

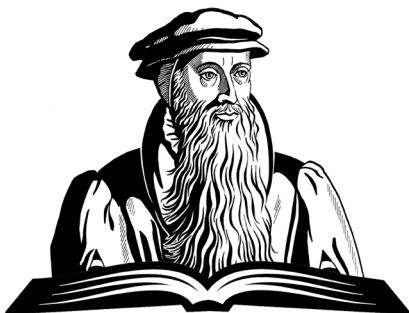
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 3:
**ANTHROPOLOGY—
THE DOCTRINE OF MAN**

Lecture 5
THE NATURE OF SIN



The John Knox Institute
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Module 3 ~ The Doctrine of Man

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 3 ~ Lecture 5 **The Nature of Sin**

There are several international classical music competitions that are held throughout the year. One of the most famous is the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto. And you will have competitors who come from various countries. They'll have spent their whole entire life, hours and hours a day, seeking to master the piano, the instrument of the piano. And they'll have trained under some of the best teachers in all of the world. There's a great deal of stress, a great deal of buildup, a great deal of pressure in coming to competitions like this, and everything hangs in the balance—the whole career that they've been seeking to build. And there will be a panel of judges that will be present, along with an audience, for this competition. And if they make one mistake, if they miss a single note in a very long and very complex piece, they are immediately disqualified. The least infraction could result in their whole life's work being lost as a result of it. Well there are many other examples of the same sort of thing: people that have studied hard in school, and preparing for a significant entrance exam to a prestigious university that they want to attend, or many other examples, where they're put to the test, and the smallest mistake could have catastrophic implications for their future and their life.

This illustrates for us something about the Nature of Sin. God has given to us his holy law, and that law works its way, by way of application, into the deepest crevices of man's being. And what we learn in the Bible is that the smallest infraction, the failure to do one thing that the law requires, or a failure in violating even the least of what God's law forbids results in catastrophic implications. Sinners are justly, equitably, and fairly condemned for the least sin. God's standard is high, demanding of all of his creatures. And we have a sense of the weight then, and the significance of what sin is.

Well, this series of lectures in this third module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Man. So the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about man, both before and after the fall and the entrance of sin into the world. In the last few lectures, we've considered aspects of the Nature of Man. In the present lecture, we will explore the doctrine of the Nature of Sin. And we'll begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture in order to open up our consideration of the Nature of Sin.

In Acts, chapter 12, the end of that chapter, verses 21 to 24, we read: "And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. But the word of God grew and multiplied." So we are drawing from a particular account and personal narrative this time, in the opening of this lecture. Why? Why are we doing that?

Because it provides a vivid illustration of the doctrine that we'll be expounding in this lecture. The account about Herod is very similar to the Old Testament example of Nebuchadnezzar, which you can read about in Daniel 4, verses 28 to 37. You'll remember, there, Nebuchadnezzar is walking about his palace, and he's speaking about how he has the greatest kingdom in the world, and that his kingdom is spread far and wide, and he's heaped to himself power and riches, and so on. The Lord does something similar with Nebuchadnezzar. He too is struck down and sent like a beast into the field for seven years, where his hair grows, and his nails grow, and he's humbled under God's hand. Well, what is vividly exemplified here, in the case of Herod, reflects really the universal nature of sin. So we're taking one example, of one man, and one sin, in order that we might, through that example, see something about the nature of sin itself.

Well, you'll notice a few things. You'll notice that natural man's estimation of himself is grossly inflated. As we've learned in a previous lecture, the minds of men are darkened and blind, unable to see themselves truly. So rather than seeing their need, rather than seeing their sin, they create a figment of imagination, in esteeming themselves more highly than they ought. Now, this is true of all men. All men minimize their sins and maximize the things that they think are virtuous or commendable.

Secondly, we see that all sin deifies man—it's an attempt for man to take the place of God. Sin enthrones self, and it dethrones God. It displaces God's rule, and replaces it with man's rule. Man ends up being the determining factor of what should be and shouldn't be done, and he makes decisions with a false sense of his own autonomy, that he has ability to determine things for himself. And this is an attack on God himself.

Thirdly, man, therefore, cannot take credit for anything, without depriving God of his honor. You'll notice how that passage in Acts 12 says, "the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory." So he was smitten because of a failure to do something positive—to give God glory. And this ties to what Paul says, in Romans 3, verse 23, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." So sin is not just having a high estimation of ourself, it's not just dethroning God, but it is also an attack on the glory of God itself. All sin is directed first and foremost against God himself.

