

The Nature of Man: A Bible Study

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This study discusses what I believe to be the Biblical view on the nature of man, with a special emphasis on the Orthodox doctrine of Original Sin. In most Christian churches, it is commonly taught that men have an innately sinful nature. That is, after the first sin committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, part of the curse of God was that all mankind became cursed with a nature bent towards evil. Because of this sinful nature, it is taught that men have no ability to choose God, or any good which would satisfy God. Salvation, then, is not attainable without a miracle of God's grace, which is a supernatural change which actually changes the nature of man from evil to good. In this way, it is taught, that men are saved by this involuntary regeneration.

I will present a different view in this study. I find no fair basis in the scripture for the views described above. Instead, I find these things to be true. First, God created man in His image. He gave them (and us) a flesh, a body which has God-given self-preservation mechanisms. He gave them (and us) a law, or commandment. He made us with the freedom to obey or disobey this commandment. In this way, God would reap a harvest of people who were truly His -- people who freely chose to obey Him and His ways. Now, throughout time, and especially in the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus, God has displayed incredible amounts of mercy and kindness (grace) towards mankind. Since our first parents freely chose to sin, God made His wonderful plans for the redemption of those who would be His in the future. He forgave (and forgives) sin, when men come to Him with contrite hearts which hear His word and choose His ways.

Before we continue, please consider these things. It is uncomfortable to consider viewpoints which are different than those we have embraced. However, only good can come from such a consideration, when the study is done in love. If the study presents the correct viewpoint, then truth overcomes error, and everyone is blessed by removing error from their belief systems. On the contrary, if the study is in error, then everyone is blessed by the further clarification of their view. No risk is involved, other than the anxiety that always comes with a potential change.

Charles G. Finney, in the preface of his *Systematic Theology*, said this before presenting his views in this subject:

- 7. If any of my brethren think to convince me of error, they must first understand me, and show that they have read the book through, and that they understand it, and are candidly inquiring after truth and not "striving for masteries." If my brother is inquiring after truth, I will, by the grace of God, "hear with both ears, and then judge." But I will not promise to attend to all that cavaliers may say, nor to notice what those impertinent talkers and writers may say or write who must have controversy. But to all

honest inquirers after truth I would say, Hail! My brother! Let us be thorough. Truth shall do us good.

First, let's consider the circumstances of the Original Sin, or the Fall of Man:

1. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. They were innocent, having committed neither good nor evil.
2. God gave the commandment "Do not eat of the fruit of that tree, for in the day you eat of it, you will surely die." In this case, the clear line of moral law was drawn. Obedience was to abstain from that one tree. Disobedience, or sin, was to eat of the fruit of that tree.
3. Satan presented the lie. "You won't surely die ... you'll be like God!"
4. Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, in willful disobedience to the known command of God.
5. Adam and Eve knew of their guilt - they instantly realized their nakedness, and the need to run from God since they were guilty.
6. God kept his part of the bargain: men would surely die. This is the punishment for sin, and the punishment all mankind bears to this day.

Next, we'll look at the curse which God enumerated in Genesis 3:14 - 19

1. To the serpent: he was cursed above all cattle and every beast of the field.
2. To the serpent: he was cursed to crawl on his belly and eat dust.
3. To the serpent: enmity was placed between the serpent and the woman, and their respective seed. The woman and the serpent would inflict mutual bruises.
4. To the woman: Pain multiplied in the bearing of children.
5. To the woman: Desire for the husband.
6. To the man: The ground was cursed - hard work was now necessary for survival.
7. To the man: The ground was further cursed with thorns and thistles
8. To the man (and all mankind): "Dust you are, and unto dust you will return." In other words -- certain death.

