

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

HAMARTIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Sin

The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us

UNIT 3: THE NATURE OF SIN WHAT SIN IS IN ITS FULLNESS

Lesson 8

Original Sin and Actual Sin The Distinction That Explains Everything

Why We Are Not Sinners Because We Sin — We Sin Because We Are Sinners

“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”

Key Texts: Romans 5:12–19; Psalm 51:5; Ephesians 2:1–3; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22; Genesis 6:5; 8:21

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.”

Psalm 51:5, NASB 1995

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Introduction

The question at the heart of this lesson is one of the most practically significant in all of Hamartiology: why do people sin? The therapeutic culture has a ready answer: people sin, or, as it prefers to say, behave destructively, because they have been wounded, because their environments have shaped them badly, because their psychological needs have not been met, or because they have learned dysfunctional patterns from the people who raised them. This framework locates the cause of sinful behavior in external factors that have acted upon the individual from the outside. The biblical framework gives a fundamentally different answer: people sin because they are sinners. Not “sinners” in the attenuated, colloquial sense of “imperfect people who sometimes fall short,” but sinners in the precise, theological sense of persons who possess, by virtue of their natural birth into Adam’s race, a constitutional condition of moral corruption that inevitably expresses itself in actual acts of sin. We do not become sinners by sinning; we sin because we are sinners.

This distinction, between original sin (the inherited condition) and actual sin (the specific acts that flow from it), is one of the most important in the entire theological vocabulary. It is the distinction that explains the universality of sin: if sin were merely a matter of external influence, it would be conceivable that a sufficiently healthy environment could produce a sinless person. But if sin is constitutional, if it is a condition inherited at birth that precedes any environmental influence and any individual choice, then the universality of actual sin is explained by the universality of original sin. Every human being sins because every human being is born a sinner. The environment can shape the form that sin takes; it cannot produce the condition from which sin flows.

The doctrine of original sin is also the distinction that explains the necessity of regeneration as the foundational work of grace. If actual sins were the primary problem, the primary remedy would be behavioral: moral instruction, better habits, improved environments, repeated forgiveness of specific acts. But if original sin, the corruption of the entire human nature at its roots, is the primary problem, then the primary remedy must be ontological: a new birth, a new creation, the sovereign and life-giving work of the Spirit that renews the very nature from which actual sins flow. Jesus was not offering a new moral philosophy when He told Nicodemus “You must be born again” (John 3:7, NASB 1995); He was announcing the only possible solution to the problem of original sin. The new birth is necessary precisely because the old birth has transmitted the condition that makes actual sins inevitable.

This lesson develops the distinction between original sin and actual sin in four major directions. First, we examine the biblical foundation of original sin in the key texts that establish its scope and character: Romans 5:12–19, Psalm 51:5, Ephesians 2:1–3, and related passages. Second, we examine the two components of original sin: original guilt (the forensic imputation of Adam’s liability) and original corruption (the ontological pollution of human nature). Third, we examine the structure of actual sin: the categories of commission and omission, the faculties through which actual sins operate, and the aggravating circumstances that the Westminster tradition identifies as increasing the heinousness of specific sins. Fourth, we examine the relationship between original sin and actual sin and the comprehensive provision of the gospel for both.

A word about the pastoral stakes of this doctrine: the distinction between original sin and actual sin is not a subtle academic refinement of interest only to professional theologians. It is the doctrinal foundation of every accurate pastoral diagnosis and every adequate pastoral remedy. The pastor who does not know the distinction will address actual sins as though they were the root problem, offering behavioral remedies for a constitutional condition. The pastor who knows the distinction will address actual sins as symptoms of a deeper reality, will see in the specific patterns of sin that her counselees present the surface expressions of a constitutional condition that only the gospel of regeneration, justification, and progressive sanctification can address at its roots. The difference between these two pastoral approaches is the difference between treating fever and treating the infection that produces it.

I. The Biblical Foundation of Original Sin

The Key Texts That Establish the Inherited Condition

A. Romans 5:12–19: The Definitive Apostolic Argument

Romans 5:12–19 is the locus classicus for the doctrine of original sin in the entire New Testament, and it is the passage that has most directly shaped the theological tradition's understanding of the relationship between Adam's sin and the universal human condition. Paul's argument in this passage is the most formally structured and most exegetically significant of all his treatments of sin, and its careful exegesis is the essential foundation for everything that follows in this lesson. The argument moves in three stages: the statement of the principle (verse 12), the elaboration of the universal reign of death (verses 13–17), and the formal parallel between the two Adams (verses 18–19).

The pivotal verse is Romans 5:12: "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" (NASB 1995). Every phrase of this verse has been the subject of extensive exegetical debate, and each phrase contributes a distinct theological affirmation to the doctrine of original sin. "Through one man sin entered into the world" establishes the historical and personal character of the entry of sin: it was through Adam, a specific historical individual, that sin entered the human condition. It did not evolve gradually, emerge from the structure of creaturely existence, or arise independently in each individual; it entered through one man's one act. "And death through sin" establishes the causal relationship: death is the consequence of sin, not a natural feature of human existence, making the mortality of the human race a moral and judicial reality rather than a merely biological one.

The most exegetically significant phrase is the final one: "and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (eph' hō pantes hemarton). The Greek phrase eph' hō has been interpreted in two main ways. The Augustinian interpretation, preserved in the Latin translation "in quo omnes peccaverunt" ("in whom all sinned"), treats the phrase as a relative clause in which "who" refers to Adam: all sinned in Adam, because they were present in him as his posterity and shared in his transgression through his federal representation of them. The alternative interpretation, followed by most modern commentators, understands eph' hō as a causal conjunction ("because"): death spread to all people because all individually sinned. The Reformed tradition has generally argued that the causal interpretation, while exegetically defensible, does not by itself establish why all people sin, it requires the prior doctrine of original corruption (the inherited tendency to sin) to explain the universality it asserts, and therefore does not eliminate the need for the Augustinian framework but rather presupposes it.

The formal parallel of Romans 5:18–19 is the most theologically explicit statement in the passage: "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (NASB 1995). The parallel is structurally precise: one transgression → condemnation to all; one act of righteousness → justification to all. One man's disobedience → the many made sinners; One Man's obedience → the many made righteous. The federal-covenantal logic is the same in both directions: the many stand with their representative head, and what the head does, the many receive. To deny the federal imputation of Adam's transgression is to deny the structural logic that makes the federal imputation of Christ's righteousness intelligible, and therefore to undermine the doctrine of justification at its foundation.