Fourthly, we see that sin is, in its essence, a violation of God's law. So in this case, which of the Ten Commandments are being violated? Well, clearly, the first commandment is being violated—"Thou shalt have no other gods before me;" and the second commandment is being violated, because he's receiving worship to himself. Now we could say that the third commandment is being violated and some of the others as well. But my point here is that sin has to be seen as a violation of an objective standard of God's law summarized in the Ten Commandments.

And then fifthly, we see that sin brings guilt, and that guilt requires punishment, in this life and the life to come. God is just, he is holy, he is righteous, and where guilt is found, that guilt must be satisfied with a penalty. In the case of Herod, he was punished in this life—he was eaten with worms and died; and he was punished in the life to come—he went to hell as well. So this little brief narrative in Acts 12 serves as a window to open up for us something about the Nature of Sin.

And so secondly, let's consider some of the doctrinal details regarding the Nature of Sin, and here we'll get into the substance of this doctrine. So first of all, sin and God's moral law. Sin can only properly be defined by reference to the moral law of God, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. The essence of sin is violating the absolute, objective, revealed will of God. The Bible teaches this. In 1 John 3, verse 4, we read: "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." So there's the Bible's definition: sin is the transgression of the law. You can compare that, for example, to Romans 4, verse 15. Similarly, we read in

Romans 3, verse 20: “for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” So, if we’re going to understand sin, if we’re going to be able to define it properly, to recognize it, to see it in ourselves, in the world, in others, we’re only going to have that knowledge of sin through the law, because it’s a violation of the law. So the Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly teaches, in its answer to question 14, “Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.” So any want of conformity—lack of conformity—unto, or transgression of the law of God. Sin is the failure of full conformity to the standard of holiness in the law. Now, each commandment brings with it both things that it requires, and things that it forbids. So, for example, it may say, “Thou shalt not steal.” So it’s prohibiting or forbidding something. But in each commandment, the opposite, the positive is also required. So rather than just stealing, we need to actually preserve the property, and time, and other resources of our neighbor, and of those that are around us, to state it briefly. Similarly, in the fifth commandment, it says, “Thou shalt honour thy father and mother”—that’s a positive command; the negative is also required. So that forbids therefore, the dishonoring, disobeying, disrespecting of our parents, or lawful authority. So each commandment has things that it requires and forbids. And if you look at the Westminster Shorter Catechism, when it’s expounding the Ten Commandments, it provides us with questions: What does this commandment require? Another question: What does this commandment forbid?

We also need to recognize the spiritual nature of the law. So it doesn’t just apply to our hand, it also applies to our heart and our head. It penetrates into every crevice of our being. Jesus makes this clear in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5, when he’s expounding the Ten Commandments, he’s saying, The law says, Thou shalt not commit adultery, but if you look upon a woman to lust after her, you’ve committed adultery in your heart. You see how the spiritual nature of the law goes down into our motives, and our thoughts, and our words, and our ambitions, and so on.

We can also note then, that every sin can be traced back to one or more of the Ten Commandments. Every sin in the whole world is connected in one way or another to one or more of the Ten Commandments. And here, what might be helpful, is to look at the Westminster Larger Catechism, which is much bigger than the Shorter, and its exposition of the Ten Commandments. And you’ll note that there are long answers to what sins are forbidden, and what duties are required. And what’s happening is that the Westminster Assembly was going through the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and it was looking for examples of various types of sin, both internal and external, that derive from the Ten Commandments. And they string them all together to give us a more searching, thorough understanding of that commandment.

It can be helpful, for example, in a simpler way, it can be helpful to think of two categories of sin, in relationship to the law. We have on one side, sins of commission. You might notice, in English, the word “commit” there—so sins of commission. Those sins are doing what the law forbids. On the other hand, we have sins of omission. In English, you can see the word “omit” there—sins of omission. And those sins are leaving undone what the law demands of us. As you can see, the word “ought”—what you ought to do, or ought not to do—has no meaning apart from a norm from a law. Ultimately, because the law reflects the character of God, the Ten Commandments are a transcript of God’s holiness; well then, to violate the law is to attack God himself.

Well there are several Biblical words for “sin” in the Old and New Testaments. These words for sin are translated into a variety of different English synonyms. You have lawlessness, transgression, iniquity, unrighteousness, evil, rebellion, wickedness, debt, and so on. But a few of the Hebrew words, in the Hebrew language that are translated “sin” convey helpful pictures about the nature of sin. One of those words is a word that means “to miss the mark.” So picture having a

bow and arrow, and pulling the arrow back, and you let the arrow fly, and you miss the target, you miss the bull's-eye on the target—it goes to the right or to the left. That's a picture of missing the mark. That's the nature of sin. The bull's-eye, if you will, is the law of God. Another word means "crooked" or "bent." So rather than straight, walking straight, according to the will of God, there's a crookedness and a bentness. A third word means "to exceed boundaries." So God has given, in his law, boundaries that we are to live within, and when we cross those boundaries, we are sinning. So these are some examples of helpful pictures for us in understanding the relationship of sin to the law.

