

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

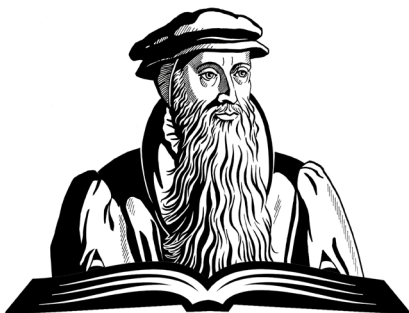
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 3:*

### ANTHROPOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

*Lecture 6*

### THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN



The John Knox Institute  
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### *Module 3 ~ The Doctrine of Man*

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## *Module 3 ~ Lecture 6*

# The Doctrine of Original Sin

Our understanding of man’s natural condition has far-reaching implications. For example, if a person believes that men are born innocent, or born as a blank slate, or that people, at root, are really good people, then it will affect how they view the problems of humanity, and the solutions that they propose. Some think that, for example, education is the answer to the problems of mankind. If you just provide people with enough information, or the right information, then all will be well. We could cite other examples of the same kind of thing. But the Bible gives us a very different perspective. It reveals the truth that the fallen state of mankind shows us that people are sinners, and the only solution for their desperate condition can be found in the gospel, and God’s salvation from sin. To make this even clearer, let’s begin with a thought-provoking question. It may sound tricky at first, but think carefully about the answer. So here’s the question: Are we sinners because we sin, or do we sin because we’re sinners? Are we sinners because we sin? Or do we sin because we’re sinners? Well, as you reflect on this question, you can discern that the question has to do with the order of things. Do we first sin, and thereby become sinners, or are we first sinners, and therefore sin, as a consequence of that sinful nature? Well, the Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin teaches us that it is the latter, that we are born with a sinful nature, and our actual sins—the sins we commit—flow from that sinful nature.

The series of lectures in this third module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Man. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about man, both before and after the fall—the entrance of sin into the world. In this lecture, we will explore the Doctrine of Original Sin, and, as has been our pattern over the course of these lectures, we’ll begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture, in order to open up our consideration of the Doctrine of Original Sin.

One of the key texts is Romans 5, verses 12 to 19. We won’t read the whole passage here, but it opens in verse 12, with these words: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” Paul then goes on to explain what is meant by the words, “all have sinned.” He does so by drawing a contrast between Adam and Christ, and the connection between Adam and his posterity—all mankind—on one side, and Christ and his people—the elect—on the other side. What we learn is that there is a union between Adam and his posterity. Adam serves as a representative of the human race. Verse 12 says all sinned, and the verses that follow explain that this is an assertion that *in Adam* all sinned. In other words, it is not merely a reference to all people sinning in their lives at some point. Rather, it is affirming that all men were included in Adam’s first sin. Notice how this is reinforced in the words that follow, if you have your Bible. In verse 14, we have Paul affirming that death reigned

in those who had not sinned like Adam. Death reigned because of the one sin of Adam himself, not the actual sins of his posterity. In verse 15, we learn that by the trespass of the one, the many died. In verse 16, we see that the judgment was from one unto condemnation. In verse 17, by the trespass of the one, Adam, death reigned through the one. In verse 18, we see that through one trespass, judgment came upon all men unto condemnation. And then in verse 19, through the disobedience of the one man, Adam, the many were constituted sinners. Well, we'll expound the implications of this in what follows in this lecture. But we see here that the Bible teaches that the first sin of the first man, Adam, had direct implications on the whole human race. Adam was not merely acting for himself, but rather, was acting as a representative of all his posterity. Well, this sets before us the Doctrine of Original Sin.

And so, secondly, let's consider some of the details regarding original sin. In Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 6, paragraph 3, we read: "They"—that is, our first parents—"being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin"—the first sin—"was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation." So how do we define original sin then? Well, it is the sin and corruption that has come to all men descending by ordinary generation from Adam. Augustine used this language of original sin to include the following concepts. First, we are all one in the state of sin. Secondly, it is derived from Adam's first sin. And then, thirdly, this sinful nature is the source of all of our actual sins. Now, remember what we learned in a previous lecture about guilt. When we say "guilt," we're referring to the fact, not to a subjective feeling—a person feels guilty or doesn't feel guilty—but an objective reality—the declaration that someone has broken God's law. They are found guilty of being a transgressor—a violator of God's law.

