

Lighten Up: The Joyful Truth about Sin and Grace

Week 2: Original Blessing (not Original Sin)

Genesis 3

Welcome to the second week of our Lenten series on “Sin and Grace.” Last week, remember (how could you forget) our hands-on work with sin. We examined the metaphors by which sin is communicated in Scripture. I wanted you to see that sin is real, it has a tangible “thingness” to it. I’m hoping that it helped you to expand your ways of thinking about sin and its effects. I want us to be as specific and accurate as possible—because specificity about sin helps us understand our God. How God’s grace deals with human sin.

This week, we should do some weed whacking. Not literally (maybe you were hoping for power tools). We need to whack away at one dubious theological idea called “original sin.” This idea has grown up over centuries and has obscured the truth about the nature of sin and about the way God heals sin.

The doctrine of original sin did was invented in the 300s by St. Augustine (picture) who was a brilliant dude, a great writer, and thoroughly obsessed with his own sin. Augustine said that our ancestor Adam sinned in the garden of Eden, and that Adam’s sin then infected every subsequent human being ever (there’s a whole theory about the role of sperm in the process that will make you laugh and cringe). Adam’s sin, he said, alters your fundamental nature. You are sinful from birth. There’s nothing you can do about it. Only Christ can fix your sin by dying on the cross, absorbing the punishment you deserve for your sin.

This nutty teaching took root in parts of the Catholic Church and then got picked up in earnest by our Reformed ancestors, including Presbyterians. We developed a charming phrase to describe human beings: “totally depraved.” The effects of this teaching have been devastating. It’s a complete misunderstanding of the way sin enters into our lives. Like a physician, if you don’t know what’s causing an illness, you are unlikely to cure it. I don’t know if you remember the Dr. Suess story about The Sneetches. In the story, a sleazy character rolls into town and exploits the Sneetches’ insecurity about whether or not they have a star on their bellies. He milks the insecure sneetches out of all their money by putting on and taking off stars. That’s been the church—we’ve told people that sin is their primary problem and that only way to fix it is to come in and get some Jesus, who functions like a sin-off machine.

I have never found original sin or substitutionary atonement convincing. But I want to assure you that our tradition has alternative ways of understanding sin and the saving event of Jesus’ death & resurrection that feel much more true to the nature of sin and to the great good news that we receive in Jesus. That’s what I want to talk about this morning. But to undo the spell of original sin, let’s go back to the beginning, to Genesis, to where it all began:

¹⁵ God took [Adam] and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And God commanded, *“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”*

¹⁸ Then God said, *“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”* ... So God caused a deep sleep to fall upon [Adam]; then God took one of his ribs and... God made it into a woman. ²³ Then the man said,

*“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;*

²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Now the serpent was craftier than any other animal that God had made. He said to the woman, *“Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”* ² The woman said to the serpent, *“We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”* ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, *“You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸ They heard the sound of God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of God. ⁹ But God called to the man, and said to him, *“Where are you?”* ¹⁰ Adam said, *“I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”* ¹¹ God said, *“Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”* ¹² The man said, *“The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”* ¹³ Then God said to the woman, *“What is this that you have done?”* The woman said, *“The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”* ¹⁴ The Lord God said to the serpent,

*“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
upon your belly you shall go,*

¹⁶ To the woman God said,
“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;

¹⁷ And to the man^[b] God said,
*“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”*

²⁰ The wife was named Eve,^[c] because she was the mother of all living. ²¹ And God made garments of skins for Adam and Eve, and clothed them.

²² Then God said, *“See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”* — ²³ therefore God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

So what is this story about? It begins with us in a garden. We've been put there by God to support and care for one another; Adam tends the garden. It's sweet and good. These two kids have the run of the place, it's young love. Free and beautiful. There's one caveat: we just can't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Fine. Right? We can do that.

Along comes the snake. The sneaky serpent, voice of temptation. As he sidles up and starts talking to Eve, I hope you notice how slippery their speech is. They stretch their memory of God's words. They do what we do when we have a rule that constrains us: look for loopholes.

Eve is convinced. After all, the tree is good to eat, it's a delight to the eyes, and for crying out loud eating it makes a person wise! What's not to like? She eats some and gives some to Adam. Then what? They don't die (as God warns they will)—that's a story and sermon for another day. Instead, their eyes are open. *What's that mean?* It feels very much like a metaphor for an awakened conscience. They now *know the difference* between good and evil, right and wrong. They have become human beings. This story is about our moral awakening; all of us have to make an essential, difficult move from childlike naivete to moral responsibility. This is a story about you and I growing up—the pain, the loss, the burden that comes with that gift.

There is sin in this story—Augustine got that part right. Sin is disobeying the will of God and Adam and Eve both sin. What we get from them is not a sinful nature, but a proclivity to sin. But this proclivity is embedded in the holy paradoxical reality of our moral freedom. We are free beings. Our eyes are open. We can discern and choose between right and wrong. The condition of this freedom is that sometimes we choose what is wrong.

Did you notice how God responds when we sin? First, God does not revoke their freedom. God chastens and burdens them all—the snake has to crawl, the woman has fierce labor pains, the man will sweat his whole life just to eat. When you and I disobey God's will, life gets harder—sometimes much harder. But what God does not do is curse Adam and Eve; God does not condemn them to sin. And God does not abandon them. Even as Adam and Eve are sent out of the garden into the world of hard moral choices, God clothes them. There's a reading that says the closing of the gates of the garden was an act of love—God knew we weren't ready to eat from the tree of life and live forever. God knows we have some growing up left to do before that fruit can be ours. After we sin, God does not curse or abandon us. God goes with us.

Read the whole of the creation story from the beginning and what you see is a picture of God who creates human beings in God's very own image and calls us good; a God who places us in the midst of a creation in which all things are designed and intended to work in harmony. Read the rest of Scripture from Genesis forward and what you see is a God who is constantly caring for us. Reaching for us. Extending love. Extending us grace. Nothing that we did in the garden, nothing you do today changes God's disposition to love you into a fullness of created being. Theologian Matthew Fox said that human beings aren't defined by our original sin, but by God's original blessing. Original blessing is our inheritance and God's response to our sin.

The great gift of my life is being a parent to my children. I know many of you feel the same. My kids are like every other kids: they make good choices and they make other choices. But the one message we try to convey to our kids and I hope the message you convey to your kids and the message the we convey to all of our kids—with our words and our deeds—is that growing up is full of hard choices and sometimes you will choose the good and sometimes you won't, but no matter what you do, one things always stays the same: you are Beloved. That is who our children are. It is who we all are. When we come to this font, and our heads are washed as a symbol of our cleansing from sin, we know full well that it's not the end of our experience with sin. But we baptize and marked by God so that we will always know who we are. "You are my beloved child. In you, God is pleased." That was true in the Garden of Eden. It is still true where we leave, East of Eden. It's our original blessing. Grace upon grace upon grace.