



Sermon Transcript September 22, 2019

We Believe! What is Wrong with Me? Romans 5:12-21

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 22, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Romans 5:12-21

¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— ¹³for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. ¹⁷For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹For 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. ²⁰Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Introduction

I read an article this week by Greg Gilbert and he captures the daily routine a lot of us can relate to. He writes, “Every evening after work, I sit down to spend a few minutes catching up on the news of the day. Though it is a restful few minutes for my body and mind, I have to admit that I don’t find in those moments much rest for my heart. That’s because what I see in the headlines reminds me of a deep-rooted reality: there is something wrong with our world, and even with us as human beings.”¹

With Gilbert’s statement on the forefront of my mind, I sat down on Tuesday evening to watch the evening news, and predictably I too was confronted with this “deep-rooted reality.” In less than 20 minutes, I heard of 14 uncontained wildfires burning in the West, flooding in Texas and two more hurricanes approaching the East Coast. I learned of an 18 year old young lady who was arrested because she had confided in her coworkers that she had plans to enter her former high school and kill as many as 400 students. I then heard of the arrest of an all-star pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates who was arrested on child sex charges. And then internationally it was reported that the rhetoric between Iran and the United States is escalating over the recent attack of a Saudi oil factory. And finally, the viewers encountered our common struggle with disease and death. We got a report on Alex Trebec’s ongoing struggle with cancer and the passing of a beloved and accomplished journalist, Cokie Roberts. (Is it any wonder why *Jeopardy* is so popular at 7:00? We need an escape from what we just heard on the news.)

After acknowledging the obvious—that there is something wrong with our world, and even with us as human beings—Gilbert asks the critical question. “But what is it?”² What is wrong with this world? What is wrong with us?

This is a critical question to answer. It doesn't seem that there is much debate over whether or not there is something wrong with the world. You know as well as I do that what is shared on the evening news is just a sample size of the many problems that never get reported from around the world, from within our own country, from our local context, from behind the closed doors of our homes and from our very own lives. So we are not debating whether or not there is something wrong with this world. Rather, we want to consider “what is it?” What is wrong with this world? What is wrong with us? The reason this is a critical question to answer is because you can’t come up with an adequate solution until you understand the nature of our problem.

So in this increasing secular culture that dismisses the idea of the supernatural—God—

there is this “*utopian* view that asserts that humans are intrinsically good and under the right social conditions, their good nature will emerge.”³ The idea is that if we can just improve our environment, then the goodness of man will blossom. So what do we need? We need better education. We need to fix our economic inequities. We need to fix our social structures. How many times are we going to pin all of our hope in the next election, thinking that this candidate and these ideas will usher in this *utopia*? It is not to say that these things aren’t important and good to strive for within our world. But if you put these ideals to the test of reality, there is just as much brokenness among the highly educated, highly affluent and highly privileged—highly enlightened—as there is in every other corner of society. Education, money and status are not the answer.

The Bible gives an answer to the question Gilbert raises when he asks “But what is it?” Last week Mike reminded us that we believe the Bible to be God’s authoritative word. And so at the end of our confession about the Bible we say that “it is to be believed in all that it teaches.” Well what does the Bible teach us about what is wrong with this world and what is wrong with us? Now I know that many of you can raise your hand and give me the Sunday School answer and tell me that “sin” is the problem. And you are right. But I wonder whether or not we fully grasp how desperate our situation really is. I am afraid that even as Christians when we confess “sin” to be the problem if we don’t have a diminished view of our sinful condition. I think many of us may be tempted to acknowledge that “yes, I have some imperfections—some flaws—some shortcomings—some sin, if you will—but who doesn’t? We can often dismissively confess, “well no one is perfect.” But that is not what the Bible says of our sin. The Bible says it is far worse than a shortcoming or an imperfection or a flaw that marks you. Ephesians 2 says that “*you were dead in the trespasses and sins, in which you once walked.*” Dead is dead!

From Romans 5:12-21, we discover how the Bible answers the question Gilbert poses; “But what is it?” What is wrong with this world and what is wrong with us? As we try to answer this question this morning I don’t want to simply address this answer theoretically or theologically. Nor, do I want to look at this issue just through the lens of what is wrong with the world “out there.” Instead, I want this to be a very personal thing for you and me to consider. What you are going to discover as we look at Romans 5 is that “what is wrong with the world is what is wrong with me.” That is the question I want to ponder. “What is wrong with me?”

Sin is what is wrong with me

For starters, we discover that sin is what is wrong with me. We read in verse 12,

“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.” The Bible’s answer to what is wrong with this world is that sin has come into this world and it has spread to you and to me.