B. Psalm 51:5 and the Pre-Birth Reality of Sin

David's confession in Psalm 51:5 provides the most direct personal testimony in the Old Testament to the pre-birth reality of original sin: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (NASB 1995). The verse has been the subject of interpretive controversy, with some commentators suggesting that David is here confessing the sin of the circumstances of his conception rather than asserting a universal principle of inherited sinfulness. But the context of the verse in the logic of the psalm argues strongly for the latter interpretation: David is building the case for why his sin is so deep and pervasive that it requires not merely the

forgiveness of specific acts but the creation of a new heart (verse 10) and the renewal of a right spirit within him (verse 10). The depth of the corruption he confesses in verse 5, reaching back to the moment of his conception, is the explanation for the radical nature of the remedy he requests.

The theological weight of Psalm 51:5 is its testimony that sin is not an acquired condition but a native one. David does not say “I have sinned so many times that I have become a sinner”, as though repeated sinful acts had gradually corrupted a nature that was originally clean. He says that his sinfulness preceded his birth, that it was present at the moment of his conception, that the condition is as old as his existence. This is the precise content of the doctrine of original corruption: every human being is born into a condition of moral pollution that precedes any specific sinful act, that has not been earned by personal transgression, and that is not the product of environmental influence. It is the condition received by natural birth as a member of Adam’s race, and it is the condition that constitutes the deepest explanation for every specific sin that the individual will subsequently commit.

Genesis 8:21’s post-flood assessment, “the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth”, provides corroborating testimony from the narrative literature. The phrase “from his youth” (*minna’urav*) does not mean “from the time he becomes old enough to make deliberate moral choices”; it means “from the earliest stages of his development,” from the beginning of his existence as a formed human being. Combined with Psalm 51:5’s testimony that sinfulness is present from conception, these two texts together establish that the condition of original sin is not an acquired habit or a developmental failure but a constitutional reality present from the very beginning of individual human existence.

“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”

1 Corinthians 15:22, NASB 1995

II. Original Guilt

The Forensic Imputation of Adam’s Liability

A. *What Original Guilt Means and Why It Is Necessary*

Original guilt is the first and most legally precise component of originated original sin: the judicial declaration that every human being, at the moment of conception, bears the legal liability of Adam’s transgression, because Adam acted as their covenant representative in the probationary test of the garden. Original guilt is not a felt sense of culpability or a vague awareness of moral inadequacy; it is a precise forensic reality, the divine tribunal’s verdict that Adam’s posterity stands condemned not merely for their own personal transgressions but for the transgression of the head who represented them.

The necessity of original guilt for the overall argument of Romans 5 is established by Paul’s argument in verses 13–14: “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.” This is one of the most decisive arguments for original guilt in the entire New Testament. Paul observes that between Adam and Moses, before the explicit giving of the Mosaic law, people were still dying, and they were dying not because they had committed transgressions similar to Adam’s deliberate, forewarned defiance of a specific explicit command, but because they were under the legal liability of Adam’s transgression as his posterity. The death of infants who have committed no personal transgression is Paul’s own implicit evidence for this claim: death reigned universally, over those who had no personal sins analogous to Adam’s, because original guilt, not personal transgression, was the basis of the condemnation.

The theological objection most frequently raised against original guilt is the apparent injustice of holding individuals responsible for an act they did not personally commit. This objection was the heart of Pelagius’ case against Augustine, and it recurs in every generation in various philosophical and popular forms. The Reformed response operates on two levels. First, the objection misunderstands the nature of covenantal representation:

Adam did not sin as a private individual whose sin was then arbitrarily extended to his descendants; he sinned as the covenantal head of the race, acting on behalf of all whom he represented, in precisely the same way that a nation's treaty obligations are binding upon its citizens whether or not they were personally present at the signing. The covenantal representation of Adam was a gracious arrangement: if Adam had succeeded, all his posterity would have shared in his confirmed blessedness; because he failed, all share in his condemnation. This is the logic of representation, and its fairness is established not by philosophical argument but by the divine appointment itself.

Second, and perhaps most decisively, the objection to original guilt as unjust implies an objection to the imputed righteousness of Christ as equally unjust. The same structural logic that produces the imputation of Adam's guilt to his posterity produces the imputation of Christ's righteousness to His people. If one is unjust, both are unjust; and if both are unjust, the gospel's announcement of justification by imputed righteousness collapses. The Reformed tradition has consistently observed that the critic of original guilt who accepts the imputed righteousness of Christ is being inconsistent: accepting the same covenantal logic when it benefits him that he rejects when it condemns him. The Bible offers no such inconsistency: the same federal-covenantal logic operates in both directions, and its justice is established by the divine wisdom of a God who knows that the only way to rescue a race that fell representatively is to save it representatively, through the obedience of the Second Adam who succeeds where the first Adam failed.

B. Immediate vs. Mediate Imputation

Within the Reformed tradition, a significant debate has occurred between those who hold the doctrine of immediate imputation and those who hold mediate imputation. The doctrine of immediate imputation, associated especially with the seventeenth-century Swiss theologians Francis Turretin and the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675), holds that Adam's guilt is imputed to his posterity directly and immediately, apart from and prior to the transmission of original corruption. On this view, original guilt is the basis of original corruption: God withdraws the Holy Spirit from Adam's posterity as a judicial consequence of their imputed liability for Adam's sin, and the resulting corruption flows from the judgment rather than preceding it.

The doctrine of mediate imputation, associated with the French Reformed theologian Joshué de la Place (Placaeus), holds that Adam's guilt is imputed to his posterity only mediately, that is, through the mediation of the transmitted corruption. On this view, original corruption is prior to original guilt: all human beings inherit a corrupt nature from Adam, and on the basis of that corrupt nature they are justly condemned as guilty. The Westminster Standards and the majority of the confessional Reformed tradition have been read as supporting immediate imputation, following the exegetical argument of Romans 5:12–19 that the ground of universal condemnation is "one man's transgression" rather than each individual's corrupted nature. The practical theological difference is significant: on immediate imputation, the infant who dies before committing any personal sin is still justly under condemnation by virtue of imputed guilt, grounding the universal condemnation more securely in the federal-covenantal logic of Paul's argument.

III. Original Corruption

The Ontological Pollution of Human Nature

A. The Scope and Character of Original Corruption

Original corruption is the second and ontologically primary component of originated original sin: the actual moral defilement of every faculty of human nature, mind, will, affections, conscience, imagination, and body, that is transmitted from Adam to all his natural posterity through generation. Where original guilt is a forensic category (a legal verdict), original corruption is an ontological category (a real change in the actual condition of the human person). Original guilt determines what human beings are judged to be; original corruption describes what human beings actually are as a consequence of their participation in Adam's fallen nature.

