

What is Man?

LESSON
THREE

THE CURSE OF SIN



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What is Man?

Lesson Three

The Curse of Sin

INTRODUCTION

Most of us have been to too many funerals. Even if we've only been to one or two, it's been too many. At Christian funerals, we express hope, because we know that we'll eventually be reunited with our lost friends and loved ones. But we still weep because we hate the pain, the hardship, suffering and death that sin has caused in our world. We recognize that if it weren't for sin, there wouldn't ever be any funerals. Sin has wreaked havoc on our world, in our families, and in our own lives. And it ultimately will kill us. How did we come to this? Why does sin have so much power and presence in our lives?

This is the third lesson in our series *What is Man?*, and we've entitled it, "The Curse of Sin." In this lesson, we'll examine what the Bible says about human sin, and especially its negative effects on humanity.

There are many types and degrees of sin. But at the heart of them all is a spirit of rebellion against God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, originally published in 1647, expresses an ecumenical Protestant view of sin in its question and answer number 14. In response to the question "What is sin?" the catechism answers:

Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

As we'll see throughout this lesson, disdain and disregard for God's law were central to humanity's first sin, and they continue to characterize our cursed condition.

Our lesson on the curse of sin will divide into three parts. First, we'll explore the origin of humanity's sin. Second, we'll describe sin's essential character. And third, we'll consider sin's consequences. Let's begin with the origin of human sin.

ORIGIN

The existence of human sin is undeniable. People commit all sorts of atrocities against God, each other, other creatures, the world itself, and even against themselves. But where did sin come from? What is the ultimate source of human sin? And how did sin come to infect humanity?

We'll explore the origin of human sin from three perspectives. First, we'll review the origin of sin in the human race. Second, we'll focus on the origin of sin in individuals. And third, we'll consider the authorship or ultimate blame for human sin. Let's look first at the origin of sin in the human race.

HUMAN RACE

Humanity fell into sin early in our existence. In fact, it was the very first two human beings — Adam and Eve — that brought sin to the human race. As we saw in a prior lesson, Adam and Eve were created sinless. They had no predisposition to sin, and no reason to sin. God had been very benevolent toward them. They had every reason to trust him, every reason to be satisfied with the provision he had made for them, and every reason to want to continue in his covenant blessings and avoid his covenant curses.

And to continue in those covenant blessings and avoid the covenant curses, they needed to remain loyal to the terms of God's covenant. Genesis 1, 2 lists a number of things that covenant loyalty entailed. This included Adam and Eve's obligation to fill the earth with human beings, and to cultivate it to make it fit for God's presence. They were also to rule over the other creatures God had created. And they were to work and take care of the Garden of Eden. In addition, they were given an explicit prohibition: They were forbidden to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

These covenant obligations indicated the types of things that pleased God, and the types of things that displeased him. Those things that pleased him would be rewarded with God's covenant blessings. And those things that displeased him would be punished through God's covenant curses.

Sadly, in Genesis 3:1-7, the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, and she did. Then she gave some of it to Adam, and he ate it too. Immediately, they realized they were naked and felt shame. Genesis doesn't claim that the tree had any power to make human beings sinful. Instead, it was Adam and Eve's disloyalty that led to their sense of guilt and shame.

Then, in Genesis 3:8-24, God confronted Adam and Eve, and cursed them because of their disloyalty. Theologians often label this entire collection of events — from the serpent's temptation through God's judgment — “the Fall.” The name “the Fall” reflects the idea that Adam and Eve's sin caused humanity to fall out of God's favor and blessings. For example, in Genesis 3:16, God said to Eve:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you (Genesis 3:16).

God's curse didn't end Eve's obligation to multiply images of God on the earth. But it did ensure that fulfilling the obligation would be painful for her. It also resulted in strife in her marital relationship to Adam. And in Genesis 3:17-19, God placed a corresponding curse on Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it

you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return (Genesis 3:17-19).

God didn't end Adam's obligation to subdue and cultivate the earth. He simply made it painful and harder. Even worse, Adam and Eve would both experience death because of their sin.

As a result of the Fall, God judged men and women and, indeed, the whole of creation. So, for example, work, which was something that Adam and Eve were engaged in prior to the Fall, became toil, and hence, human beings have a love-hate relationship with work. The relationship between the man and the woman, again, was corrupted and perverted. Childbirth is — again, another gift of God for the re-creation of more images of God — became painful, and basically, the overall result was that the good things that God gave for Adam and Eve to enjoy continued to be enjoyed, but actually, then, were also twisted and perverted in some sense, and weren't enjoyed in all their fullness.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

We don't know what would have happened if Adam and Eve hadn't sinned. Some believe that human beings would have lived perpetually in the Garden as long as they didn't sin. Others believe that Adam and Eve were on probation; and that if they had passed their probation, they would have lived forever. But the reality is that they *did* sin, and that their sin was the origin of sin in the human race.

Having looked at the origin of sin in the human race, let's turn to the way sin enters individuals.

INDIVIDUALS

If Adam and Eve's sin hadn't affected anyone else, then each individual human being would face a similar choice to the one Adam and Eve faced. Each person would have to decide for himself or herself whether to remain sinless or to fall into sin. But Scripture teaches that the curse on Adam and Eve applies to *all* their natural descendants — meaning everyone except Jesus. Listen to what Paul wrote about Adam's sin in Romans 5:12-19:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ... [T]he result of one trespass was condemnation for all men ... [T]hrough the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners (Romans 5:12-19).

Adam's one act of disobedience condemned all humanity because Adam was the covenant head of the human race. He represented not only himself, but also his wife, and every other human being that would descend from them through natural human generation. His sin was counted as our sin. And his guilt became our guilt. And because we share in that guilt, we also share in God's curse against that guilt, including death and corruption. That's why Paul could say that Adam's sin resulted in human death, and that it turned all human beings into sinners. Through Adam, sin has corrupted us all, so that we're born into this world already guilty of Adam's sin, enslaved to sin, and sentenced to death. Or as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15:22:

In Adam all die (1 Corinthians 15:22).

