

Jason Upchurch - Ephesians 2:1-3 - Dangerous Threats to the Doctrine of Sin

This morning we come to one of the most offensive passages in the Bible. In 3 short verses Paul summarizes the Bible's teaching on the doctrine of sin. And it is a devastating summary. We were dead, trespasses, walked in sin and followed Satan, under the wrath of God. That was all of us before salvation.

Now, what's somewhat shocking about this little section here is that Paul has just gone on for a whole chapter about the predestining work of God in the life of believers. How God chose us, loved us, blessed us. But, he says, even though you were chosen before the foundation of the world remember who you were before you were saved.

We were dead in sin. Following Satan. Under the wrath of God. Now, we usually use this section when presenting the gospel to unbelievers. They're sinners and then we read on about the grace of God through faith in Jesus. And that's fine - that's not a bad thing.

But who is Paul writing to? Christians. The saints in Ephesus. Christians need to be reminded of the truth of our sin as well. We need to be reminded continually about the grace of God in our lives. Especially for those of us who have been in the faith for a while, and our lives have been transformed by God, it's easy to forget where we came from and just how much grace God poured out on us. We can become impatient and frustrated with others. Sometimes we need to be put in our place.

And so that's what Paul does here with the doctrine of sin. Everyone outside of Jesus is dead in sin under the wrath of God. Just that truth right there is incredibly important for us to know and understand and believe and embrace. To put it simply, if we don't really understand the doctrine of sin then we really can't really comprehend the need for the gospel.

Imagine going to your yearly doctor checkup and you feel ok and the doctor says, you really need to start taking this prescription and you need to be on it the rest of your life. You ask why. He says "you're kind of sick and this will help." You ask what are my symptoms, what's worst case scenario here? He says listen, just trust me, this medicine will make your life better. Are you taking that medicine? Of course not.

What if he tells you you have typhoid? You've got all the symptoms and we tested you. You're going to begin to have fever, stomach pain, head ache, no appetite, swollen abdomen, cough, the whole works. You'll be dead soon and it will be excruciating - your bowels just basically split open inside of you and you die of sepsis. But I've got a pill you can take that will save your life. You taking that pill?

Yes. Why? Because you understand the gravity of what's wrong.

Listen, this is how it is with the gospel. If people don't understand the gravity of their sin, own their sin, and know what the result of their sin will be they're never going to believe they need the radical cure of the gospel. If our actions and our speech and our thoughts aren't so bad, then we don't really need redemption for them.

This is why people tell you they think Jesus was a good teacher, they like the parables, they're spiritual but not religious, they read the Bible that one time. Their whole understanding is that Christianity is just a moral book about a nice guy. But they miss - or ignore - the issue of sin because they don't like talking about sin.

You remember the woman at the well? She's a serial adulterer and Jesus calls her out on it. And she's like, "Hey. Let's talk about the location of our temples. Deflection.

Now, I'm going to be honest with you. I sat down and started to write an introduction to this sermon. And the introduction became the sermon. And the reason the introduction became the sermon is because the assault on the doctrine of sin is absolutely massive on every level.

Shocker: people don't like talking about sin. So they will do everything they can to avoid it. The world does everything they can to reject sin, or redefine sin, or minimize what it really is. This is true with unbelievers and it's true with Christians. We often do anything we can to defer accountability. And, just to be fair, there's a good chance I'll ruffle some feathers this morning - so buckle up.

How does the world cover up sin? And how do Christians follow along? I want to talk about 3 main assaults on sin.

1) Psychological Assault on sin. In the last 100 years psychology has had a devastating effect on church and world and our view of sin. Many issues that were once handled by local pastors and just mature believers just discipling other believers have now been relegated to the realm of secular psychology and therapy.

Psychology has so completely infiltrated the church that most Christians don't even know there was a time when it didn't exist. Psychology seeks to understand human actions and motivations but without any biblical foundation.

For the most part the unbelieving world knows something is wrong with people, at least the worst situations. I think there's also a sense in which they know there's something not quite right with all of society and humanity. There is some kind of decay problem.

But because they have no grounding in biblical truth they reject sin and moral categories. And they certainly don't want to use the word sin because that sounds really judgmental and puritanical. And so they try to explain things using every other word possible than sin. And some of this is simply to deflect personal responsibility.

And so what psychology often does is retreat to the disease model, or the chemical imbalance theory. Chemical imbalance theory is basically the idea that the chemicals in our brain - serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine, so on - are out of balance and that's why we have the problems we do. And it's just a theory - no chemical levels are ever tested and no one knows what the proper balance is even if they were.