The Westminster Confession's description of original corruption in chapter VI is among the most comprehensive and precise in the Reformed confessional tradition: Adam and Eve became "dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body" (VI.2). Three features of this description are theologically significant. First, "wholly defiled": the corruption is total in its extension, reaching every faculty without exception. This is the confessional formulation of the doctrine of total depravity, not that every faculty is as corrupt as it could possibly be, but that no faculty is uncorrupted, morally neutral, or spiritually sound in relation to God. Second, "all the faculties and parts of soul and body": the corruption encompasses not only the spiritual dimension (the soul's relationship to God) but the entire person, including the body in its susceptibility to disease, aging, and death as the somatic expression of the moral corruption of the whole person. Third, "dead in sin": the state is not merely one of weakening or wounding but of spiritual death, the cessation of the proper orientation of the soul toward God that had characterized Adamic existence before the fall.

The specific effects of original corruption on each faculty are developed in the Reformed tradition under the heading of total depravity. The mind (*nous*) is darkened (Ephesians 4:17–18), suppressing the natural knowledge of God (Romans 1:18–21) and unable to receive spiritual truth without the illumination of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). The will is enslaved (John 8:34; Romans 6:20), not compelled externally but internally incapacitated: it always chooses according to its nature, and its nature is now directed away from God and toward self and sin. The affections are disordered (Romans 1:21–25), loving what should not be supremely loved and failing to love what should be supremely loved. The conscience is defiled (Titus 1:15), capable of delivering verdicts but always in a context of bias, rationalization, and the progressive suppression of its own deliverances. The imagination is oriented toward evil (Genesis 6:5; 8:21). And the body shares in the effects of the soul's moral corruption through mortality, susceptibility to disease, and the disordering of bodily appetite that accompanies the disordering of the whole person.

B. *Original Corruption as the Root of Actual Sin*

The relationship between original corruption and actual sin is the relationship between a tree and its fruit, between a spring and its streams. Jesus articulated this principle with unforgettable directness in Matthew 7:17–18: "Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit." The "bad tree" of Matthew 7 is original corruption: the constitutively disordered, morally polluted human nature that every member of Adam's race inherits. The "bad fruit" is actual sin: the specific acts of disobedience, the specific failures of love, the specific violations of the divine standard that the bad tree of corrupted human nature inevitably and continuously produces.

This means that the primary problem with actual sins is not that they are surprising or inexplicable but that they are entirely expected and entirely explained: they are what inevitably flows from the corrupted nature from which they grow. The person who commits adultery, steals, lies, nurses bitterness, harbors pride, or neglects the duty of love is doing exactly what a person with a corrupted nature will do in the conditions that prompt those specific expressions of that corruption. This does not eliminate personal responsibility for actual sins, the tree that bears bad fruit is responsible for what it bears, as Jesus makes clear, but it does explain why behavioral modification, however sincere and sustained, cannot solve the problem of actual sin at its root. Cutting the fruit off the branch does not change the nature of the tree. Only a new tree, or, in theological terms, a new birth, a new creation, a regenerated nature, can produce the good fruit of genuine righteousness.

Augustine's formulation of this principle in his treatment of the stages of human existence remains the most compact and precise: before the fall, human beings possessed the *posse non peccare* (ability not to sin) and the *posse peccare* (ability to sin); after the fall, unregenerate human beings possess the *non posse non peccare* (inability not to sin), not that they are compelled from without to sin but that their nature is now constitutively directed toward sin so that they cannot help sinning; and after glorification, the redeemed will possess the *non posse peccare* (inability to sin), not because their freedom is removed but because their nature will be perfectly and permanently aligned with the divine holiness so that the desire to sin will be entirely absent. The doctrine of original corruption explains the second stage and makes the third stage the fitting consummation of the redemptive work that addresses it.

“As for you, you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air... and were by nature children of wrath.”

Ephesians 2:1–3, NASB 1995

IV. Actual Sin

The Specific Acts That Flow from the Corrupted Nature

A. The Categories of Actual Sin: Commission and Omission

Actual sins are the specific thoughts, desires, words, deeds, and failures to act that flow from the corrupted nature constituted by original sin. The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s definition of sin as “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Q. 14) establishes the two primary categories of actual sin: sins of omission (want of conformity, failing to render the positive obedience the law requires) and sins of commission (transgression, actively violating what the law forbids). Both categories are equally sin; neither is reducible to the other; and both together constitute the full range of actual sin that flows from the corrupted nature.

Sins of omission are the less visible and more consistently underemphasized category of actual sin, yet they constitute a substantial and theologically significant portion of the total moral landscape. Jesus’ most devastating indictments are frequently indictments of omission: in Matthew 23:23 He rebukes the Pharisees not for their active transgressions but for their “neglect” of the weightier provisions of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness. In Matthew 25:41–46, the condemnation of those on the left hand is the condemnation of omission: they did not feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, or visit the sick and imprisoned. James 4:17 establishes the principle with lapidary precision: “To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.” The failure to love, the failure to render to God and to neighbor the active, self-giving, responsive love that the law of God commands, is sin, and it is sin that fills the daily lives of even the most morally careful believers in ways that behavioral self-assessment consistently fails to detect.

Sins of commission, the active transgression of what the law forbids, are more immediately visible and more readily recognized as sin in the moral vocabulary of most Christians. But the Reformed tradition, following Jesus’ exposition of the law in the Sermon on the Mount, has insisted that sins of commission include not merely the external behavioral violation of a specific prohibition but the internal violation of the spirit and intention behind the prohibition. The person who does not commit murder but nurses unrighteous anger has committed the sin that the sixth commandment addresses (Matthew 5:21–22); the person who does not commit adultery but cultivates lustful desire has committed the sin that the seventh commandment addresses (Matthew 5:27–28). The scope of actual sin in the commission category is therefore as comprehensive as the law’s reach into the inner life of the person, which is to say, comprehensive indeed.

B. The Faculties Through Which Actual Sin Operates

The Reformed tradition, following the comprehensive scope of the Westminster definition, has consistently identified thought, word, and deed as the three primary faculties or modes through which actual sins operate. This threefold categorization is reflected in the general confession in many liturgical traditions (“we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed”) and is grounded in the comprehensive application of the law to every dimension of human existence that Jesus establishes in the Sermon on the Mount.

Sins in thought include not merely the deliberate entertainment of sinful mental content but the underlying dispositions, attitudes, and orientations of the mind and heart that produce specific sinful thoughts: the pride that generates contempt for others, the self-centeredness that generates envy, the resentment that generates bitterness, the idolatry of security that generates anxiety. Jesus establishes that the seventh commandment addresses “everyone who looks at a woman with lust” (Matthew 5:28, NASB 1995), establishing that the scope of the commandment reaches not merely to the external act but to the internal orientation of desire that drives it.