Secondly, sin, law, and love. So law and love are not opposites. There is an inextricable connection between them. Understand this connection further opens up our insight into the Nature of Sin. The Lord summarized the moral law in terms of love—Matthew 22, verses 37 to 40, "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." So here is Christ summarizing the first four commandments as love to God, and then commandments 5 to 10 as love for our neighbor.

For the believer, love is expressed by obedience to the law, not as a way unto salvation, like earning of salvation, but as the fruit of gratitude for the salvation that the believer has received. That's why Paul can say, in Romans 7, that the law is holy, just and good, and that he delights in it after the inward man. Similar language to David, in Psalm 119, "Oh, how I love thy law." Love for God results in love for the character of God that is seen in the law. So Christ says to his disciples, in John 14:15, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." Likewise, we read in 1 John 5, verse 3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous"—they're not burdensome to the believer. It's a law of liberty, as Paul says elsewhere. In building on this, Paul goes on to say, in Romans 13, verse 10, "therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." We can't actually see the law fulfilled in its totality without love—love for God and our neighbor—being at the heart of it, and emanating through all that we do.

So this makes clear the Nature of Sin, that it is radically opposed to love. Second commandment, Exodus 20, verse 5, speaks of God "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." Hate me—it's the opposite of love, sin is. So sin is not just against law, sin is relational. It is against God himself. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, and he had killed, murdered Uriah, her husband, and when he speaks about this, in Psalm 51, verses 3 and 4, he says, "I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest." David saw that the sin against Bathsheba, against Uriah, against Israel, against his house, and so on, was ultimately sin against God. Indeed, the Bible refers to sin, one of the common pictures frequently used—the imagery in the Old Testament, is that of harlotry—of whoredom. Sin is harlotry, it's whoredom, idolatry is depicted in gross and disgusting ways. The Nature of Sin is something defiling and that reviles God—something that should be repugnant to the believer's heart, the idea, the grossness of a harlot or a whore—this is the character of sin, not true love, quite the opposite.

Thirdly, we need to think about the relationship of sin and guilt. So guilt, the word, as a theological term, expresses the relationship of sin to the penalty of the law. So when we say "guilt" it's not the subjective feeling of guiltiness, but the objective fact of being found guilty of breaking God's law. You know, if a criminal comes to court and stands before a judge, and the judge says,

“I declare you guilty,” he’s not speaking about the internal feelings of the criminal. He may or may not feel guilty about what he did. He’s making a declaration about the criminal’s actions in relationship to law—he’s broken the law, he’s guilty.

And there’s a twofold aspect to guilt, and this may be helpful for us. First of all, we think of guilt, theologically, as the intrinsic moral evil. So here we’re talking about the essence of sin, or the sinfulness of sin, of our fallen state. This is something that is permanently a part of every sinful deed and action. It is an intrinsic moral evil, and it is a violation of God’s law—all sin everywhere. So this pertains to unworthiness, and it pertains to demerit, and it pertains to deserving punishment. This is of the essence of sin. It cannot be removed from the essence of sin. So the believer is forgiven, and the believer is justified, declared righteous by God, but that does not change the Nature of Sin itself, in this first aspect of guilt.

But then secondly, a second aspect is not the essence of sin, but it’s relation to the penal sanction of the law. So it requires the actual penalty, punishment, and satisfaction of God’s wrath, for violating the law. And this guilt, this aspect of guilt can be vicariously removed. It can be removed. It can be transferred from the sinner and credited to the account of Christ, as a substitute. That penalty and punishment is borne by Christ, and God’s wrath is satisfied, for violation of the law. That guilt is therefore removed from the believer. And this is the most common use of the word “guilt” in theology.

I’ll just say briefly that along with this guilt, we also have the pollution of sin—the stains of sin, the defilement of sin. And this is twofold. Negatively, the absence of original righteousness, which Adam had before the fall, and positively, the real presence of sin, as a staining, polluting, defiling influence upon us.

Fourthly, we can think about the relationship of the Nature of Sin and punishment. So we’ve noted that guilt demands punishment for sin, something that is removed in the believer’s life. That punishment can take place in this world, and it can take place both inwardly and outwardly. So punishment in this world takes place inwardly, the Bible says, through things like blindness of the mind, being given over to a reprobate mind, strong delusions, hardness of heart, the horror of conscience, vile affections—those are punishments. Outwardly, it can also happen, the curse of God upon his creatures. All of the evils that befall us in our bodies, our names, our estates, our relations, and employments, and death itself. We saw that with Herod; the Lord struck him and he was eaten with worms. So those are punishments in this world.