But the larger picture of psychology is the disease theory - the reason we act poorly is because there is some underlying disease.

So watch how this works.

We don't call people drunkards anymore. What do we call them? Alcoholics. Why? Why don't we use the only word associated with drunkenness in the Bible? Where did alcoholic come from? In the late 1800s and early 1900s as psychology became more prominent doctors sought to explain cravings for alcohol in medical language rather than moral language.

Someone isn't a drunkard - that sounds mean and judgmental. No, they're alcoholics. Psychology defines alcoholism as a disease, like the cold or the flu. It's not the fault of the individual - or at least not all their fault. It's the alcohol that's in control of the person. The alcohol has changed their brain and there's not much they can do. And the result then is that drunkenness isn't a moral failing, it's just a medical condition. Same with drugs and OxyContin and marijuana. So there's no moral failing and also, no real hope of redemption.

The Bible says drunkenness is a sin - slavery to wine, strong drink, drugs which the Bible often connects to idolatry using the term pharmakia. These are moral failings - sin - that can keep you from entering the Kingdom of heaven.

If you're a jerk you have antisocial personality disorder. It's not your fault you can't be nice, you're diseased. No way to repent from that, pastor. I'm sick.

Which view is correct? The Bible.

People are no longer have fear of man - that's a biblical phrase for someone who does not fear God. Anxiety and worry are rooted in fear, not disease. But it's no longer fear of man. What do they have now?

They have general anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and depressive disorders. Almost 1 in 5 Americans is diagnosed with anxiety disorder. Women are almost twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with these disorders. An OB/GYN once admitted to my wife that she prescribes anti-depressants to 80% of her patients. 80%.

There's no attempt to get to the root of the cause. No attempt to care for the soul or even diagnose what's actually causing the problem. What behaviors or lack of belief.

Jesus commands us - it's a command - do not be anxious. And if we are anxious the root is a lack of trust in God. Anxiety is not a disease. Worry is not a disease. It's sin.

Pro. 29:25: The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.

Deut 31:6: Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you.

You either fear God or you fear people, like Jesus says.

Psychology says "it's not your fault!" "It's your diseased brain." It's a disease like the measles. We'll try to help you cope. Again, they remove all moral, spiritual dimensions to the issue.

Some people will push back and say, we can't call it a sin. We're not psychologists, how can we possibly weigh in on these matters?

Two reasons. First, if the Bible addresses the issue, it's 100% fair game for us to address in the Bible's terms. If the Bible calls anxiety sin, what is it? It's sin. And the Bible calls us to repent from it. And live a life that is completely free from anxiety and worry. It's actually possible.

These aren't just semantics, sanctification is at stake.

Second reason we can push back, what the psychological world doesn't tell you, is that it changes their own definitions of all these every 15 years or so. They update a book called the DSM - the diagnostics and statistics manual. There have been 8 versions since it came out in the 1950s with several major overhauls of the whole system. In 1994 it added 297 disorders that didn't exist in the previous 4 versions.

And that there is no unanimous agreement on these diagnoses or whether they should even be in the book. People in the psychological field fight over the definitions all the time. You think Calvinists and Arminians argue...wait till you see 2 psychologists go rounds on the criteria changes of the DSM.

And I mention that book because that's the Bible of psychologists and their Bible changes all the time. We don't need to be afraid of psychology.

The next time you hear a psychological diagnosis - a label - just go look it up. Ask ChatGPT. What is the diagnostic criteria for PTSD according to DSM 5? Bi Polar? Schizophrenia? Some of these things are just lists sins. Some of these are lists traumas that we need to be patient with while holding people to account for behavior. Some of these, seriously, are descriptions of demonic activity.

This redefinition of behavior is pervasive in psychology. We're no longer lovers of self which the Bible condemns, we have narcissistic personality disorder. We're just destined to be manipulative and dysfunctional and maybe we can cope. But it's not our fault.

What psychology does is eliminate the doctrine of sin. There's no more moral judgment. There's no more more personal accountability. There's only mental illness and diseases - that can't be measured, only somewhat controlled.

Sadly, because there is very little accountability there's really no hope that psychology offers either. If you get labeled in psychology that label just hangs over you forever. **Turn to 1 Cor. 6** for just a moment. Look at the difference between psychology and the gospel. **Read 6:9-11**

The Bible calls these things sin, calls these things wrong, assumes we're accountable. But the gospel gives us hope. Those whose lives were defined by these things are not defined by them any longer. As such were some of you. That's who you were - but no longer. In Christ we're washed, sanctified and justified.