Sins in thought are in a certain sense the most morally fundamental category, because all actual sins begin in the heart before they express themselves externally.

Sins in word encompass the full range of verbal transgression: lying, slander, gossip, flattery, boasting, harsh speech, idle words, broken promises, false testimony, and the failure to speak when truth and love require speech. James' extended treatment of the tongue in James 3:1–12, "The tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire" (James 3:5, NASB 1995), is the most comprehensive biblical treatment of verbal sin in the New Testament. Jesus establishes the depth of the moral standard for speech in Matthew 12:36–37: "I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment." The category of sins in word is therefore not limited to deliberate lies or slanders but extends to every verbal expression that fails to conform to the standard of truth, love, and the edification of the hearer that the law requires.

Sins in deed encompass the visible behavioral expressions of the corrupted nature: the acts of violence, dishonesty, sexual immorality, covetousness, idolatry, and neglect of duty that the law forbids and that human history has recorded in every culture and every generation. The specific deeds that Paul catalogues in Galatians 5:19–21 ("immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these") are described as "deeds of the flesh", the natural, inevitable expressions of the unregenerate nature that original corruption has produced. They are not aberrations from the natural condition of the fallen person but its typical expressions, restrained in their force and frequency by common grace but never eliminated.

V. The Aggravations of Sin

When Actual Sins Become More Heinous

A. The Westminster Larger Catechism on the Degrees of Sin

The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 150–151) provides the most systematic treatment in the Reformed confessional tradition of the factors that increase the heinousness of specific actual sins, a subject of considerable pastoral significance because it establishes that while all sins equally deserve death and condemnation (Romans 6:23), not all sins are equally serious in their moral gravity and their consequences for the sinner and for those affected by the sin. The catechism identifies several categories of aggravating circumstances.

Aggravations from the persons offending include: those of greater light and knowledge; those of greater strength, gifts, or callings; those who have received greater grace, experience of God, or special tokens of His love; those who have made high professions of holiness; and those who have received forgiveness for previous similar sins. The principle underlying these aggravations is that greater privilege intensifies the moral seriousness of transgression: the person who sins against fuller knowledge, stronger calling, and greater grace bears a more serious guilt than the person who sins in ignorance or weakness. Jesus Himself teaches this principle in Luke 12:47–48: the servant who knew his master's will and did not act accordingly will receive a greater beating than the servant who did not know.

Aggravations from the parties offended include: when the offense is against God directly; when it involves persons of excellent qualities or office, parents, teachers, magistrates, ministers; when it is against believers, the weak, or those for whose souls one has responsibility. Aggravations from the nature and quality of the offense include: sins that are against the express letter of the law, against the light of nature, against promises or vows made to God, premeditated, committed with deliberate purpose, and persisted in despite conviction and despite the means of grace. The pastoral significance of this analysis is not to produce a calculus by which certain sins are excused but to provide the framework for honest moral self-assessment that sees specific sins in their full weight of aggravating circumstances rather than through the distorting lens of self-justification.

B. The Unforgivable Sin

Matthew 12:31–32 introduces the most theologically difficult category in the entire discussion of actual sin: the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which Jesus declares will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come. “Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:31–32, NASB 1995). This passage has produced more pastoral anxiety in the history of the church than perhaps any other, precisely because it appears to establish an absolute exception to the gospel’s promise of universal forgiveness for all who repent and believe.

The Reformed tradition has generally identified the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as the settled, willful, malicious rejection of the Spirit’s testimony to Jesus Christ, the conscious, deliberate, final repudiation of the gospel in full knowledge of its truth, attributing the works of the Holy Spirit to the power of Satan (the specific context of Jesus’ statement in Matthew 12:24–32). This sin is unforgivable not because it exceeds the infinite sufficiency of the atonement, the cross is sufficient to atone for every sin of every description, but because it is the final, settled rejection of the very Spirit whose work of conviction and regeneration is the only means by which anyone can come to repentance and faith. The person who has committed this sin has permanently closed the only avenue through which forgiveness comes. The most pastorally important observation about the unforgivable sin is this: those who are anxious about whether they have committed it almost certainly have not. The genuine concern about sin and the desire for forgiveness are themselves the evidence of the Spirit’s ongoing work in the soul, a work that the person who has committed the blasphemy against the Spirit has definitively and finally rejected.

The broader Reformed tradition has approached Matthew 12:31–32 pastorally with the principle that the gospel’s promise of forgiveness to all who sincerely repent and believe is the standing word of God, and that no specific act of past sin, however extreme or deliberate, places a person beyond the reach of that promise apart from the final, settled, Spirit-rejecting hardness of heart that Jesus describes. Paul himself had “acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Timothy 1:13, NASB 1995) in his persecution of the church, which was in many respects an assault upon the work of the Spirit, and he received mercy. The thief on the cross received forgiveness in his final hour. David committed adultery and murder and received forgiveness. The promise of 1 John 1:9 stands: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NASB 1995), and “all unrighteousness” admits of no exception in the one who genuinely confesses.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 6:23, NASB 1995

VI. The Gospel’s Answer to Original and Actual Sin

The Comprehensive Provision of Grace for the Full Diagnosis

A. Justification for Original Guilt: The Second Imputation

The gospel’s answer to original guilt is the doctrine of justification by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. Just as Adam’s guilt was imputed to his posterity through their union with him as their federal head (the first imputation), so Christ’s righteousness is imputed to all who are united to Him by faith as their covenantal Representative (the second imputation). The structural logic is identical, as Paul establishes with formal precision in Romans 5:18–19: “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.” The “one act of righteousness” is not merely Christ’s death (passive obedience) but His entire life of perfect conformity to the law on behalf of His people (active obedience), the whole righteousness that is required and the whole righteousness that is credited.

Justification does not merely erase the slate, removing the condemnation of original and actual guilt, but positively credits the righteousness of Christ to the believer’s account, so that the justified person stands before God not

merely as one whose debts have been cancelled but as one who is clothed in the positive righteousness of the Second Adam. Paul's formulation in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is the most concentrated expression of this double transaction: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (NASB 1995). The One who knew no sin, who had no original sin or actual sin of His own, was made sin (had our guilt imputed to Him at the cross) so that we who are full of original and actual sin might become the righteousness of God (have His righteousness imputed to us through faith). The first imputation (Adam's guilt to all his posterity) is the problem; the second imputation (Christ's righteousness to all who believe) is the solution.