God holds all humanity accountable for Adam's sin because of the doctrine of federal headship. Adam was, and is, our federal head. Now, a way to understand this is to think about a nation or a kingdom. There are two kingdoms, and each of the kingdoms has a king. If you're a citizen of kingdom A and the king of kingdom A declares war against kingdom B, because he's your federal head, you too are at war with kingdom B. It operates the same way theologically. Adam is our federal head; we are all in Adam when he is created. He is our federal representative, so when he falls, we fall in him. Now, if we have a problem with that, we're in trouble, because salvation works the same way. Christ becomes our federal head so that, just as in Adam, Paul says in Romans 5, "All sinned," in Christ, we're all made alive. So, Christ as our federal head keeps the whole law, succeeds where the first Adam failed and wins victory over death, hell and the grave. He is perfectly righteous so that he can impute that righteousness to us, and then in his passive obedience takes upon himself the death that we owe because of our federal head, Adam, so that in his passive and active obedience our sinfulness is imputed to him and his righteousness is imputed to us. This is the *other side* of federal headship. So, you don't really appreciate the federal headship of Adam until you appreciate the federal headship of Christ.

— Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.

It might sound odd to think of it this way, but it was actually gracious for God to allow humanity to be judged in Adam. Adam had a much greater ability to avoid sin than we do. And he faced much less temptation. He wasn't born into a world where sin ran rampant. He wasn't subjected to sinful influences from hosts of other people. Further, he actually walked and talked with God in the Garden. Without question, his knowledge and experience of God surpassed ours. He also possessed great personal righteousness, being created completely without sin. No one but Christ has ever had a personal ability to resist sin that was greater than Adam's. If we were to face the same temptation Adam faced, we

would fail even more miserably. So, to be represented by him was actually to be given a great advantage.

It's easy to see that God applied sin's guilt to us directly because we were represented by Adam. But theologians are somewhat divided when it comes to the process by which sin corrupts and indwells individuals. Some believe that sin is directly applied to us by God as the proper judicial punishment for the guilt we share in Adam. Others believe that sin is inherited from our parents. They believe it's replicated in us in the same way our bodies are formed after the pattern of our parents. In any case, sin corrupts *every* human being from the moment of our conception. Psalm 58:3 says that the wicked are sinful from the womb. And in Psalm 51:5, David lamented his adultery with Bathsheba by admitting that he had been sinful from the time his mother conceived him. So, even children who die in the womb need to be saved by Jesus. As Jesus said in John 14:6:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

The fact that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus indicates that everyone, without exception, needs forgiveness and cleansing from sin. Because of our sin, we all come into the world in a state of spiritual death, just as Paul taught in Ephesians 2:1-3. And we all struggle with indwelling sin and a sinful, corrupt nature, as described in Romans 7:14-25. Every one of these problems originates in Adam's first sin in the Garden of Eden. That transgression was not only the origin of sin in the human race, but also the origin of sin in every individual human being.

Now that we've considered the origin of sin in the human race and individuals, let's turn our attention to the authorship of humanity's sin.

AUTHORSHIP

When we speak of the authorship of human sin, we have in mind the person that's ultimately to blame. For the sake of illustration, consider what happens when someone plays a game like billiards. A player moves a cue stick, which strikes the cue ball, which strikes another ball, causing it to move. We can describe the movement of the various parts from the perspective of any part. For instance, we can say that the cue stick caused the cue ball to move, and that the cue ball caused the second ball to move. But no one would say that the cue ball, or even the cue stick, was the origin of all this motion. Obviously, it was the player that started the whole thing, first by deciding to move the cue stick, and then by actually moving it.

And something similar is true when people sin. Of course, human sin is more complex, because each person has a will and can originate or author new aspects of events. But somewhere, there's still an ultimate source for the events.

This idea of authorship is important because many opponents of Christianity have accused God of "authoring" humanity's fall into sin. That is, they've tried to blame God for humanity's sin. They've generally had one of two purposes in mind. On the one hand,

some have argued that if God is sinful, he's not worthy to be God, and certainly not worthy to be worshiped. On the other hand, some have said that if God is the ultimate source of sin, then humanity isn't responsible for sin, so it would be unjust to punish us. But what does Scripture say?

You might recall that after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God judged the serpent, and Adam and Eve. And in the course of that judgment, Adam and Eve both tried to shift the blame to someone else. Adam was the first one to try to shift the blame. In Genesis 3:12, Adam said:

The woman you put here with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it (Genesis 3:12).

Adam didn't deny eating the fruit, but he did attempt to avoid being held responsible. First, he blamed his wife, who had given him the fruit to eat. And second, he implicitly blamed God, since God had created her. In Genesis 3:13, Eve shifted the blame to the serpent, saying:

The serpent deceived me, and I ate (Genesis 3:13).

Both Adam and Eve tried to argue that the ultimate blame, or the "authorship" of their sin, should be put on someone else. And it appears that they did this to try to get out of being punished. But of course, God didn't agree with their reasoning. He didn't deny that they had been influenced by others. But he did deny that these outside influences provided sufficient reasons not to punish them. So, in the verses that follow, God punished the serpent for deceiving the woman. He punished Eve for being deceived into mistrusting God, for eating the fruit, and for misleading her husband. And he punished Adam for being misled by Eve, and for eating the fruit. As far as God was concerned, Adam and Eve were guilty at the very least because they chose to disobey his command.

In this account, we might say that the ultimate "author" of sin was the serpent, because it was the first character to come up with the idea to sin, and the first one to try to cause humanity to sin. But Adam and Eve also contributed free choices to this event, and in this sense, authored human sin.

But that still leaves us some very common questions, like: Why did the serpent sin? Who was the first thinking creature to sin? Why did that creature sin? And, is God ultimately responsible for the sins of his creatures? Scripture doesn't answer all of these questions fully. But it does provide us with enough information to answer the most important aspects.