In Christ we're new creations who can put those old ways to death.

Side: I'm pretty hard on psychology because I think in America psychology is the biggest threat within the church for explaining behavior and problems. The church has allowed secular, godless psychology to replace the simple truths of the Bible and is used in therapy basically everywhere. Even so-called Christian therapy.

Things that used to be sin or matters of obedience and discipline are rejected. And many Christians no longer even think they're capable of giving obvious life advice because they're not a counselor, they don't have a PhD, they don't know what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 says about eating disorders or cutting or depression so how could they possibly help?

Rom 15:14: I am satisfied about you brothers, that you are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and able to instruct - counsel - one another.

If you have the Word of God you can counsel anyone. We have everything we need in the Word for life and godliness.

1 Cor. 10:13: No temptation has overtaken you except that which is what? Common to man.

People got drunk 2000 years ago. They had addictions. They had PTSD. They were narcissistic - where do we think that word narcissism came from? Narcissus from Greek mythology. It's been around a while. The gospel was and is what they need to live godly lives.

I will say that Psychology is fairly decent at describing behavior and patterns. I don't usually take issue with the descriptions. I do take issue with their explanation as to **why** people behave the way they do and I take issue with their **solutions**.

2) Sociological Assault on Sin. Turning from psychology to sociology, people want to reduce personal problems and societal problems to systems of oppression and systemic injustice. This is the whole woke movement which is just Marxism repackaged - and the church should push back on it.

The reason it's called woke is that presumably we are waking up from our societal fog and realizing that for decades and centuries - this whole time - our society has been taking part in systemic racism and sexism and power structures. It's really a Marxist view of oppression and class struggle repackaged.

So, how this works out is that sin is excused or eliminated for different classes of people. It's okay for people of color to riot and burn down cities because it's justifiable rage from societal oppression. They deserve to riot because they've been put down and oppressed for so long.

No. It's sin. We don't burn down peoples' buildings and homes and loot because people who were never slave holders are a different color than people who have never been slaves.

This spills into men and women's roles as well. Since women have been oppressed all these years by being wives and mothers they need to overcome their systems of oppression and defeat the patriarchy. They should be able to join the special forces and do all the things men can do even when it's obvious there are differences and even prohibitions against it in Scripture.

Society says that being a stay at home mom and wife is actually oppressive. Doing what God has designed women to do is a travesty. We have to dismantle the patriarchy and resist social oppression.

So women are no longer encouraged to marry and keep their homes and raise children. They are told to freeze their eggs, pursue corporate life, pursue military service, pursue sexual promiscuity, pursue positions of power

and influence. Women and other minorities are given advantages in hiring and academia because we've missed just how oppressive we've become.

Now, maybe this sounds out there to you, but this has affected major Christian institutions and figures in American Christian culture. It's affected the Southern Baptist Convention. JD Greear the former president of the Southern Baptist convention openly admitted to passing over qualified men and qualified white people because women and people of color have a greater wisdom than white guys. Matt Chandler has done the same thing. David Platt is the same way. 9 Marks also embraces some of this teaching.

The Gospel Coalition - a great online resource of theology for years - decided to embrace the Marxist social oppression agenda. It's affected our Presbyterian friends as well. Tim Keller was woke, Ligon Duncan promotes this nonsense as well.

And so what happens is that all the commands in Scripture to show no partiality are gone. All the truths about that there is no slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female, but we are one in Christ Jesus - those truths are jettisoned. And rather than calling behaviors sin, they are justified because of oppression. If you or anyone you know has ever been oppressed in any way, you are entitled to privileged treatment. And the more oppressed you are, the more your sinful actions are justified.

Again, this isn't nebulous and out there - this is being taught by people within our circles.

So the doctrine of sin is attacked by psychology, sociology.

3) Evolutionary Biology

Evolutionary biology says that we're just advanced animals. There's really no difference in value between us and a monkey or us and dog except that we've evolved more.

And so when it comes to behavior, evolutionists believe that what is happening is what ought to happen. It's called the is/ought connection.

Lions aren't in sin when they have multiple sexual partners, we're advanced lions, so promiscuity is fine.

If you ask someone who believes in evolution for how they defend their view of morality the best they can come up with is conforming to social norms.

But don't judge them. For an unbeliever, moral judgment is the greatest possible threat. It's greatest possible offense. That's why so many unbelievers love to quote "Judge not." They have no idea where that passage is - Matthew 7 - and they don't rest: lest you be judged. First take the plank out of your own eye, then judge your brother.

Jesus is saying don't judge hypocritically.