So the question then is this: How is the guilt of Adam's first sin passed on to his posterity? And in order to understand the relationship between Adam, as a representative of the human race, and all of his posterity that flow from him, we need to understand the Biblical concept of imputation—this is very important. Imputation is a legal term, and it means, "to attribute to," or, "to credit to one's account," or, "to reckon." Now, imputation, this legal term, is not only important for understanding original sin, it is essential for understanding the gospel, because the Bible teaches that there are three imputations. First of all, the one we're concerned with in this lecture—the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity. So, Adam's sin being credited to the account of his posterity. The second is, the imputation of the elect's sin to Christ. So the sins of God's elect people are imputed to Christ—they're credited to his account. They're reckoned to the Lord Jesus Christ, and he then, as the sin-bearer, atones for their sin. And then, thirdly, you have Christ's righteousness imputed to the elect, and received by faith alone. So here, the law obedience, the perfect law-keeping of the Lord Jesus Christ is credited to the account of his elect people. They receive that by faith; they are justified by faith; they are declared righteous in the sight of God, and have access and acceptance before him as a result. So there are these three imputations. So it's important that we understand this idea. The word itself, for example, the word for imputation is used several times in Romans 4, when explaining the gospel. And you'll see the concept, for example, in places like 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21. Where it's speaking of Christ, it says, "For he who knew no sin," became sin, "that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." It's talking about sin being imputed to Christ, and Christ's righteousness being imputed to the believer. Well, we noted that imputation is a legal term, and you can see how this is so fundamental to understanding Biblical doctrine. The relationship of our sin to Christ, as the sin-bearer; the relationship of Christ's righteousness to the elect. Well, the same applies to Adam and his posterity. Adam was serving as a representative of the human race,

and his sin and the guilt of his first sin, in eating the forbidden fruit, is credited to the account, or imputed to all of his posterity. So that we are counted guilty with Adam. Just as Adam was guilty in his sin, we are counted guilty with Adam. So that helps us—this background of understanding the idea of imputation helps us in answering the question, how exactly does the guilt of Adam’s sin get transferred to those of the human race.

Well, another thing, thirdly, under this, is we see that Adam served as a representative then, which speaks of his headship over the human race. So there is a union with Adam, a union between all of his posterity—everyone who’s ever been born into this world—with Adam. This is why 1 Corinthians 15, verse 22 says, “For as *in* Adam all die, even so *in* Christ shall all be made alive,” speaking about union with Adam, “for as *in* Adam,” and it’s contrasted with the believers’ union with Christ, “even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” Paul goes on to expound this later on in that same chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, verses 45 to 49. And so, Adam served as a legal head, as our representative. The effects of the curse, including death, for example, fall upon those who have not yet sinned themselves, by the imputation of the one trespass of the one man, Adam, to his posterity.

We can also speak of Adam, not only as a legal head, but as a natural head as well. He’s the first man, and through Adam and Eve, you have all of the descendents of every race, and tribe, and tongue, and people throughout the whole world. And our physically descending from Adam accounts for our inheriting a corrupt nature. So on the one hand, we’re talking about imputation of guilt of Adam’s sin; we also have those who descend from Adam inheriting a corrupt nature from him as well. And so, when you’re thinking about this union, this union between Adam and his seed, or posterity, the nature of that union is not just his representation as the source of all mankind. So there are some who think, well, you’re in the loins of Adam, and that explains the imputation of guilt, that you’re in the loins of Adam. No, that’s not what’s being spoken of. Nor it is his representation by every individual really being in Adam. In other words, we are all a portion of the human race contained in Adam. That doesn’t get to the point that Paul’s making either. Rather, the correct view of the nature of this union is that he served as a representative head. What Adam did was for himself, and for all of his posterity.

Well, we can go a step further, and we can ask about the nature of imputation itself. We’ve noted that it’s a legal term; we’ve showed how it relates to the relationship of the elect in Christ, and so on. But we can go a little deeper with regards to our understanding of the nature of this imputation. Because the question is, is that imputation mediate, or is it immediate? So, what do we mean by those words? Well, is imputation mediate—in other words, this is speaking of hereditary depravity. And those who would say that the imputation is mediate—“mediate” means, through the means of something, that it comes through other means; in other words, hereditary depravity is the vehicle through which Adam’s guilt is imputed to us. The corrupt nature that we have derived is the ground of our condemnation, not really Adam’s sin itself. And this would be incorrect. This doesn’t do justice to what we find in Romans, chapter 5, verses 12 to 19, which is the fullest passage on the Doctrine of Original Sin. No, rather, we should view the imputation of Adam’s sin as immediate—so, not passing down to posterity through some other means. The guilt of Adam’s first sin was immediately imputed by virtue of his posterity’s union with him—it’s the point of Romans 5. It’s teaching us that the sin of Adam and the death that comes as a result of that guilt to all of his posterity is something immediate. And in that passage, the same is true with regards to judgment as well—the judgment that comes as a result of it.

So in thinking about this, just maybe by way of summary, the imputation of the guilt of Adam’s sin is important for us to understand the Bible. If his guilt is imputed to his posterity, well then,

therefore the penalty and punishment of that guilt, the judgment and death also come to all of his posterity. This explains why children, for example—this is very sad—but children can die within their mother’s womb. Well, how can they die? Because death is the consequence of sin. And the point is, the reason their able to die is because, in union with Adam, they have imputed to them the guilt of sin, and therefore they are subject to death.

We also, in addition, as fallen mankind, inherit a corrupt nature, as those who descended from Adam. So you have guilt, and then you have this corrupt nature; and our actual transgressions, in other words, the sins that we commit ourselves proceed from that original corruption. Listen to how the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 6, paragraph 4, puts it. It says, “From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.” So, going back to that question we asked at the beginning, you can see that we sin because we’re sinners. We begin with a sinful nature, and our actual sins proceed out of that sinful corruption.