Now, an analysis of the first sin:

- There is no place in this episode, nor in any other passage in Genesis or the other books of the Pentateuch which suggest that God changed the nature of men from good (or innocent) to sinful, so that men would be wholly unable to choose good without an actual physical supernatural intervention.
- The mechanism, or process of sin, has never changed from that first day until today. We are made exactly the same as our first parents, except that we don't have bodies which will last 900+ years (until the resurrection). As Adam and Eve were given a choice between the commandment of God and the desire of their flesh, so we are given the same choice in every moral (spiritual) decision we make.
- If God had in any way tainted the makeup of Adam and Eve so that they had a physical, or uncontrollable instinct to choose either good or evil, we would look upon this scenario and say "that's not fair!" Neither bias would be acceptable. If God had created Adam and Eve with a bent or instinct to choose good, He would have no pleasure in their choice of good, since they would have had no choice. Their choice would have been programmed, not **real**. Likewise, if they were predisposed towards the choice of evil, we could rightly call God unjust. He would have made creatures, given them a commandment which He knew they couldn't do, then punished them for doing exactly what they could choose to avoid!
- If today, God had tainted our makeup in any way regarding our choice of good or evil, that would be equally unjust, and impossible. We are each responsible before God for the choice of His ways (righteousness) or selfish ways (sin). It would be unjust for God to require our obedience while creating us with the inability to obey. In addition, God would not have real followers if He supernaturally made them able to choose Him. Neither sin nor righteousness is **real** unless it comes from a heart motivated to either sin or do good.

Let's examine some scriptures which speak to the issue at hand:

James 1:13-16 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

James 4:17 Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.

- These foundational concepts in James show the fact that sin is a free choice.

John 9:41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

John 15:24 "If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well."

- Men sin when they choose to, when they knowingly disobey the revealed light from God, and choose to serve themselves to the exclusion of God and their neighbor. Since these people to whom Jesus was speaking freely chose to do what they did, they had no excuse, and their sin remained. Had they not been able to 'see', they would have not been held responsible by God for their actions.

Rom 1:16-21 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, *because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.* For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

- Men have the ability to choose God because He has given us the light of creation. He expects us to choose Him, and when we don't choose Him we have no excuse.

Rom 2:5-8 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

- We are commanded to obey God, to do good, and seek for Him. This would not be commanded if it were impossible. We are the ones with the stubborn and unrepentant hearts -- and if God had created our natures so that we could do nothing but evil, we would not be responsible for our sin, God would be.

Rom 2:9-15 There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have

sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.

- The matters of Sin and Righteousness are clearly matters of the hearts, and motives. Those who have hearts which love God and His ways, please Him. Those who have hearts which follow their own lusts, violate their conscience, and God's law.

Rom 5:12-14 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned -- for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

- The point in these verses is that death is reigning -- all men die as a result of the curse. This verse does not say that all men **sin** because of the curse, but that all die. All people sin because they freely choose to, just like those who serve God and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior do so because they freely choose to.

Rom 6:7-12 For he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts.

- We overcome sin in our life by realizing that Christ died to save us, and so freed us from the bondage of sin -- which was *death*. We are no longer subject to the *penalty* of sin, and so, should no longer sin now that we understand this great truth.

So, what is the summary perspective being presented here?

Sin and righteousness are, and must be, completely voluntary acts. Everywhere in the scripture, the message is "Obey God, and flee sin." These commands are given to men because God created us with the ability to choose Him. If God had created us with a tendency towards evil or good, our choice of either would be void of any truth. In reality, the choices we make are ours, and God accepts us or rejects based on our response to His light.

Wait a minute, what about God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness?

Let not the student misunderstand: a 'works-based' salvation is not being advocated here. First of all, men are mortal, and do not in any way deserve favor by God. Any favor given to men by God is an act of God's grace, or kind favor, upon us. God, in His mercy and for His higher purposes, has chosen to make forgiveness for sins available, and has provided a hope of eternal life to all men who will accept Him on His gracious terms. It is by God's grace that we have a plan of salvation available to us at all.

God's grace does not *cause* the salvation, in the sense that it forces the will of men to choose Him in any way. Without God's grace no hope for anything past the grave would be available, since there is nothing men can do to make themselves immortal. When we accept God in the way He has asked us to, namely, to accept His Son and follow Him, we are freely accepting the gift He has given. This is the clear teaching of both Old and New Testaments.