First and foremost, Scripture emphatically insists that God isn't culpable or guilty of sin, or of compelling anyone to sin. In fact, God himself is the perfect standard of goodness. So, by definition, he can't be guilty of anything. Listen to what John wrote in 1 John 1:5:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

In this letter, John repeatedly used "light" to refer to moral purity; and "darkness" to refer to sin and its effects. And the point is clear: God is completely free from sin.

God himself is the ultimate standard of good and evil. There is no ultimate moral standard outside him that can judge him. Besides this, Scripture tells us that God hates sin in passages like Deuteronomy 25:16, Psalm 5:4, and Zechariah 8:17. And James 1:13 says he can't be tempted by sin.

But since God is free from sin, and God hates sin, and God is certainly powerful enough to prevent sin, how did sin ever happen? How could a sinless, all-powerful Creator design a creation that would lead to sin? Most theologians have answered this question in terms of the freedom, or liberty, of the will of God's creatures.

If anyone's thought about theology, the Bible, the Christian faith for any length of time, sooner or later the question is going to come up in their mind, "Well, why isn't God the author of sin?" And I think we do have to acknowledge and, in fact, affirm that everything that's going on is part of a grand plan. And so, God is the one from eternity past who planned all that we see, and also he has a grand purpose. So, from eternity past, the plan to eternity future is going to fulfill a glorious purpose... But we do not say that God is the author of sin because God is not the efficient cause of sin, and by that I mean he's not the "doer of the deed." We make much of the concept of permission, that God has created morally responsible beings and he has given them the ability to choose right and wrong. And when the good is accomplished, this is by God's grace, and we are quick to say that God has ordained the good. When evil happens, we say that this is within the permissive will of God, that God has *allowed* this. This is true all the way from the Garden up until the day that Satan bows at Jesus' feet and proclaims him Lord.

— Dr. Ken Keathley

Different theological traditions understand free will in different ways. But Evangelicals tend to agree to the following order of events and causes. First, God created the angels and endowed them with enough liberty of will that they were able to choose between sinning and avoiding sin. When angels chose to sin, they fell out of favor with God and came to be known as demons. Jude 6 refers to this when it says:

The angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home — these [God] has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day (Jude 6).

Second Peter 2:4 uses similar language to describe these fallen angels.

After the fall of the angels, God created humanity and placed them in the Garden of Eden. Like the angels, human beings were created with sufficient liberty of will both to sin and not to sin.

Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, described this as the state of *posse non peccare*. This Latin phrase can be translated literally as, "to be able not to sin." In its theological use, however, the phrase is more commonly translated

as “the ability not to sin.” According to Augustine, Adam and Eve were empowered to avoid sin completely. But they also had the ability to sin.

After humanity was placed in the Garden of Eden, Satan, the most prominent fallen angel, took the form of a serpent. And in this form, he tricked Eve into eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Although Genesis doesn’t identify the serpent with Satan, Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 both call Satan the “ancient serpent.” And in Matthew 4:6, Satan used the same strategies to try to trick Jesus that the serpent in the Garden used to deceive Eve. In both cases, the strategy was to quote and then misapply God’s words. For reasons like these, most evangelical theologians have equated the serpent in the Garden of Eden with Satan.

In any case, Genesis 3:6 records that both Eve and then Adam ate the forbidden fruit. They knew God’s command and freely chose to disobey him. There was no compulsion from any internal or external power. Their minds and choices were their own. In this way, humanity was culpable for their sin, and God was not. Now, we may still ask why God *allowed* humanity to sin. What purpose did it serve?

One of the perennial questions Christians have, and rightly so, is, why did God allow Adam and Eve to sin? It seems inconceivable to us that an infinitely powerful God could not have, in a sense, preempted all of these catastrophic consequences, these centuries, millennia, of death and suffering and human pain when he knew what was ahead. Why did God allow this? Well, we don’t know. And it’s typical of us to stand in judgment of our Judge and to ask tough moral questions of his behavior, but I think in the end faith says, God must have been acting from a calculus rooted in his infinite wisdom and goodness. And he must have seen that even though this is not the use of human freedom and dignity that he intended, a greater good could come from this than cancelling at the outset this magnificent human experiment. And I think, perhaps, in the end, we will not see the answer to this question until we will be able to look back with gratitude and amazement at the glorious triumph over evil, the magnificent good that God will, in the end, achieve through this human experiment and in spite of the tragic rebellion of the participants. We have no clear idea yet just how great God's magnificent triumph is going to be.

— Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

God’s purposes aren’t always clear to us. And his reasons for allowing sin into the world can be somewhat mysterious. It’s true that history would have taken a very different course if God had kept us from sin. But it’s obvious that God has chosen this course for us instead. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:11:

We were ... predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).

Nothing that happens is outside God's plan or control. So, he certainly had a reason for allowing human sin. At the very least, we can affirm that our sin gives him the opportunity to express many of his attributes that would be hidden from us if we never sinned. For instance, he sometimes expresses mercy and forbearance in response to human sin, and at other times he expresses wrath. God is both known and glorified through the expression of these attributes. So, there's a sense in which he's glorified by dealing with our sin. We can even affirm that, ultimately, sin works to the benefit of believers, making it a useful part of his plan to bless us. As we read in Romans 8:28:

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

Everything God does is right and good. There isn't even a hint of sin in him. So, we should never imagine that human sin somehow detracts from his holiness. On the contrary, human sin provides an occasion for God to reveal his glory, to express his mercy and compassion through forgiveness, and to express his justice and wrath through judgment. And all of these things contribute to and demonstrate his absolute purity and goodness. So, when we think about the origin of sin in the human race and in human individuals, we need to remember that the blame rests squarely on human shoulders.

Now that we've explored the curse of sin in terms of the origin of human sin, let's consider sin's essential character.