But then there are the punishments in the world to come: everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God; grievous torments in soul and body forever. Not only does the Lord’s omnipresence include hell, he alone reigns over it, though his comforting presence is withheld from that place. And the manifestations of his justice, righteousness, wrath, and indignation are expressed there.

Fifthly, there’s a relationship of sin and misery. Sin and misery always go together. The consequences of the entrance of sin at the fall brought great misery. Where sin is, misery is—where misery is, sin is. Where sin is removed, misery is removed. But in the entrance of sin at the fall, think of the great misery. It resulted in the loss of communion with God. It resulted in God’s displeasure and curse. It made, by nature, men to be children of wrath. It made them bondslaves to Satan. This is misery. It brought death—the mortality of the body; secondly, spiritual death, through the corruption of the soul, and then of course, the sentence of eternal death. It made them justly liable to all the punishments in this world, and that to come. And this gives us a cursory summary of the Nature of Sin.

Thirdly, next, we must consider some errors related to the Nature of Sin. First of all, God alone has authority to define sin—we saw that it's defined in his law. So when we refuse to call something sin that God calls sin, or alternatively, when we call something sin that God does not call sin, we are usurping God's authority and taking it for ourselves. We have to stick to the book, to the Bible, in terms of defining sin—not adding a list of things that God doesn't say are sinful, and making those taboos sinful; nor failing to call sinful what God calls sinful. So there's lots of confusion. The world and the church miss the mark on both sides. They'll excuse things as not important that God says are important, and then they'll elevate other things that God has not called sin.

Secondly, contrary to natural man, we need to understand that sin is not just human weakness, it's not just mistakes that people make, it's not oversight or other foibles—it is an attack on God's very character and being. And if we're going to think Biblically, we need to think on those terms, that it is an attack on God himself. That shows the seriousness of it.

Thirdly, it helps us in what we'll eventually consider in the module on the Doctrine of Salvation. It helps set the background for the nature of salvation. Salvation must address real guilt. It's not just moral reformation—people trying to do things a little better than they did before, or stop doing things that they were doing wrong. No, there's guilt here—a penalty must be paid. There's an atonement, a substitutionary atonement that is necessary. This actually places Christ's substitutionary atonement at the center of the gospel, and at the center of the Bible. We need a perfect righteousness that is in perfect keeping with God's law credited to our account—the righteousness of Christ, and we need our sin to be atoned for, and for Christ to satisfy God's wrath against them.

Well, fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. First, we need to grasp the abhorrent Nature of Sin. We need to see sin as the evil of evils, cultivating a hatred for sin, as harlotry, and as against God himself. We need to feel the weight of sin. It's not abstract, it's not just vague, it's not just something here and there. We need to think about the details of every single sin is a gigantic mountain or weight upon us. As the Bible says, our sins go way above our heads, that they are more than the number of hairs that we have on our head. As the psalmist says, in Psalm 130, "If thou shouldst mark iniquities, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared."

And the evil of sin, seeing the evil of sin is manifest most clearly in the cross itself. We need to glory in the cross. We need to think about the cross. We need to meditate upon the cross. There we see both love of God, and the holiness of God. How evil is sin? Here is the spotless Lamb of God, the eternal Son incarnate, as the Word of God, who has obeyed all things according to God's will. And here is Christ being subjected to this torment, being brought under the punishment and penalty for sin, having the wrath of God poured into his soul, on behalf of his people. And as we meditate upon that and think about the details of all that that entails, it shows us the evil of sin, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else. And it leads us to see that the greatness of sin shows us our great need for a great Savior. Every sin—there are many, many, many, many sins that you are not even aware of in your life, and the Lord has to pay for all of the sins of his people, and for all of his people, from Adam to the end of time. This shows our need for a great Savior. There's only one, and one alone, who can redeem us from the wrath of God, and reconcile us unto him.

But then fourthly, it reinforces the joy of the believer, the joy of deliverance from the power of sin here. God has broken the shackles, he's delivered from the slavery to sin! What a joy this is! And the joy of deliverance from the presence of sin hereafter in heaven! You know, heaven is a glorious place, because sin will be eradicated entirely, and the believer will, with a full-hearted devotion and love for the Lord, in holiness, worship, and adore him. There is joy, both in the

deliverance from the power of sin here and now, and the presence of sin hereafter.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the Nature of Sin. We'll continue to consider what the Bible teaches about the transgression of God's law in the lectures to come. In the next lecture, we will turn our attention back to the beginning, to Adam's first sin, and its ongoing implications for the human race. We'll seek to deepen our understanding of the Doctrine of Original Sin.