B. Regeneration and Sanctification for Original Corruption and Actual Sin

If original guilt is the target of justification, original corruption is the target of regeneration and progressive sanctification. The problem is not merely legal, it is not merely that human beings stand condemned before the divine tribunal, but ontological: human nature itself has been corrupted at its roots, and specific sinful acts flow inevitably from that corruption. The remedy must therefore be not merely legal but ontological: not merely a change in standing before the tribunal but a change in the nature of the person. This is precisely what regeneration accomplishes: the sovereign, life-giving work of the Holy Spirit that creates a new nature, a new heart, a right spirit (Psalm 51:10), a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), within which the spiritual life that original corruption had extinguished is renewed and the proper orientation of the whole person toward God is restored.

Regeneration does not immediately or completely eliminate the effects of original corruption in the regenerate person, the doctrine of remaining sin, to be treated in Lesson 21, addresses this reality. But it changes the fundamental orientation of the regenerate person's nature from hostility and indifference toward God to love and desire for God, creating the new dispositional center from which genuine spiritual obedience can flow. The subsequent work of sanctification, the Spirit's progressive transformation of the regenerate person into conformity with the image of Christ, is the ongoing address to the specific effects of original corruption in each faculty: the darkened mind being renewed through the transforming of the mind (Romans 12:2), the enslaved will being freed through the Spirit's indwelling and empowering (Romans 8:13), the disordered affections being reordered through the love of God shed abroad in the heart (Romans 5:5).

Actual sins are addressed through the correlative provisions of forgiveness and progressive sanctification. The ongoing practice of specific actual sins in the believer's life is addressed through the ongoing provision of 1 John 1:9 ("If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins") and through the Spirit's mortifying work (Romans 8:13: "if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live"). The relationship between original corruption and actual sins in the believer's sanctification is the relationship between fighting a constitutionally compromised immune system and fighting specific infections: the ultimate victory over specific actual sins requires the renewal of the nature from which they flow, and that renewal is the Spirit's long, patient, progressive, and ultimately certain work in the life of everyone who has been regenerated and is genuinely united to Christ.

"For just as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous."

Romans 5:19, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Original Sin	In its technical theological usage, original sin refers to two inseparable realities that flow from Adam's first transgression as the federal head of the human race. First, peccatum originale originans ("originating original sin"): the first sin itself, Adam's transgression in the garden as the covenant-breaking act that produced universal consequences. Second, peccatum originale originatum ("originated original sin"): the condition transmitted to all of Adam's natural posterity as the consequence of his transgression, comprising both original guilt (the imputed legal liability of Adam's sin) and original corruption (the inherited moral pollution of human nature). The Westminster Confession of Faith (VI.2–3) states: "By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body... They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity."
Actual Sin	The specific acts of sin, in thought, desire, word, deed, and omission, that flow from the corrupted nature constituted by original sin. Actual sins are distinguished from original sin not as though they are unrelated but as effects are distinguished from their cause: original sin is the root, actual sins are the fruit. Actual sins are further distinguished by the Reformed tradition as sins of commission (active transgressions of God's law) and sins of omission (failures to render the positive obedience the law requires), and as sins in thought, word, and deed, encompassing the full range of human faculty. The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 24) specifies that "actual sins are more heinous in some than others, according to the persons offending, the parties offended, the nature and quality of the offense, the circumstances of time, place, and means."
Original Guilt	The legal liability imputed to every human being by virtue of Adam's transgression as the federal head of the race. Original guilt is not a metaphor for the general human condition of moral failure; it is a precise forensic category: the judgment of the divine tribunal that every human being, at the moment of conception, is legally accountable for Adam's sin because Adam stood as their covenantal representative. The biblical basis is Romans 5:12–19, particularly the assertion in verse 18 that "through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men." The Westminster Confession (VI.3) affirms that "the guilt of this sin was imputed" to all Adam's posterity. Original guilt is the specific target of justification in the gospel: through the second imputation (the crediting of Christ's righteousness to the believer), the first imputation (the crediting of Adam's guilt to all humanity) is legally and permanently reversed.
Original Corruption	The inherited moral pollution of human nature that is the second component of originated original sin. While original guilt is a forensic category (the legal imputation of Adam's guilt), original corruption is an ontological category: the actual moral defilement of every human faculty, mind, will, affections, conscience, and body, that is transmitted from Adam to all his natural posterity through generation. The Westminster Confession (VI.2) describes this corruption as including the falling from "original righteousness and communion with God," becoming "dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body." Original corruption is the source from which all actual sins flow: we do not first commit actual sins and thereby become corrupt; we are constitutionally corrupt, and our actual sins are the expression of that corruption. Original corruption is the specific target of regeneration and progressive sanctification in the work of the Spirit.
Federal Headship and the Two Adams	The theological principle by which Adam and Jesus Christ function as representative heads of the two humanities: Adam as the head of the old humanity (all who are born of natural generation and share in his transgression and its consequences), and Christ as the head of the new humanity (all who are born again through the Spirit and share in His righteousness and

Term	Definition
	its benefits). Paul develops the parallel with formal symmetry in Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45–49. The federal headship of Adam explains why all die and all receive condemnation; the federal headship of Christ explains why all who are in Him receive justification and life. The structural logic is identical: the many stand or fall with their representative head. The two-Adams typology is the exegetical foundation of the doctrines of both original sin and penal substitutionary atonement, and it is explicitly christological: one cannot understand what Adam did without understanding what Christ has done in response to it.
Peccatum Originale Originans	Latin: “originating original sin.” The technical theological term for the first sin itself, Adam’s transgression in the garden, as the originating cause of the universal condition of sin in the human race. The distinction between originans (“originating”) and originatum (“originated”) was developed in medieval scholastic theology to clarify that original sin names both the primal event that set the universal condition in motion and the universal condition that the primal event produced. Augustine, the first theologian to develop the doctrine of original sin with systematic rigor, was primarily concerned with the originans, with establishing that there was a specific first sin, committed by a specific historical person, with specific universal consequences. The Protestant Reformers retained and refined this distinction, grounding it in the exegesis of Romans 5:12–19 and insisting on the historical reality of Adam’s transgression against all allegorical or mythological interpretations.
Peccatum Originale Originatum	Latin: “originated original sin.” The technical theological term for the condition transmitted to all of Adam’s natural posterity as the consequence of his transgression, the universal inheritance of sin that every human being receives at conception. This originated original sin comprises both original guilt (the imputed liability for Adam’s transgression) and original corruption (the inherited defilement of human nature). The doctrine that every human being inherits a condition of original sin from the moment of conception finds its primary biblical support in Psalm 51:5 (“In sin my mother conceived me”) and Genesis 8:21 (“the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth”), as well as in the systematic argument of Romans 5:12–19. It stands in irreconcilable opposition to Pelagianism (which denies that any condition is transmitted) and to Semi-Pelagianism (which affirms transmitted corruption but denies transmitted guilt).
Total Depravity (Defined)	The Reformed doctrine that the corruption introduced by original sin extends to every faculty of the human person, mind, will, affections, conscience, imagination, and body, so that no faculty remains unaffected by sin’s pollution. Total depravity does not mean that every person is as wicked as it is possible to be (an absolute depravity restrained by common grace), nor that every human action is as sinful as it could be, nor that fallen human beings are incapable of any genuine natural good or civic virtue. It means that the corruption of sin is total in its extension (reaching every part) rather than partial (affecting only some parts), that no faculty of the unregenerate person is morally neutral or spiritually sound in relation to God, and that the unregenerate person is constitutively incapable of any genuine spiritual good, of seeking God savingly, of pleasing God truly, or of contributing anything to their own salvation, apart from the sovereign, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The principal biblical supports are Romans 3:10–18; Ephesians 2:1–3; and Jeremiah 17:9.
Sins of Commission and Omission	The distinction, rooted in the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s definition of sin (Q. 14), between active transgressions of God’s law (sins of commission, doing what God forbids) and failures to render the positive obedience God’s law requires (sins of omission, not doing what God commands). James 4:17 provides the primary biblical basis for the category of sins of omission: “To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.” Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 (“woe to you... you have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness”) is a prophetic indictment of sins of omission. The distinction is pastorally significant because sins of omission are