CHARACTER

The easiest and surest way to identify sin in Scripture is to look for examples of things that God prohibits, condemns or curses. When we do that, we see that the Bible uses a wide variety of vocabulary to refer to sin. It regularly describes sin in terms of injustice, trespassing, negligence, missing the mark, going astray, perverseness, vanity, dishonesty, causing injury, rebellion, impiety, treachery, disloyalty, rashness, lewdness, lust — the list could go on and on, and so could our discussion of each word. So, rather than try to explore the meaning of every term Scripture uses to identify sin, we'll focus our attention on sin's general attributes.

We'll describe the character of sin in two parts. First, we'll see that sin is fundamentally lawless. And second, we'll see that it's unloving. Let's look first at the idea that sin is lawless.

LAWLESS

It's common for Christians today to think that God's law is unnecessary or even harmful to us. Usually, this is because they misunderstand Paul's teaching about the role of the law in salvation. Of course, it's true that the law can't save us. It can only condemn us. That's why in Galatians 5:4, Paul wrote:

You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace (Galatians 5:4).

But that's exactly why the law is so useful in helping us identify and characterize sin. The law's power to condemn us lies in its ability to identify our sinfulness. As Paul wrote in Romans 5:20:

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Romans 5:20).

The law increases sin in different ways. For instance, it places obligations on us that weren't required before the law. And it ignites our sinful passions by drawing attention to what it forbids. Nevertheless, the law is still *good*. It's still a true reflection of God's character, and the standard by which sin is measured. As Paul went on to write in Romans 7:12:

The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good (Romans 7:12).

People often wrongly think that all of God's law was given to hinder, to hinder man's life. In truth, it's not that way. God's law was given to mankind in order that mankind [would know how to] live ... rightly. But because humans are unable in sin, [the law] becomes something that is then wrongly understood by sinful mankind. But after a person knows God, he will know with clarity that God's law was given for that person to be able to obtain a life that is good, that is perfect in God. So with that, in truth, a believer ought to respond to God's law in a positive way, with gratitude, because God's law protects him, preserves him, guides him. And God's law, according to God's Word, is something that is perfect in itself.

— Rev. Agus G. Satyaputra, translation

The lawless character of sin is readily apparent in the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve received a single explicit prohibition from God. And they sinned by directly transgressing that law. And every sin since then has reflected that lawlessness.

Think about sin's lawlessness in terms of God's covenant relationship with humanity. We mentioned that God's covenant demonstrates his benevolence toward us, requires loyalty from us, and provides consequences for our loyalty and disloyalty. Well, the *law* is what describes the loyalty God requires from us. Everything he approves and blesses is a requirement in his covenant law — whether or not it's explicitly mandated in Scripture. And everything he condemns and curses is a prohibition in his covenant law — whether or not it's explicitly forbidden in Scripture. And therefore, everything we do is

either in obedience to God's covenant or in violation of its law. Every motive of our hearts either seeks God's glory and pleasure, or seeks our own satisfaction. Every thought we think, every action we take, every emotion we feel, is either a step toward building God's covenant kingdom or a step toward rebellion against its king. This is what led the apostle John to write in 1 John 3:2-4:

We are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:2-4).

In this passage, John contrasted law breaking with the absolute purity of being like Jesus. Those were the only two options he saw. Either we're sinless or we're lawless.

John believed that the law isn't limited to a finite number of "dos" and "don'ts" in Scripture. Rather, it summarizes God's perfect character. That character itself is the ultimate fulfillment of the law, whereas the written law in Scripture simply describes it. And therefore, anything that's contrary to God's holy nature violates his law. Listen to how James put it in James 2:10-11:

Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder" (James 2:10-11).

James's point was similar to John's: Every scriptural law comes from the same God and requires us to please God fully.

God himself is the ultimate standard for our behavior, and the law reveals that standard to us. The law isn't intended to reveal God fully. After all, God is infinite, incomprehensible — no words could ever describe him completely. Instead, the law merely summarizes his character. Correspondingly, our obligation isn't just to *do* what the law says explicitly. It's to conform ourselves to the perfect character of the God the law describes. And wherever we fall short, our sin is rightly described as lawlessness.

Having seen that sin's character is lawless, let's explore the idea that it's also unloving.

UNLOVING

When Adam and Eve first sinned against God, they demonstrated a terrible lack of love for God and for each other. And the same thing is true when we sin. Our sin is unloving toward God and toward other human beings.

Now, in order to understand what it means to be *unloving*, we should begin by explaining what it means to be *loving*. There are many different conceptions of love. Scripture speaks of love between a husband and wife, love between family members, love between friends, love for justice and ideals, and even love for food. But when it

speaks in terms of loving God and humanity, it tends to have something different in mind. This is a love of loyalty to our covenant obligations, and a love of kindness toward others for the sake of the covenant. Think of Jesus words to his disciples in John 14:15:

If you love me, you will obey what I command (John 14:15).

Love is properly expressed as obedience only when the one we love has authority over us. Can you imagine a child saying to her parents, “If you love me, you’ll obey me”? Or can you imagine saying that to one of your friends? Of course not. Friends can’t command their friends to obey them. And children don’t have authority over their parents. But Jesus wasn’t challenging his disciples to love him as a child or a friend. He was challenging them to love him as their covenant king. John captured this same idea in 1 John 5:3, where he wrote:

This is love for God: to obey his commands (1 John 5:3).

And in Deuteronomy 6:5-6, God associated love and covenant loyalty in this way:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts (Deuteronomy 6:5-6).

In both these passages, we learn that the primary expression of the love God required is heartfelt obedience to his commandments.