These are all ways the world seeks to deny sin. To redefine it or escape it.

What does Paul teach us about sin back in Ephesians? With our time remaining, I just want to define sin.

1) Define Sin. Read 1-3

Paul here says we were dead in our sins and trespasses. Before we were Christians, before we were saved, we were dead. Dead spiritually. That is, we had no spiritual life within us.

There are some people who want to say that before we come to faith in Jesus we're just sick. Sin is a sickness, a disease that infects us. But the reality is that the Bible all over portrays those who are unbelievers are dead in sin.

Col. 2:13: you were dead in the your trespasses and the uncircumcised of your flesh.

Salvation is talked of in terms of being raised to life, having eternal life. Our status before salvation is that we were dead.

What does it mean to be dead? It means that we had no capacity to please God or choose God or even understand the depths of the gospel because we're dead.

Imagine going to a morgue because a friend died. And they pull out the cold body and you say to the body "Hey, do you want an oak casket or a hickory casket?" That would be crazy because the person is what? Dead.

That's an unbeliever, spiritually speaking. It's not that unbelievers can't understand anything. It's that as it relates to God, they are without any ability to choose God or save themselves or even fully love and know the gospel.

Now, you can see why this is offensive to people. Imagine telling your neighbor he's dead in sin and he follows after Satan. That's a hard pill to swallow.

So what is sin?

We talk about sin all the time. What is it? For kids, usually I define sin as anything we do, say or think that's against God. I think that was an Awana definition from decades ago but it's not bad.

It's any action contrary to God. Mom says don't hit your brother, you hit your brother that's sin.

God says don't lie, we lie, that's sin.

It could also be non-action. Mom says do your chores - you don't do your chores. That's sin. God says be generous to your neighbor in need, you're not, that's sin

There are sins of commission - sins we commit - we do. And there are sins of omission - things we don't do but we should.

James 4:17: The one who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

So it's not just stuff we do, it's also stuff we don't do that we should. And this goes for our words and our thoughts as well.

Wayne Grudem gives a more formal definition in line with theologians throughout the ages: sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in action, attitude, or nature.

This is a more formal definition, but it's not far from the kid's definition. And I like it for 2 elements. First, because it includes our attitude. We are called to obey God joyfully in all things. If you do the right thing but you have a bad attitude even that is sin. Now, it's better to obey with a bad attitude than disobey.

There's a lot of people who somehow think if they can't obey with a good attitude they're not going to obey at all. Try that with the speed limit or paying taxes. Dear IRS, I didn't feel joyful about paying taxes so I'm not going to. Good luck.

Dear Mom, please bail me out of jail for going 50 in a 25 because I wasn't happy going 25. No, you should obey no matter what you feel, but you should repent from your bad attitude.

God wants us to obey with a cheerful heart. Our attitude is important.

The other reason I like this definition better is that it includes our nature. "Wayne Grudem: sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in action, attitude, or nature."

We are sinners by nature. **Read 2:1**

The Bible teaches what we call original sin. In the Garden of Eden when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, it didn't just affect him. It affected all of humanity. All of humanity was plunged into sin and death and guilt. We are guilty of sin the moment we are conceived.

RC Sproul: We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners.

That's our nature. It's like breathing air, or drinking water. Sin is just what we do. We arrive in the world spiritually dead because we are in Adam. He is our federal head.

Did you ever wonder why it was only after Adam ate the fruit that their eyes were opened? Eve ate first, but they only fell when Adam ate. And Adam is the one Paul talks about in Romans 5. Why? Because he was our federal head. His actions trickled down to all humanity.

I remember talking with my step dad when I was first a Christian and I asked him if he believe the Bible. I didn't know what he believed. And he said no. It was stupid to think that he had to burn in hell forever because some guy ate an apple thousands of years ago when God told him not to. Now, that's pretty harsh, but it's actually an accurate assessment.

But you know what he missed? There's another head. Another federal head who's better than Adam. It's Jesus Christ. Just as in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive.

Listen, the Bible storyline is that sin entered in through Adam and death through sin. The reason we die is because of sin. But the Lord Jesus completely reverses that. Now, through faith in Jesus we are no longer condemned in our sin. We are set free to live lives of righteousness.

We're no longer slaves to our sins. We're new creations in Christ. We don't excuse or redefine our sins, we just repent from our sins.

See, what many people think is oppressive in Christianity is actually freedom. Jesus gives us victory over sin. Through him we can conquer sin and put it death because he was put to death for us.

And he rose that we might live in him. We'll look more at sin next week.

Pray