theologian, reflected on his actions and drew this conclusion: "I was foul to the core, yet I was pleased with my own condition and anxious to be pleasing in the eyes of men." In other words, Augustine discovered that he was a sinful human being and he often sinned for no other reason except, perhaps, to impress others. It was from this reflection that Augustine articulated the doctrine of Original Sin. Original sin is defined as the tendency to sin, a tendency that we inherit from Adam. In other words, we are oriented toward sin from our very conception onward.

This idea does not play well with people when they look at little babies. We might hear someone say, "Look at how innocent she is," when watching their daughter or granddaughter as she sleeps. Little infants do look quite innocent, and it seems offensive to think that that beautiful little child is inherently sinful. But if babies were inherently innocent and did not have the propensity toward sin, then why can they become so difficult after they have celebrated their second birthday? ("The terrible twos" is an oft-used expression, and for good reason.) Do parents teach their innocent children to be rebellious and disobedient? I haven't met a parent who would admit it. Or maybe their sweet, innocent children learn it from other children, perhaps in the nursery at church? To say that would be to say that other parents taught their children to be sinful, and that would be a false accusation. Even if we could completely protect our children from negative outside influence, they still adopt sinful behaviour.

Of course, not all of us have stolen pears from an orchard or dropped kick a mirror off a random car, but we all do things that are wrong, and we do them for no good reason except that we feel like it, or, even worse, because our peers encourage us to. It may be that we do not really understand why we did what we did, but we did it anyway.

The concept of original sin, namely that we are inherently inclined to commit sin, has long been rejected by secularists in the West and is increasingly being rejected by Christians as well. Replacing original sin is the question which asks, "Is this behaviour caused by nature or by nurture?" If we say, "by nature," we would say that we do what we do because we are built this way. Or, to use Christian speak, "God made us this way, and there is nothing we can do about it." On the other hand, if we say, "by nurture," we can

blame our inclinations, even our sinful ones, on our upbringing or on our peer group or on our experiences. Without a doubt, we cannot discount either nature or nurture as being influencing factors on our behaviour, for they both play a role in who we are. A sexually abused child, for example, will more likely become abusive him/herself, and some people, because of the way they are built are far more likely to become alcoholics. (I know of several families where alcoholism is rampant.) Yet, we cannot lay our sinful behaviour either at the feet of nature (how we were brought up) or nurture (how we are built). Even the person with the best environment and the best genetics still sins, so nature and nurture do not explain or give reason for all of our sin.

The best explanation is Augustine's who said that the root of our sin is found in the fact that we every part of life is affected by the sin that first entered the world through Adam. God did not create sinful human beings, nor did he create an environment which would teach us to sin. Adam did that for us, and we follow in his footsteps.

Thankfully, there is hope. When we speak of Jesus coming to this world to die for our sins, we can name some of the sins we have committed, although if Martin Luther is correct, we remember only a small fraction of them. We are thankful that all the sins we committed are forgiven by God's grace in Jesus Christ, if we, through faith, ask him for forgiveness. But the death of Jesus on the cross did more than just provide forgiveness for each and every one of our particular sins; it also served to rid our lives of our sinfulness, thus removing even the tendency toward sin. As the Heidelberg Catechism says, the Holy Spirit makes us wholeheartedly ready and willing to serve the Lord. True, we all still fall back into the tendency toward sin, but we also know that as we seek to follow Jesus, the Spirit works in us to make us hate sin more and more, something that Paul alludes to in Romans 7.

The problem of original sin, therefore, which is the root of all our sins, is also dealt with at the cross, and we are set free. Our job, then, as followers of Jesus Christ, is to continually root out the individual sins from our lives so that we become more and more obedient to Jesus, becoming like him in all that we do. This process is called "sanctification" (becoming holy), and sanctification is only possible because Jesus also dealt with our original sin on the cross.

Pastor Gary