Love for God, I think, motivates obedience to God because if he loves me and I love him back, and I also understand the price that he paid on my behalf, I’ll do anything for him. I have this relationship with some human beings. Not quite like God, but with my wife. I’ll do anything for her she needs for me to do because I know she loves me. I love her in return, but I understand the price that she has paid in our marriage to make me happy, to make me holy, to make me all of the man that God wants me to be. And so, recognizing that, I have tremendous motive to be all the man I need to be for her. And the truth is, I think it works precisely like that with a God-man relationship. We’ll do anything once we know about that love and about that price.

— Dr. Matt Friedeman

God didn’t want his people to obey him simply because they feared him, or simply because they wanted to be rewarded. Rather, he wanted them to obey because they truly honored him, because they were thankful for his benevolence, because they were loyal to his covenant, and because they treasured him and his law in their hearts. This is why Scripture so often speaks of God’s covenant in terms of love. For instance, listen to these words from Deuteronomy 7:9-13:

He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands... If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers (Deuteronomy 7:9-13).

In this passage, both God's love for his people, and his people's love for him, are described in terms of covenant faithfulness.

This is what Jesus had in mind when he talked about the greatest commandment of the Law in Matthew 22:34-40, and Mark 12:28-31. In those passages, Jesus was having a discussion with a Pharisee who was an expert in the Law. And the Pharisee posed a question designed to test Jesus' understanding of how the commandments of the Law relate to each other. Specifically, he asked Jesus to name the greatest or most important law. And Jesus responded by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5, 6 and Leviticus 19:18. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-40:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

First, by way of reminder, notice that Jesus identified these laws as broad summaries intended to reflect the full character of God's law. Second, notice that both these laws were expressed in terms of love: love for God, and love for neighbor.

Paul made similar statements in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14, where he said that the entire Law can be summed up in terms of love for neighbor. In other words, love for God and love for neighbor are more than just two halves of the Law. Instead, each of these commands summarizes the whole Law. Love for God is one summary of the whole Law, and love for neighbor is another summary of the whole Law.

Therefore, it follows that sin is fundamentally *unloving* toward both God and neighbor. At the very least, every sin is unloving toward God because it shows that he isn't the foremost commitment of our hearts. Every sin is a rejection of his character, a rebellion against his authority, and a violation of his covenant. And every sin is also unloving toward our neighbor. It despises the reflection of God's character and authority in our neighbor, who is God's image. And it fails to seek our neighbor's good through the blessings of God's covenant.

I teach my students that they can't graduate unless they pass “Theology 101,” and then I tell them Theology 101 is simply the statement: God is God and you're not. Sin says, “I'm God.” Sin marginalizes God, God's glory, God's honor, God's will, God's kingdom, and centralizes *our* glory, *our* honor, *our* will, *our* kingdom. And so, following from Theology 101, I have Theology 102: Because

God is God, you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and because you're not God, the world doesn't revolve around you. You are to love your neighbor as yourself. And so, yes, sin is *fundamentally* not loving others. It's loving yourself; it's centralizing yourself. And so, the perfect obedience to God — that is, not to sin — is to love. It's to love God and it's to love others.

— Dr. Alan Hultberg

Think about sin's unloving character in terms of humanity's fall into sin. The serpent tempted Eve by telling her that God was lying about the forbidden fruit. He said that if she ate it, not only would she not die, but she would become like God. After she had eaten it, Adam was apparently convinced of the same lie, so he also ate some.

Now, how were Adam and Eve unloving toward God and neighbor? They were unloving toward God by rebelling against his covenant law, and by trusting the serpent's lies over God's truth. Eve was unloving toward Adam by tempting him to sin, by being dissatisfied with God's image in him, and by failing to seek his good through obedience to God's law. Similarly, Adam was unloving toward Eve by failing to correct her understanding when she had been deceived, by affirming her dissatisfaction with God's image in herself and in him, and by committing a sin that had negative repercussions for her.

And something similar is true of all human sin. Just like that first sin of Adam and Eve, every human sin takes a similar view of God by rejecting his truth, by distrusting his benevolence, and by rebelling against his authority. In short, every human sin fails to demonstrate proper covenant love for God. And every human sin also fails to demonstrate proper covenant love for our neighbors. Whether we sin against them directly or indirectly, and whether we sin by our action or our inaction, our sin always harms other people. It disrespects God's image in them. It fails to seek their good. And it damages their lives with the corruption and consequences of sin.

Have you ever met Christians who believed that they could break God's law, as long as they were motivated by love? Or people that believed that if they kept God's law, it didn't matter if they loved anyone? Both of these types of people have it wrong. We love God and our neighbors only when we value them as God's covenant requires. And our actions keep God's law only when they're motivated by covenant love. That's what makes it so easy to sin. Sin doesn't care which half we ignore. Whether we're lawless or unloving, sin wins. That's why it's crucial for believers to understand the character of sin. Because when we understand it, we're better prepared to avoid it, and we're more appreciative of our salvation from it.

So far in our lesson on the curse of sin, we've explored the origin of human sin, and described sin's essential character. Now we're ready to address our third major topic: the consequences of sin.

CONSEQUENCES

In traditional systematic theology, the term “original sin” refers to the consequences of humanity’s first sin. Different theologians have explained the details of original sin in different ways. But in each case, the focus has been on:

The condition into which Adam’s natural descendants are born as a result of Adam’s fall into sin.

Adam’s disobedience negatively impacts every human being that naturally descends from him. Only Jesus avoided original sin.

Original sin, briefly, is sin that, at bottom, a person has possessed since he was born. And a person cannot evade this sin. Every person who is born must accept this because people are born from a sinful lineage. I’ll give an example: It’s not possible for a lion to give birth to a lamb, and it’s not possible for a sinful person, Adam’s offspring, to give birth to a holy person, a person who is right before God. And this is sin that already exists. Although we don’t commit it with our thoughts, don’t commit it with our speech, we don’t commit it with our deeds, it’s already there. And there is no one among us who can avoid it. That is what is called “original sin.” Like David said in Psalm 51, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

— Yohanes Praptowarso, Ph.D., translation

For our purposes in this lesson, we’ll focus on three consequences of humanity’s fall into sin: corruption, alienation and death. Let’s begin with corruption.