Thirdly, we need to think about this doctrine polemically, and consider some of the errors that are related to original sin. There have been those who have attacked this doctrine from the very beginning of the church. I had mentioned Augustine, a fourth-century theologian, earlier in the lecture, and there was a great dispute between him and another man named Pelagius. And Pelagianism, the system of thought that he taught, included the idea that all men are born like Adam, in a state of innocence, and that they learn to sin through bad examples. Well, you can see immediately, this flies in the face of what the Scripture teaches. Augustine confronted this. He refuted this from the Scriptures, using some of the passages, and many others that we have referred to. This notion of being born in a state of innocence, as a blank slate, is something utterly opposed to the Bible. David, for example, in that song of repentance that we sing, in Psalm 51, says that in sin did his mother conceive him. So, he’s recognizing that from the inception of his existence, that he was sinful, that he had a sinful nature. So we need to beware of that old heresy of Pelagianism raising its ugly head again from generation to generation.

Secondly, there are those who hear the Doctrine of Original Sin, and their reaction is, “That’s not fair!” People object, “This doesn’t seem right. We are blamed for what Adam did. We’re guilty because of what Adam did, as our representative.” And you can appreciate the objection. You can see what a person might be thinking, and why they would feel the way that they feel. But we have to be very careful here, because if we were to reject the Doctrine of Original Sin on this ground—that it is unfair, you’re disposing of something else that’s very important. This objection cuts two ways, because, for example, take what we learned about the doctrine of imputation. If you don’t like the idea that Adam’s guilt is imputed to his people, then you have to reject, as well, all that Christ has done. Right? It’s not fair then, on those terms, that the sins of God’s people are credited to the account of Christ, and he has to pay the penalty and punishment for them. It’s not fair that Christ’s perfect record of righteousness is imputed to his people by faith, and they’re justified and made acceptable before God. You see my point. You have to be very careful here. We can’t reject this one side, and think, well, somehow I’m going to take the benefits of the other side, no, these things have to be held together. The fact is that, if God gave us what is fair, we would be doomed. But thankfully, he is just and merciful. He is just and the Justifier of the ungodly through the work of Christ, and he extends mercy where it is unwarranted from our side—undeserved. The Lord bestows mercy upon us. We have to believe what the Scriptures teach, and that means not only the good news about what Christ has done, but the bad news about our union with Adam as well.

The third objection has to do with what we considered in a previous course on the Doctrine of

Decrees. You know, why did God allow Adam to sin? The Westminster Confession takes this up in that same chapter, chapter 6, paragraph 1, it says: “Our first parents, being seduced by the subtilty and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.” We are finite creatures who see and know so little. God is the infinite God of glory. And in that infinite wisdom and power and goodness, God has decreed that the fall would happen, that Adam’s first sin would happen, in order that he might, in his purposes, use it for his own glory, for magnifying the glory of his own great name. And we need to humble ourselves before the Lord, and to put our hands over our mouth, as it were, and to say, “Let God be God, and all glory be to him for his wise disposal.”

Fourthly, we can now draw a few brief practical applications for ourselves. First of all, we cannot downplay the desperation of man’s condition. So, as Christians, we need to resist vehemently all of the pagan notions of man’s inherent goodness and moral purity. People want to think that people are generally good; if we just gave them more information and educated them, we can turn the world into a wonderful place. The Christian rejects this outright. And we have to acknowledge there is nothing that can contend with what the Bible says about how desperate man is in his fallen condition and his inherent sinfulness. This is serious, and a serious truth that has to be contended for.

We also need to see that sin is the root problem of all problems. So people will talk about civil unrest, and wars, and domestic violence, and people have personal problems and struggles, and there’s conflict in families, and in communities, and so on, and so forth. It doesn’t matter what the problem is. I mean, you can look at all the diversity of problems that arise within human experience. They can all be traced back to the root problem of sin itself. Well, this gives the Christian a measure of wisdom, in being able to see things rightly, as God sees them. The Christian isn’t going to be so easily duped into some of the solutions that the world tries to give, to personal problems, family problems, problems between nations, and so on. The Christian recognizes that there is something missing, that it has to be brought down to the root problem, that in fact, problems with nations are best solved by sending missionaries, and that missionaries going and preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and people being brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and given a new heart, and so on, and then the Spirit coming to indwell them, and enabling them to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in Christ’s likeness, that these are the means through which problems are addressed.

And that, of course, highlights, lastly, the inescapable necessity of Christ’s redeeming work that is proclaimed in the gospel. The background of being in Adam accentuates the glory of being in Christ. It shows how desperate we are to be, we must be united by faith, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is in union with him that all of the other benefits and blessings of salvation and grace flow to us. They flow from Christ, who is our Head, to us, who, united to him, are members of his body. He has all the preeminence, because from him, we receive all of the benefits and blessings. And so this accentuates for us the wonder of Christ’s redeeming work which is proclaimed in the gospel.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the Doctrine of Original Sin, and we’ve learned that the problem of the whole human race must be traced back to Adam and his first sin. In the next lecture, we will turn our attention from the past, the beginning of time, to the present. And we will explore more fully man’s fallen nature in an exposition of the Doctrine of Total Depravity.