Lets begin by defining what we mean by “sin.” Wayne Grudem defines sin this way. “Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude or nature.”⁴ Sin is defined in relation to God and our response to his moral law. That is exactly what we see in Genesis 3 when *“sin came into the world.”* Adam and Eve failed to conform to the moral law of God. They broke God’s commandment. We read in Genesis 2:16-17, *“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 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 surely die.’”*

Do you ever wonder why God put that tree—that one tree—in the garden? At the beginning of our confession this morning we acknowledged that: “We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image.” Part of what it means to be created in the image of God is that man was created to represent God in the world God has made. Adam was told to “subdue the earth” and that he had “dominion” over it. And so being created in the image of God, man is given authority to rule over God’s creation. But we don’t have absolute authority. Our authority is derived from God and by placing that tree in the garden, God gave them a symbol of their dependence upon God. In other words, even though they bear the image of God, they are not God. By not eating of that tree, they were expressing their ongoing dependence on God.

And as we rehearsed in our confession this morning, “but they sinned when tempted by Satan.” And what was at the heart of Satan’s temptation? He caused the woman to doubt the word of God by contradicting God, *“You will not surely die.”* And then, Satan called into question the goodness of God. If you eat of this tree *“you will be like God.”* Looking back on this in 1 Timothy 2:14, Paul says Eve was deceived, but Adam wasn’t. Adam’s eating of the forbidden fruit was flat out rebellion against God. Boice captures the attitude and heart of Adam at the point when he took a bite of that forbidden fruit. He writes, “Adam, however, in full knowledge of what he was doing, looked at that one tree and said in effect, ‘I don’t care if I’m allowed to eat of all the trees north of here, east of here, south of here and west of here. So long at that one tree stands in the garden as a symbol of my creaturehood, so long as it is there to remind me that I am not God, that I am not perfectly autonomous—so long as it is there, I hate it! So I will eat of it and die, whatever that means.’”⁵ The first sin was more than just eating forbidden fruit. It was the prideful rejection of God’s absolute authority. That is what is wrong with me.

Pride! That is what is wrong with me. Over 1500 years ago, St. Augustine looked back on Adam and concluded that pride was Adam's original sin. He said that Adam had a "presumptuous opinion of himself."⁶ It was pride that caused Eve to think she knew better than God. It was pride that caused Adam to think that he was too great to be bound by God's rule. C. S. Lewis concluded that pride is "the utmost evil."⁷ It lives in us. It is expressed today in the conventional wisdom of our day that tells me to look within myself and to be true to myself. That is no different than Adam expressing his desire to shake free from God's authority. It is my pride that causes me to rebel against the commands of God. That is what sin is and that is what is wrong with me.

My sinful nature is what is wrong with me

Oh, but it is far worse than what you may realize. My sin isn't just what is wrong with me. It is my sinful nature that is wrong with me. It is a nature I inherit from Adam. This is what we call "original sin." But the title for this important doctrine may be a little misleading. Sure, it is "original" in that it comes from the first man, Adam. And of course, it is "original" in that we are born with it and it is with us from the moment of conception. David said, in Psalm 51:5, "*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.*" But the doctrine of "original sin" means more than that it came from the first man—Adam—and that I have been plagued with this sinful nature from birth. It means something far more sobering than that. It means that Adam's sin and Adam's guilt is my sin and my guilt. As our statement puts it, we are "in union with Adam."

Look at verse 12. Paul writes, "*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.*" When Paul says, "*because all sinned*" he is not talking about the sins you and I commit everyday of our lives. The point he is making in verses 13-14 is that "*death reigned from Adam to Moses*" even though that was a time when there was no written law of God to transgress. Keep in mind that it wasn't until Moses came along that we had the Ten Commandments given to us from God. Paul makes a little editorial comment at the end of verse 13, "*sin is not counted where there is no law.*" And yet, in spite of the fact that there was no law, those who lived between Adam and Moses still died. They still bore the judgment of sin. Obviously, during this time people were "sinning." The story of Noah makes that quite clear. But their "*sinning was not like the transgression of Adam*" who broke the commandment of God. So Grudem concludes, "this is proof that God counted people guilty on the basis of Adam's sin."⁸ When Paul says, "*death spread to all men because all sinned*" he is referring to the fact that we sinned in Adam and so we

inherit his guilt.