CORRUPTION

You’ll recall that when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it changed them for the worse. Earlier, we mentioned that Augustine, the bishop of Hippo described humanity’s original, sinless state as *posse non peccare*, meaning that humanity had the ability not to sin. But after Adam and Eve sinned, they lost this ability, and retained only the ability to sin. Augustine described their new state as *non posse non peccare* — the inability not to sin. The corruption Adam and Eve suffered removed their capacity to please God and to merit his blessings, and left them only with the ability to sin and to merit God’s curses.

Now, as we see in Genesis 3:12, 13 Adam and Eve confessed their sin, however imperfectly. And in the verses that follow, God was lenient with them. He could have killed them outright for their sin. But he didn’t. Instead, he showed them mercy. And in Genesis 3:15, he even promised to send a redeemer to rescue them from sin and its

effects. By means of the faith and repentance that Adam and Eve expressed, God renewed their spirits and restored their ability to avoid sin.

Unfortunately, their personal restoration didn't extend to their natural descendants. The rest of the human race was doomed to be born with the inability not to sin. Jesus and Paul compared this state of moral corruption to being slaves to sin in places like John 8:31-44, and Romans 6:6-20. And we all remain in this state of corruption until God saves us, just like he saved Adam and Eve.

In Luke 6:43-45, Jesus compared our corrupt state to a bad tree that can only produce bad fruit. He didn't mean that unsaved fallen humanity never does anything *outwardly* good. They still take care of their children, still respect civil laws, and so on. But sin's corruption makes them incapable of acting out of respect for God's law, or out of covenant love for God and neighbor. And therefore, everything they do is tainted by sin. As Paul said in Romans 8:6-8:

The mind of sinful man is death ... the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Romans 8:6-8).

Unfortunately for fallen humanity, our corruption isn't limited to our inability to avoid sin. It extends to every facet of human nature. Different theological traditions understand the extent of this corruption in different ways. But we can all agree that every faculty of our human nature has been affected, including every part of our bodies and souls. For example, our bodies suffer and die, just as God said in Genesis 3:16-19. Our minds don't understand, as Paul pointed out in Romans 3:11. And our hearts lust after sin, as John pointed out in 1 John 2:16.

Sin is pervasive in our lives. It corrupts every part of fallen humanity's being — our bodies, our souls, our minds, and our desires, our thoughts, and everything else. And as a result, it also corrupts everything that flows from our being — everything we think, do and feel. When we come to faith in Christ, God renews us in ways that restore our ability to please him in all these areas. But for those who haven't yet been saved, sin expresses itself in everything they do.

Consider just three ways Scripture talks about the sin our corruption produces before we come to faith, beginning with the sinful concepts we embrace.

Concepts

Eve's concepts were corrupted when she believed the serpent's lies about God's motives and about the forbidden fruit's effects. And Adam's concepts were similarly corrupted when he determined the fruit was worth eating. But the most terrible thing about those corruptions is they were passed down to all human beings through God's curse.

As we saw in a prior lesson, sin has damaged humanity's capacity for conceptual thought, and caused us to believe that false ideas are true. Ecclesiastes 9:3, and Jeremiah 17:9, say that sin makes us all insane in some ways. We don't value what God values,

and we commit ourselves to evil. Deuteronomy 29:2-4 says that sinful minds have trouble grasping the significance of God's miracles. And John 8:43-47 teaches that sin causes us to embrace lies and prevents us from accepting the truth. In Ephesians 4:17-18, Paul described sin's impact this way:

The Gentiles [live] in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts (Ephesians 4:17-18).

Whenever we fail to believe the truth, it's because sin has corrupted our concepts. What's worse, many of our false concepts are themselves sinful. It's not sinful for us to misunderstand concepts that are too difficult for us to grasp, or to be ignorant of things we haven't had the opportunity to learn. But it *is* sinful for us to affirm false doctrine and unbiblical ways of thinking. That's why in 1 Timothy 6:3-5, Paul accused false teachers of sin because of their culpable ignorance and corrupt minds. False doctrines and wrong ideas are lies that obscure the truth of God, and that lead us into further sin.

God is God and he is worth knowing correctly and rightly. We owe it to him to know who he is aright and to have correct doctrines, because correct doctrine describes who God is and our relationship to him. So, first of all, God is worthy of our best thought and of thinking about him absolutely as *correctly* as we can. And so, correct doctrine is important because it honors God. It gives respect to him. We want to know him as he truly is. We want to know the truth about him that he has revealed to us. That, of course, is the purpose of Scripture, that we can know that. Secondly, the New Testament speaks so strongly against false doctrine because it leads to a false way of life. It leads to sin, to turning away from God. When we don't understand God correctly, when we have an aberrant view of God, then we're going to live an aberrant life. We're not going to serve him as he would have us to serve him. So, that's why the New Testament speaks so strongly against false doctrine.

— Dr. Gareth Cockerill

A second result of our corruption is the sinful behaviors we perform.

Behaviors

Adam and Eve's behavior was probably the most obvious aspect of their sin: they ate the forbidden fruit. And this sin served as the model for all the behavioral sins that have plagued humanity since then. After that time, as we read in Genesis 6:5, God was so

angered by sinful human behavior that he destroyed the entire race with a flood, saving only Noah and his family to repopulate the world.

Sadly, the human race hasn't done much better this time around. We still commit all sorts of behavioral sins. In fact, in Romans 1, Paul argued that one reason we sin so much is that God has given us over to our sinful appetites. In that same chapter, Paul also provided a frightening description of the behaviors that now characterize us in our unsaved, fallen condition. Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 1:29-32:

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:29-32).

