

“Words You Should Know: Sin”

Isaiah 64:4-9 • Romans 3:9-26

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 29, 2022

I’m sure that you have all heard about the terrible shooting that took place last week in an elementary school in Uvalde. When we hear news like this, it makes us stop and say, “What’s wrong with some people?” The question we want answered is “why?” What causes people to do these kinds of things? All you need to do is turn on the evening news to know that people are capable of doing terrible things. The truth is that sin and evil are real.

The past few weeks we have been trying to understand some theological concepts by learning “words you should know.” We talked about faith, and grace, and then last week election or predestination. Today I want to talk about one of the most important theological words: sin. Another word for sin is depravity. So I want to begin by asking you a basic question about humanity: Are people basically good or bad? What about you? Deep down are you basically good or bad? To answer that question, we need to define what we mean by good.

For years our culture has told us that the individual is the one who decides what is ultimately good. You are a good person because you live up to the definition that you create of a good person. This is sometimes called “self-actualization” in the social sciences.

Many times, if you ask someone whether they are basically good or bad, you will get an answer like, “Well, I think I’m basically a good person. I haven’t committed any serious crimes and I try to help others when I can. Besides, I’m not as bad as some people.”

This same kind of thinking carries over into their ideas about God. When you ask these same people if God should let them into heaven, the answer is usually something like, “I hope so. I try to do the right thing most of the time and I think I do more good things than bad, so I hope God will let me in.”

It’s this kind of thinking that the Apostle Paul is addressing in today’s passage from his

letter to the Romans. The Jewish leaders at that time taught that because they had the Torah and Circumcision they would be saved. They believed that if they generally obeyed God’s law then they were considered good.

But that’s not what we find in Scripture. In verse 9, Paul says, “all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.” He then goes on to quote a number of Old Testament passages that back up his argument – five from the Psalms, one from Ecclesiastes, and one from Isaiah. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, no one does good, not even one.”

What this passage is making clear for us is that there is really no such thing as a “good person.” As verse 23 says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The issue is sin. We are all “under sin.” But you need to know that sin is more than just the things you have done wrong in your life. It runs much deeper than that. Sin is about who you are.

What we’re talking about is referred to in Reformed Theology as Total Depravity. R.C. Sproul points out that the term *total depravity* can be misleading for many people because it suggests a moral condition of *utter* depravity. So a lot of people reject the concept of total depravity because they say, “It can’t be true because I’m not nearly as bad as I could be. I’m not *totally* depraved.”

Now it’s true that some of you are not as bad as you could be. But that’s not what Total Depravity means, though. The term total depravity refers to the effects of sin on the whole person. As today’s passages, and in fact many others in the Bible, make very clear, sin affects every aspect of our being – our bodies, our minds, our wills, our relationships, and so forth. There is no part of your self that is not affected by sin. Our human nature is sinful. In other words, we are not sinners because we sin; rather, we sin because we are sinners. John Calvin

reminds us that our corrupt nature is not something we acquire in our life, but that we “bring an innate corruption” from the womb. We’re born this way.

That’s not to say that we can’t do things that would be considered “good.” We’re all capable of doing incredible good for our fellow human beings. Even people who consider themselves atheists or agnostics often do great things for others. The issue comes back to God’s perspective of us. God not only looks at what you do, he sees you for who you truly are. From God’s perspective, your best efforts are simply not good enough. Not even close. In fact, as our reading from Isaiah said, “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” The best you can do on your own is like smelly socks to God. The point is that there is nothing that you and I can do on our own that will earn God’s favor. Our efforts to get into heaven by our own merits will fail.

That’s why another term frequently used for the concept of Total Depravity is Total Inability. Because of that sinful nature that we’re all born with, you and I are unable to bring anything of value to our salvation. We call this the human predicament: we are responsible for what we do, but we cannot be saved by what we do. This is where the concept of *free will* comes in. God has created you with a mind so you can think, and a will so you can act. You have the freedom to make choices. The problem is that because of our sinful nature, we make sinful choices.

What this means is that we end up choosing to put other things in the place of God in our lives. When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest he said it was to love God with *all* your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love others completely. Sin is doing anything less than loving God and loving others perfectly. Instead, we tend to search for meaning in our careers or in our kids and grandkids or in a new car, rather than finding our meaning in the one who created and redeemed us. Sin is anything that harms our relationship with God as the most important

thing in our lives. The Bible calls that idolatry. Idols are not just little statues that people worship. An idol is anything that you put in the place of God in your life. Even things that God has said are good can become idols for us.

So what are we to do? Is there any hope for us? The good news is that yes, there is hope. Verse 23 says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” You see how all these words we’ve been studying are related and interconnected.

The cure for our sinful condition is Jesus Christ. Later in Romans Paul says “the wages of sin is death,” referring to our spiritual condition. But when we are united with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made alive in him. The idea in today’s passage is one of “redemption,” which we will talk more about in a future message. For now, just know that redemption was frequently used in the ancient Greek world to refer to redemption from slavery or the ransom paid for prisoners of war.

Which is why the doctrine of Total Depravity is so helpful to us. The tragedies we see in the news serve as reminders that apart from Christ we are all capable of terrible things. When we understand our sinful nature, we realize our need for a savior. We also realize that we don’t “find” God but that we are found by him. It’s only in the light of grace that we recognize and seek forgiveness for our sinfulness and rebellion and it’s only in the light of realizing our rebellion that we are humbled to receive grace by faith in Christ.

Amen.