If you question that is what Paul is saying here, all you need to do is go down to verses 18 and 19 and he further confirms this to be the case. Here he says, “*one trespass [the sin of Adam] led to condemnation for all men . . . by the one man’s disobedience [Adam’s disobedience] the many were made sinners.*”

This week I was sitting in my office and I was studying this passage. I got a knock on my door and I was being introduced to a pastor from Norwich. He held out his hand and introduced himself and said, “my name is Adam.” I jokingly said, “I was just reading about you! Why did you do it? Look at all this trouble you caused!” But it wasn’t just Adam wrapped up in this “original sin.” Somehow and somehow, with Adam as our head, we were there in Adam.

I know that many people find this hard to accept. The idea of sin and guilt being imputed upon us from Adam goes against the human ideal of fairness. And furthermore, it debunks the notion that humans are intrinsically good. We are by nature sinners. And yet, reflecting on this biblical truth, Trevin Wax says, “I believe original sin is a beautiful truth.”⁹ He is not suggesting that “sin” is beautiful. But he is suggesting that all truth has beautiful aspects to it. One of the beautiful facets of original sin is that it “puts us all on the same level before God.” He recounts a story he heard about the evangelist George Whitefield. This English evangelist preached up and down the Connecticut River Valley in the 1700’s during the revival known as the Great Awakening. Whitefield’s ministry touched common people and people of high social status. In fact, he had become friends with Selina, the Countess of Huntingdon. She wrote Whitefield a letter and in the letter she told him how offended she was at the notion of “original sin.” Here is what she said, “It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiment so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.”¹⁰ But that is the beauty of this doctrine. It cuts us all down to size, from the prince to the pauper, from the rich to the poor, from the educated to the illiterate. My sinful nature is what is wrong with me.

My sinful choices are what is wrong with me

Now if you still take issue with the idea of original sin, you still have to deal with the actual sins you commit. We say in our confession that “human beings are sinners by nature and by choice.” This is what is wrong with me. In my human nature, I still

choose to sin. Wayne Grudem says that “everyone who protests that original sin is unfair has also voluntarily committed many actual sins for which God also holds us guilty.”¹¹ Romans 2:6 says that God “*will render to every man according to his works.*” Colossians 3:25 says “*the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done.*” There is plenty we have done that renders us accountable before God.

This is the point Paul is getting at in Romans 5:20. Here he says, “*Now the law came to increase the trespass.*” At the very least, when we think of the law we think of the Ten Commandments. They tell us how to love God and how to love others. The deeper you dive into the Ten Commandments, the more you realize how far you fall short of what God requires. You might say in a moment of pride, “I never committed adultery.” Or, “I never murdered anyone.” Jesus asks, “Have you lusted after a woman?” “Have you been angry with another, defaming the image of God in them by calling them an idiot?” “Have you worshiped other things in the place of God?” “Have slandered or gossiped against another?” The list goes on and on.

So Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:8 that sure, “*the law is good.*” But it was never given to us to “fix our problem.” He says in Galatians 3:21 that the law was not given so that it can bring life. It can’t bring life. Instead, it was given to demonstrate the depths of our sinful heart. If anything, our inability to keep the law of God illustrates that by nature we are sinners.

Consequently, Paul tells us three times in this passage that because of Adam’s sin *death reigned*. In verse 14, we already say that “*death reigned from Adam to Moses.*” In verse 17, again we are reminded that because of one man’s sin “*death reigned through that one man.*” And in verse 21, as given evidence by the giving of the law of God to us, “*sin increased . . . as sin reigned in death.*” And that is exactly what Adam was told in Genesis 2:16, “*for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*”

By death, we mean several things. We are alienated from God. Our sin alienates us from one another. Our sin impacted all of creation and so we experience things like floods and hurricanes and wildfires. And in the end, we die. We return to the dust from where we came. I often say at funerals that death is not a biological issue. Rather, death is a theological issue. And that is not all. In our confession we say, “human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under his wrath.” And so some day, we stand before God and must give an account for our lives. And who here can stand on their own? No one.

I hope you see that our sin is so pervasive that we can't fix our problem. This is what leads me to my final point.

What is wrong with me is what leads me to Jesus

My final point is that “what is wrong with me is what leads me to Jesus.” Notice how Jesus and Adam are put side by side in verses 18-19. *“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 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.”* The idea is that if sin and death is passed to us through one man, then righteousness and life can be passed down to us through one man. That one man is called the “second Adam.” That one man who passed life to us is Jesus. His “*act of righteousness*” is the death he died on the cross for our sin.