Term	Definition
	consistently the less visible and the more socially acceptable form of sin, and the one most likely to be overlooked in self-examination and most likely to be minimized in pastoral counseling.
The Noetic Effects of Sin	The effects of sin's corruption on the mind (nous) and its capacity for true knowledge, particularly knowledge of God. The noetic effects of sin include: the darkening of the understanding (Ephesians 4:17–18: “the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding”), the suppression of the natural knowledge of God (Romans 1:18–20), the inability to receive spiritual truth without the illumination of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14: “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God”), and the persistent bias of fallen human reason toward self-justification rather than truth-seeking. The noetic effects of sin have profound apologetic implications: the unbeliever's rejection of the gospel is not a failure of evidence but a failure of will and a blindness of mind that only the Spirit's regenerating work can overcome. Cornelius Van Til's presuppositional apologetics is the most rigorous development of the apologetic implications of the noetic effects of sin in the twentieth-century Reformed tradition.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that original sin is a real, historical, universal, and constitutionally transmitted condition, not a metaphor, not a theological abstraction, and not merely the accumulated weight of social conditioning and bad choices. Every human being who has ever been born of natural generation, with the sole exception of Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and therefore did not inherit the Adamic nature, has entered the world already bearing the original guilt and original corruption that Romans 5:12–19 describes. This is not a pessimistic or cynical assessment of the human race; it is the biblically authoritative diagnosis of the human condition, given by the God who made human beings and who alone has the authority and the knowledge to describe what they have become. To believe this is to be equipped to understand both the universality of sin and the absolute necessity of the gospel's provision.

We must also believe that the distinction between original sin and actual sin is not a merely academic refinement but a pastorally essential diagnostic tool. The pastor or counselor who cannot distinguish between the root (original corruption) and the fruit (actual sin) will inevitably address symptoms rather than causes, offering behavioral remedies for a constitutional condition. The understanding that specific patterns of sin in a counselee's life are not mere bad habits to be broken but expressions of a constitutive moral orientation that only the gospel's regenerating and sanctifying grace can address at its roots changes the entire pastoral conversation: from behavior modification to new creation, from self-improvement to the mortification of sin by the Spirit, from trying harder to trusting more.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The doctrine of original sin, rightly understood, should produce in the believing heart a deep and specific humility, not the false modesty of vague self-deprecation but the honest, Spirit-illuminated recognition of a constitutional condition that precedes all effort, that is not amenable to all effort, and that was present from the very first moment of one's existence. Psalm 51:5 is the model: David's confession reaches behind his specific transgressions to the condition from which they grew, and his humility is proportional to the depth of the diagnosis. The person who has understood original sin as a constitutional condition, as the state of being "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3), is in the most accurate and the most grace-receptive posture available to a fallen human being. She knows that she does not merely need forgiveness; she needs a new heart. She knows that she is not merely guilty; she is corrupt. And she knows that both the forgiveness and the new heart are available freely, at the cost of Christ's life, received by faith.

Desire, above all, the profound gospel gratitude that only the full diagnosis of original sin can produce. The person who knows that she was "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1) before grace intervened, not weakened, not wounded, not slightly disadvantaged, but dead, and who knows that the grace that made her alive was entirely unmerited, entirely divine in its origin, and entirely sufficient in its provision, has the deepest possible foundation for the kind of humble, wonder-filled, grace-saturated gratitude that the Christian life is designed to express. The doctrine of original sin is not the enemy of joy; it is, rightly received, its deepest foundation.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 5:12–19 in a single sitting, slowly, paying careful attention to the four-fold parallel between Adam and Christ that the passage constructs. For each element of the parallel, one man's transgression and its consequences; one Man's obedience and its consequences, ask yourself: how does the specific provision of the gospel answer the specific aspect of original sin described in this verse? What does it mean for you personally that you are in the condition of verse 18's first clause ("through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men") and also in the condition of verse 18's second clause ("through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life"), both by virtue of union with their respective heads?
- Examine your own life under the category of sins of omission, the "want of conformity" that the Westminster Shorter Catechism identifies as equally sinful as transgression. Specifically: where are you

failing to render to God the active love, trust, gratitude, and obedience that the law of love commands? Where are you failing to render to your neighbor the active service, honesty, mercy, and justice that the second great commandment requires? Sins of omission are the most consistently invisible and most consistently underconfessed category of actual sin, and the person who confines his self-examination to sins of commission has examined only half the moral landscape. Let James 4:17 be the instrument of this examination: “To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