You know, when the twentieth century began, there was so much optimism in the world, especially the Western world, that due to, because of the advancement of science, because of the wide availability of education, because of all the discoveries, technological progress, and so on, there was among philosophers and social scientists and even liberal theologians, there was this great aura of optimism that the twentieth century would be a century of peace in which there would be war no more. Twentieth century would be a century in which the human reason would rule, and reasonable beings will not go killing each other. So, in this enormous expectation that we were arriving in a century in which there would be peace, you see, the problem in this kind of thing... And that was the problem in Marxism. It had an optimistic anthropology that ended in social disasters because it didn't have the doctrine of sin. And so what happened? You had the First World War. You had the Bolshevik Revolution. You had later the Holocaust, Second World War, Hitler, Nazism, and we could go on. And so, as a result, to sum it up, in the twentieth century, some 112.8 million people have been killed in warfare. I'm talking just warfare — civilians and soldiers, as far as recorded data permit us to calculate. That is four times as many as in the previous four centuries cumulatively. What does that tell us? That something is wrong, not only social conditions. With all of the knowledge, advancement of science and progress of civilization, there is something fundamentally wrong with human nature. And this is what we are — Christians — calling "sin." Now that's not a very popular word in the media, in the academy and so on, and yet as Reinhold Niebuhr said, the Christian doctrine of sin is the *least*

popular of all doctrines, and yet the one for which we have the most overwhelming empirical evidence everywhere.

— Dr. Peter Kuzmič

The third result of our corruption we'll mention is our sinful emotions.

Emotions

As we've seen, the first and second greatest commandments of God's law are both commands to love: first, to love God; and second, to love our neighbors. And of course, love is an emotion, at least in part. It's the motivation that drives us to obedience in every area of our life. So, it shouldn't surprise us that sinful corruption also affects our emotions, preventing us from loving God and our neighbors as we should, and preventing us from manifesting other righteous emotions that flow from this love.

The corruption of Adam and Eve's emotions was involved in their sin itself, in its immediate effects, and in its lasting curse. For instance, in Genesis 3:6, Eve desired the wisdom that the forbidden fruit offered. In verses 7-10, Adam and Eve felt shamed over their nakedness. And in verse 16, God cursed the way their emotions and desires would impact their marital relationship.

And something similar is true of sin's corruption of the emotions of every human being. We all struggle with coveting, lust, pride, hatred, unrighteous anger, and all sorts of other sinful emotions. As Jesus said in Mark 7:21-22:

From within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly (Mark 7:21-22).

Even before we act, our sinful emotions and desires drag us toward sinful thoughts and behavior. James put it this way in James 1:14-15:

Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin (James 1:14-15).

In our sinful nature, even outward obedience to God's law is impossible. But when we consider our emotional corruption, and our inability to love God and our neighbor as we should, it becomes apparent that, apart from his saving grace, we have no ability to please God.

Having seen that pervasive corruption is one of the terrible consequences of humanity's fall into sin, let's explore our alienation from God and from other human beings.

ALIENATION

It's really impossible to overstate the effect of sin. First, the wages of sin is death. Death enters the human experience because of sin. We all will die because of sin. Second, we are cut off from God because of sin. Our relationship is fractured and we have no right to be connected to him at all because of our sinfulness. And third, our relationships with each other are fractured, fragmented and broken because of sin. Because we choose to put our own needs first and put ourselves ahead of others and are inflated by pride and selfishness and conceit, we fail to get along together in perfect harmony. So, all of this is explicable because of sin.

— Dr. Constantine Campbell

Human beings were created in God's image to rule over this world in fellowship with him. We were supposed to expand the Garden of Eden to fill the whole earth, so that all creation would become his earthly kingdom. And in that kingdom, God would live with us and manifest his presence to us. And we were also supposed to live as a united race, cooperatively and lovingly governing creation as God's vice-regents or vassal kings.

But sin broke our fellowship with God, and damaged our relationships with each other. It caused God to banish Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:24 says that he even posted angels at its gate to make sure they didn't sneak back in. As a result, humanity was forced to live in the untamed wilderness away from God's presence and protection. And as we learn in Genesis 4–6, humanity quickly turned against each other in the wilderness. Cain murdered his brother Abel, and became the father of many generations of people that treated others wickedly. Eventually, humanity's abuse of each other became so great that God flooded the entire world in the days of Noah.

Humanity's alienation from God and from each other has continued in this catastrophic manner ever since. We no longer walk in God's immediate presence like Adam and Eve did; instead, we hate and make war with him. And lies, deception, hatred, strife and all sorts of other relational problems prevent us from living peacefully and cooperatively with other people.

As we've seen, the initial cause of this alienation was Adam and Eve's act of rebellion against God when they ate the forbidden fruit. In their sin, our first parents asserted their own authority over the authority of God. It was an act of treason against God's covenant that turned our entire race into God's enemies.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul revealed that humanity's fall into sin caused our entire fallen race to join the kingdom of Satan. We went from being God's close allies to being enemy combatants in a spiritual war. As a result, every one of us begins life in total alienation from God's favor and grace. We know him only as our natural enemy. In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul offered this description of his audience prior to their salvation:

You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Notice that Paul applied this description to every unsaved, fallen human being when he said “all of us” lived this way. He made a similar point in Romans 5:10, where he wrote:

When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (Romans 5:10).

We're not just alienated from him because our relationship is strained, or because we can't be in his immediate presence. It's much, much worse than that. Humanity's fall into sin made us God's enemies.

And while it didn't harm our relationships with all other human beings to the same extent, the Fall still alienates us from each other in many ways. Of course, our sin has created many enemies and wars among human beings. But it's also responsible for our more common relational problems. In the same way that it created shame and marital strife for Adam and Eve, it creates problems in every other marriage, too. In the same way that it produced violence in their children, it produces violence in every society as well. It causes us to lie to each other, to hate each other, to harm each other, to take offense and to give offense. It makes us jealous, spiteful, unforgiving. And even among believers, after God has rescued us from our hopeless slavery to sin, we still struggle to treat each other with love and compassion. As James wrote to believers in James 4:1-2:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight (James 4:1-2).