James Boice said that the doctrine of original sin is not repulsive. Rather it is an act of God's grace.¹² If sin is passed to us through one person, then God has opened a way for righteousness to be freely given to us by God's grace. Five times from verses 15-17 Paul says that the grace God gives us is a “*free gift*.” I think the free gift of God's grace is sometimes just as hard to accept as the doctrine of original sin. The two go hand in hand. The need for God's grace means that I have nothing that I can present to God to merit anything before him. This is why we need to know the depth of our sin and what is wrong with us. It is far more than a character flaw or an imperfection here or there that plagues us. I am sinful by nature and I am sinful by choice. I need God to step in and rescue me from my sin. Our confession ends by saying, “Only through God's saving work can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.”

There was a sitcom on television a few years ago called *Parks and Recreation*. Micah Mattix wrote an article reflecting on the doctrine of original sin through the lens of this sitcom. He pointed out how the flaws of the characters were readily on display in each episode. After rehearsing their flaws he concluded that “All of them reflect the goodness of humanity perverted by original sin.”¹³ That is what we said earlier. You might not like the doctrine of original sin but how else do you explain the universal reality of broken and sinful humanity? But here is what really caught my attention in the article about the sitcom. He noted that at the end of most episodes, after their faults—their shortcomings—their sins are acknowledged some commitment is made to try to reform their ways to make themselves better. Mattix observes that “willpower and hard work is not a very satisfying answer” to fix their “sin” that troubles them.¹⁴ And yet, their

attempt to do something to fix it acknowledges something must be done to fix it.

And that is the point. Only Jesus can fix it! Trevin Wax says that one of the beautiful things about original sin is that it tells me what the real answer is to my problem. “I need God to swoop in and change me and save me himself. I can’t save myself. I am so wicked. I know my heart. I know my thoughts.”¹⁵ My sin is like chains that have me wrapped up in bondage. One pastor said that original sin allows us to honestly pray, “Lord, I am the failure that you always knew I would be.”¹⁶ But God loves us anyway. And so Paul says in verse 20, “*but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*”

Conclusion

“So what is it?” What is that “deep rooted reality” that is wrong with us and the world? Tomorrow the news you watch won’t be too different than the news you watched yesterday. What is wrong with the world is what is wrong with me. It is sin. I am a sinner by nature and I am sinner by choice. I desperately need Jesus to rescue me from my sin.

What about you? Do you see this “deep rooted reality” in your life? Do you ever wonder why you do what you don’t want to do and don’t do what you know you should do? Do you sense the guilt that lies within? You can’t fix it. But Jesus can. Repent of your sin. Turn in faith to Jesus. He died on the cross for you sin. “*Through the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.*”

I would encourage you to turn to Jesus today and be forgiven of your sins. The next two Sunday we will look at what we believe about Jesus and what we believe about the cross. But what you don’t know is “tomorrow.” You don’t know if you have tomorrow. So turn to Jesus “today.” The very last phrase of this passage reminds us that faith in Jesus leads us to *eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

¹Greg Gilbert “What is Man” in *Tabletalk The Heart of the Gospel* Ligonier Ministries, 12

²Ibid

³Chuck Colson *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1999) 148

⁴Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 490

⁵James Boice *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986) 195-196

⁶St Augustine *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* quoted in the article: “Original Sin and Parks and Recreation” by Micah Mattix, March 7, 2012 www.thegospelcoalition.org

⁷C. S. Lewis *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1952) 94

⁸Grudem, 494

⁹Trevin Wax “Why Should I Believe in Original Sin” www.thegospelcoalition.org Sept. 29, 2009

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹Grudem, 495

¹²Boice, 207

¹³Micah Mattix “Original Sin and Parks and Recreation” www.thegospelcoalition.org March 7, 2012

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵Trevin Wax

¹⁶Ibid

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What experience have you had in studying Christian doctrine? None? Little? Some? What was your experience like? What do you think about the importance of it?
2. What observations do you make of the statement for this week?
Human Condition: We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-7. What do you learn about sin in these two passages?
4. Read Romans 5:12-14. What does it mean for us to be in "union with Adam?" How does the doctrine of original sin deepen your understanding of sin?
5. What does it mean that we are sinners "by nature and by choice?" See also Romans 5:20. How does this conform with reality? Why is this hard for people to accept?
6. Read Romans 5:18-21. How does this help you see the "beauty" of original sin?
7. Read Romans 5:15-17. What is the lone remedy that God has provided for our sin?

Taking It Home

8. How would you explain "original sin" to someone who doesn't know Christ? What evidence can you give to this truth in everyday life?
9. How has this study deepened your faith and your understanding of grace?