- Study Ephesians 2:1–10 as the comprehensive gospel narrative organized around the original sin / gospel provision structure. Verses 1–3 describe the original condition: dead in trespasses and sins, walking according to the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, living in the lusts of the flesh, by nature children of wrath. Verses 4–10 describe the gospel’s provision: made alive together with Christ (regeneration), raised up and seated in the heavenly places (union with Christ), saved by grace through faith (justification), created in Christ Jesus for good works (sanctification). Map each element of the original sin diagnosis (verses 1–3) to its corresponding gospel provision (verses 4–10). This mapping exercise transforms an exegetical study into the specific reception of the grace that addresses the specific condition.
- Reflect on the pastoral implications of the distinction between original sin and actual sin for a specific counseling situation you are currently navigating or have recently encountered. The person presenting with a specific pattern of sinful behavior, a persistent addiction, a recurring relational failure, a settled pattern of dishonesty or anger or sexual immorality, is presenting with a fruit whose root lies in the constitutional condition of original corruption. What would it mean to address both root and fruit in the pastoral conversation: to offer both the mortifying power of the Spirit for the specific actual sin and the regenerating, sanctifying work of the gospel for the original corruption from which it flows? What specific gospel resources would you deploy?
- Pray through Psalm 51 using the lens of the original sin / actual sin distinction. Identify which verses address original sin (verse 5, and possibly verse 10’s “create in me a clean heart” as the request for the renewing of the corrupted nature) and which address actual sins (the specific transgressions, iniquities, and sins confessed in verses 1–4). Note how David’s prayer moves from the specific acts to the underlying condition to the comprehensive provision of grace that addresses both. This is the pastoral logic of Psalm 51: specific repentance for specific acts, honest acknowledgment of the constitutional condition from which they flow, and comprehensive confidence in the grace of the God who is “faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Key Texts: *Romans 5:12–19; Psalm 51:5; Ephesians 2:1–10; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22; Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Matthew 7:17–18; James 4:17; 1 John 1:9; Romans 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 21*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, how did you understand the relationship between what the lesson calls “original sin” (the inherited condition) and “actual sin” (the specific acts that flow from it)? Did you tend to think of human beings as sinners because they sin, or as sinners who sin because they are sinners? How has the lesson’s distinction clarified or challenged your prior understanding?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Romans 5:12–19 carefully and identify the precise structural parallel that Paul constructs between Adam and Christ. For each of the following elements, identify both the Adamic statement and the corresponding Christological statement: (a) the originating individual and the character of his act; (b) the scope of those affected; (c) the specific consequence for those affected. What does the formal symmetry of the parallel establish about the structural logic that governs both the transmission of condemnation and the provision of justification?
3. Read Romans 5:13–14: “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.” What specific argument does Paul make here for the doctrine of original guilt, as distinguished from personal transgression, as the basis for universal condemnation? Who are “those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam”, what category of persons does Paul seem to have in mind? How does the reign of death over this category of persons serve as evidence for original guilt rather than personal transgression as the grounds of condemnation?
4. Read Psalm 51:1–10 and identify the movement of David’s prayer from specific actual sins (verses 1–4) to the constitutional condition of original corruption (verse 5) to the prayer for the comprehensive renewal of the corrupted nature (verses 7–10). What is the logical connection between these three movements? Why does David’s confession of specific transgressions lead him backward to the confession of original corruption? And why does the acknowledgment of original corruption lead forward to the specific prayer for a new heart and a right spirit? What does this movement reveal about the relationship between actual sin, original corruption, and the comprehensive provision of grace?
5. Read Ephesians 2:1–10 and identify every phrase that describes the original condition of human beings apart from grace (verses 1–3) and every phrase that describes the gospel’s provision (verses 4–10). For the condition described in verses 1–3: which aspects describe original guilt (the legal condition of being under condemnation), and which describe original corruption (the ontological condition of moral pollution and spiritual death)? For the provision described in verses 4–10: which aspects address the legal dimension of the problem, and which address the ontological dimension?
6. Read Matthew 12:31–32 in its context of Matthew 12:22–37. What specific act or attitude is Jesus describing as the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? What is the specific context, the Pharisees’ attribution of Jesus’ works to Beelzebul, that prompts the statement? How does understanding this specific context help define what the unforgivable sin is (and is not)? What pastoral counsel would you offer to a person who is anxious that they may have committed it?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson presents the doctrine of original guilt, the imputation of Adam’s liability to all his posterity, as the necessary structural counterpart of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to all who believe. Evaluate this argument. Is the parallel between the two imputations as structurally tight as the lesson claims? What specific aspects of Romans 5:12–19 establish the symmetry between the two? And is the argument, that to deny the first imputation is to undermine the structural logic of the second, a compelling one? What would the critic of original guilt need to say about the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to be consistent?

8. The lesson argues that original corruption is the root from which actual sins flow, that the primary problem with actual sins is not that they are inexplicable but that they are entirely predictable as expressions of a constitutionally corrupted nature. Evaluate the pastoral implications of this claim. If original corruption is the root and actual sins are the fruit, does this mean that pastoral care should focus primarily on the root (through the ministry of the gospel's regenerating and sanctifying provision) rather than the fruit (through behavioral accountability and the mortification of specific sins)? Or is the relationship between root and fruit such that both must be addressed simultaneously? How does Jesus' metaphor of the bad tree in Matthew 7:17–18 guide this pastoral judgment?
9. The Westminster Larger Catechism's analysis of the aggravating circumstances of sin (Q. 151) implies a graduated scale of moral seriousness: some sins are more heinous than others because of specific features of the person sinning, the party offended, or the circumstances of the offense. How does this graduated analysis relate to the principle in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is death", which appears to apply the same consequence to every sin? Is there a tension between the graduated seriousness of specific sins and the universal condemnation that all sin incurs? How does the Reformed tradition resolve this tension?
10. The lesson distinguishes between immediate imputation (original guilt is imputed directly and prior to transmitted corruption) and mediate imputation (original guilt is imputed through and on the basis of transmitted corruption). Evaluate the exegetical basis for each position from Romans 5:12–19. Which interpretation does the passage more naturally support? What are the specific pastoral and theological consequences of each position for the question of the condemnation of infants who die before committing any personal sin?
11. The lesson describes Augustine's four stages of the human condition: *posse peccare*, *posse non peccare* (before the fall); *non posse non peccare* (after the fall, unregenerate); *posse non peccare* but with remaining sin (after regeneration, in the present life); and *non posse peccare* (in glorification). Evaluate this fourfold structure as a framework for understanding the relationship between original sin, actual sin, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. Is it consistent with the biblical data? Does it adequately account for the reality of remaining sin in the regenerate? And how does it illuminate the eschatological hope of the new creation as the definitive answer to original corruption?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson argues that the distinction between original sin and actual sin changes the fundamental posture of pastoral care: from addressing symptoms to addressing causes, from behavioral remedies to constitutional ones. Reflect on your own most persistent pattern of actual sin, the specific failure, the recurring temptation, the ingrained habit of disobedience, and ask: what is the original corruption that underlies this specific actual sin? Is it primarily the corruption of the will (a disposition of self-will that refuses God's authority in this specific area), the corruption of the affections (a disordered love for something that competes with the love of God), or the corruption of the mind (a darkened understanding that rationalizes this specific sin as acceptable or inevitable)? And what specific provision of the gospel, justification, regeneration, progressive sanctification, the mortification of sin by the Spirit, most directly addresses the root from which this specific actual sin grows?
13. The lesson identifies sins of omission, the failure to render the positive obedience that God's law requires, as the consistently underemphasized and underconfessed category of actual sin. Perform a specific, honest examination of your own sins of omission in the following areas: (a) in your relationship with God, specific failures of prayer, Scripture engagement, corporate worship, or the active cultivation of the knowledge and love of God; (b) in your most important human relationships, specific failures of love, service, honesty, or sacrificial attention; (c) in your ministry or vocation, specific failures of diligence, faithfulness, or the use of the gifts God has entrusted to you. Bring these specific sins of omission to confession, using James 4:17 as the theological ground of the confession.
14. The doctrine of original guilt, the imputation of Adam's liability to all his posterity, is one of the most intellectually challenging doctrines in the entire Reformed system because it attributes moral liability to