Humanity's fall into sin has alienated us both from God and from each other. We were created to exist in peaceful, loving relationships with God and with other people. We were supposed to live and work together, centering our lives around the God we served. But the Fall made us selfish, arrogant and hateful. So, instead of serving God, we oppose him. Instead of living selflessly with others, we covet what they have and use them to serve our own purposes. No, we're not as bad as we could be. And we do see remnants of good in fallen human relationships. But it's not like it should be. Sin has destroyed our relationship with God, and severely damaged our relationships with others. Apart from God's grace, these problems have no solutions.

So far, we've considered the consequences of humanity's fall into sin in terms of corruption and alienation. Now we're ready to address the matter of death.

DEATH

In Genesis 2:17, God told Adam that if he ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he would die. Then, after Adam ate the fruit, Genesis 3:19 records that God cursed Adam to physical death. But, as we mentioned earlier, Adam's sin and its curse didn't just affect Adam. After all, he was the covenant head of the entire human race. He was our king. So, when he rebelled against God, our entire human kingdom fell under the shadow of his guilt and, consequently, under the curse of death. As Paul said in Romans 5:12-17:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned... [T]he many died by the trespass of the one man ... [B]y the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man (Romans 5:12-17).

Paul said that all sinned because God reckoned Adam's guilt not only to Adam, but to the rest of natural humanity, too. And this guilt results in our death. From the legal perspective of original sin, every human being is just as guilty as Adam was. So, if Adam was worthy of death — and he was — then we are too. And that's why we die. Even after we come to faith in Christ, sin's curse hangs on to our bodies. As a result, we all eventually die and return to dust, just like Adam.

Now, Adam didn't die immediately when God cursed him — at least not physically. And the same thing is true of the rest of us. God permits us a physical lifespan on earth. But Scripture does imply that Adam died spiritually when he was cursed, and that his natural descendants are spiritually dead before they come to faith.

The question of spiritual death is very nicely addressed in Ephesians 2. Basically, Paul says we're dead in our sins and our transgressions. So the understanding there is that we're dead, and a dead person really can't do much with respect to pleasing God. And particularly, I think, Paul is addressing the issue of our actions and how God sees our actions. That verse goes on to say in chapter 2 that ... we're following the leader of this world. We're doing the things that he wants us to do, because that's our natural tendency. When we're dead in our sins, we follow the leader of death who is Satan. When we are made alive in Christ ... we are given a new life. It's a new life. It's a life that allows us to act, to do things that are pleasing to God, but only possible through that ... through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our faith in him.

— Rev. Timothy Mountfort

Paul described spiritual death in Ephesians 2:1-5 when he said:

You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time ... But ... God ... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions (Ephesians 2:1-5).

The people Paul described were physically alive. They engaged in sin, and fought against God in the spiritual war. But Paul still called them “dead” because they stood under God’s condemnation, and because they lacked the spiritual vitality necessary to please God. Paul also said that even believers used to be “dead” in the same way. All fallen human beings share this spiritually dead condition until we receive spiritual life in Christ. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:10:

If Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness (Romans 8:10).

Here Paul said that we have spiritual life if Christ is in us. By implication, if Christ is *not* in us, we’re spiritually dead.

Because of Adam’s fall into sin, human beings suffer immediate spiritual death when we’re created, and eventual physical death. And worse, if we never come to faith in Christ, if we’re never redeemed from sin’s curse by God’s grace, we’ll continue to suffer both spiritual and physical death in hell. And just like spiritual death in the present world, it will be a conscious experience. The unredeemed will exist forever, suffering the everlasting curse of sin in both body and soul. The curse of sin is very real. But by God’s grace, we can struggle against sin’s influence now, and completely escape it in the future.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the curse of sin, we’ve explored the origin of sin in the human race and in human individuals, and discussed sin’s ultimate authorship. We’ve also described sin’s essential character as lawless and unloving. And we’ve considered sin’s consequences of corruption, alienation and death.

The weight of human sin would cause us to despair if we didn’t have hope in Christ. As we’ve seen in this lesson, it’s not a small thing. It’s a terrible burden that chains us to corruption in this life, and drags us into everlasting death. In his famous book, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan described sin as a load fastened to our backs that can only be removed by the cross of Christ. In our next lesson, we’ll look at how that happens when our Savior redeems us from the curse of sin.

Dr. Greg Perry (Host) is Vice President of Strategic Projects at Third Millennium Ministries where he has served on the board of directors since 1998. Previously, Dr. Perry was Associate Professor of New Testament and Director of the City Ministry Initiative at Covenant Theological Seminary from 2003 to 2017. While teaching theology in Australia, he chaired a task force to assess and support Australian church planters. He also has been involved in several creative nonprofit ministries seeking to embody the gospel while addressing social challenges in urban Atlanta and Washington D.C. Dr. Perry holds an M.Div. from Reformed Theological Seminary, a Th.M. from Columbia Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary. He is a fellow with the Institute for Biblical Research and a member of both the Evangelical Theological Society and the Society of Biblical Literature.

Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr. is Dean of Seminary at Africa Christian University in Zambia.

Dr. Constantine Campbell is Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Dr. Gareth Cockerill is Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

Dr. Matt Friedeman is Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

Dr. Alan Hultberg is Associate Professor of Bible Exposition and New Testament at Talbot School of Theology.

Dr. Ken Keathley is Director of the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture and Professor of Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Peter Kuzmič is the Eva B. and Paul E. Toms Distinguished Professor of World Missions and European Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the co-founder and director of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia.

Rev. Timothy Mountfort is Academic Dean at Western China Covenant Theological Seminary.

Yohanes Praptowarso, Ph.D. serves at Batu Theological Seminary.

Rev. Agus G. Satyaputra is President of Bandung Theological Seminary.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary, San Diego.

Dr. Simon Vibert is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.