individuals for an act they did not personally commit. How do you personally engage with this challenge? Does the covenantal-representational logic of Romans 5:12–19 resolve the apparent injustice to your satisfaction? If so, what specific features of the argument are most compelling? If you continue to find the doctrine difficult, what specific aspect of the difficulty remains, and how does the parallel imputation of Christ's righteousness (which raises the same logical question in the other direction) bear on that difficulty?

15. The pastoral treatment of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit requires a careful balance: on one hand, taking seriously Jesus' statement that this sin will not be forgiven; on the other hand, recognizing that genuine anxiety about having committed it is typically evidence of the Spirit's ongoing work and therefore of the absence of the settled hardness that the sin describes. Have you encountered in your pastoral ministry people who are tormented by the fear of having committed the unforgivable sin? How did you respond? In light of this lesson's treatment of the subject, what specific scriptural and pastoral resources would you deploy in that conversation?
16. The lesson concludes with the claim that original sin, rightly understood in all its implications, is not the enemy of joy but, properly received, its deepest foundation, because the person who knows the full depth of what she was before grace (dead, corrupt, guilty, by nature a child of wrath) has the most profound possible grounds for the wonder and gratitude that the gospel produces. Does your experience of the Christian life confirm this claim? Is there a correlation, in your own spiritual experience and in your observation of others, between the depth of the understanding of original sin and the depth of the joy, gratitude, and wonder that the gospel produces? What would it take to receive the doctrine of original sin not merely as a grim theological truth to be believed but as the preparation for the most wonder-saturated gratitude the human soul is capable of?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's time of prayer by reading Psalm 51:1–10 slowly, using the original sin / actual sin framework that this lesson has established to enter more deeply into the theological structure of David's prayer. Receive verses 1–4 as the specific, honest, undefended confession of specific actual sins, not a generic acknowledgment of general imperfection but the naming of specific transgressions before the specific God against whom they were committed. Note that David's confessions do not begin with explanation, with extenuating circumstances, or with the attribution of blame to others; they begin with the direct address to God and the direct, unqualified acknowledgment of what he has done: "Be gracious to me, O God... blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." Then receive verse 5 as the acknowledgment of original corruption, the reaching backward from specific acts to the constitutional condition from which they flow: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." This is the confession not merely of what David has done but of what he is: a member of Adam's race, bearing original corruption from the first moment of his existence, and therefore in need of something far more radical than the forgiveness of specific acts. And receive verses 7–10 as the prayer for the comprehensive gospel provision: purify, wash, make me hear joy and gladness, hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities, create in me a clean heart, renew a steadfast spirit within me. This is the prayer that original corruption makes necessary, and the prayer that the gospel of regeneration and sanctification has come to answer.

Pray in the structure of the two Adams, moving back and forth between the condition that the first Adam's transgression produced and the provision that the Second Adam's obedience has accomplished. Begin with the first Adam: the one whose sin in the garden made every person in this room, by birth, a participant in original guilt and original corruption, "children of wrath by nature" (Ephesians 2:3), "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1), "made sinners" by one man's disobedience (Romans 5:19). Let the weight of that condition settle. Then move to the Second Adam: the One whose obedience in the wilderness answered every form of the first Adam's failure in the garden, whose active righteousness across a perfect life of conformity to the Father's will fulfilled what the first Adam was called to do, and whose passive obedience on the cross bore the full weight of the condemnation that the first Adam's transgression incurred. "Through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Thank the Father for the Son's perfect representative obedience. Thank the Son for the free, costly, sovereign grace of the second imputation. Thank the Spirit for the regenerating and sanctifying work by which the ontological damage of original corruption is being addressed in the life of every believer, faculty by faculty, day by day, until the work of glorification completes what the work of regeneration has begun.

Pray together in three directions for the application of this lesson's content. First, for those who have not yet been confronted with the full doctrine of original sin in its biblical depth, who think of themselves as good people who sometimes fall short, or as wounded people who need healing, or as confused people who need guidance, but who have not yet understood themselves as constitutionally sinful people who need new birth, justification, and regeneration. Pray that the Spirit who convicts the world of sin (John 16:8) would do in their hearts the work of honest self-knowledge that produces not despair but the desperate, grateful reception of the gospel. Second, for those in your pastoral care who are struggling with specific patterns of actual sin and who have become discouraged by the failure of behavioral remedies to address the problem at its root. Pray that they would receive the doctrine of original corruption not as an excuse for their sin but as the precise diagnosis that directs them to the precise provision: the regenerating, sanctifying, mortifying work of the Spirit who alone can change the tree that bears the bitter fruit. Third, for your own growth in the specific area where the relationship between original corruption and actual sin is most personally real for you: where the battle against a specific pattern of sin has revealed the depth of the constitutional condition from which it grows, and where the gospel's provision of regenerating and sanctifying grace is most urgently needed and most gratefully received.

Close with the doxological conclusion of Romans 5: not verse 23's "all have sinned" but verse 20–21's "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." The doctrine of original sin, in its full depth, with both the guilt and the corruption fully acknowledged, with the constitutional and pre-personal character of the condition fully received, is the doctrine that, more than any other, makes this doxological abounding of grace intelligible and wonderful.

The grace that has abounded is not the grace that barely keeps pace with sin's expansion; it is the grace that has outrun sin in every dimension, the imputed righteousness of Christ that outstrips original guilt, the regenerating work of the Spirit that outstrips original corruption, the progressive sanctification that outstrips the specific pattern of actual sin, and the final glorification that will outstrip even the remaining sin of the present life and complete what grace has begun. This is the gospel's answer to original sin and actual sin alike: not merely adequate but superabundantly sufficient, not merely covering but transforming, not merely forgiving the past but creating the new future in which the non posse peccare of glorification will finally and permanently replace the non posse non peccare of original corruption.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit."

Psalm 51:10–12, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 5:12–21; Psalm 51:1–12; Ephesians 2:1–10; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22; Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Matthew 7:17–18; 12:31–32; James 4:17; 1 John 1:9; Romans 6:23; 8:13; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 21

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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