

### ***Bad Seed***

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: one of the first things I learned in engineering school (more years ago than I care to say) is that the first step in finding a solution to a situation that needs correction is to properly identify the problem. You can't really fix something until you know what's wrong. And it's not true just for engineering, but for *any* trouble you might face in any field of human endeavor. You've got to be able to identify and describe the *real* problem; otherwise you end up wasting time and effort on faulty solutions geared toward treating symptoms rather than what's causing them.

I mention this because this last Wednesday the Church calendar turned once again to the season of Lent: a time when we who are faithful turn our attention to considering all the evils of our fallen condition as we prepare ourselves to better understand and appreciate – and better *apprehend* for ourselves – the salvation achieved for us by our Lord Jesus Christ in his passion, death, and resurrection: the event we call the *atonement* which is the very heart of the Gospel. *That*, we know is the *solution* to our problem. But let me suggest that we still will not be able to really apply this graciously provided solution unless we can adequately describe the problem. To illustrate, suppose I were to go to a doctor complaining of an itchy rash that had broken out on my arms. And after some tests he prescribed a medicine that would cure it. But after a week or so of spreading this medicine on my skin and not seeing any sign of relief, I go back to him and say, "Doc, this stuff isn't working. I've been putting it on the rash twice a day and nothing's happening." The doctor says, "Well, that's because your rash is caused by bacteria in your system. You're supposed to *drink* the medicine, not apply it to your skin." You see, the mistake I made was to use the medicine to treat the symptoms rather than the problem.

As foolish as that sounds, it often happens that Christians use the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the same inappropriate way. We try to use God's Word and his message of salvation to treat the symptoms of the fallen human condition rather than their ultimate cause because, well, because often we don't understand what the real problem is to begin with. I mean, we know that the problem is our sin. We all confessed a short while ago "all our sins and iniquities with which we have ever offended against" the Lord. But what does that mean? What really is our sin problem? Is it, as many believe, simply the accumulated list of the bad things we've thought, said, and done, together with the good things we should have done but didn't do? Or does the problem of our sin run a lot deeper than that? This is the question we'll explore today precisely so that we will better understand our problem.

In today's Old Testament lesson, we have the familiar story of our first parents' temptation by Satan and their subsequent fall by disobeying the Lord and eating the forbidden fruit. We correctly identify this episode as the beginning of the sin problem from which we all suffer. In the past when this text has come up, I've unpacked the temptation in detail, and so I won't do that again. But there is something I want to point out. I want you to note that the first breaking of a commandment was not from the perspective of Adam and Eve simply a wanton act of rebellion. They didn't wake up one morning and say, "Ha ha! How can we be evil and disobedient and make the Lord angry with us today?" No, there was some priming and build up by Satan. They had to be prepared through his deceptions. And what I want you to see is what Satan is doing as he begins his conversation with Eve, is that he is planting the seeds of doubt in her heart and mind. He implies that the Lord is not the great benefactor she believes him to be, that he has not been entirely honest with her, and that he's been holding out on some

blessings – the grace of being like God, no less – which she can obtain simply by biting into a piece of fruit. It's so easy, she thinks, and the results will be so good. How could it be wrong? Especially since the Lord had lied to us, tried to scare us with that warning about dying. Good thing friend serpent here has set us straight on that score.

And what I'm trying to show is that by the time they actually eat the forbidden fruit, the bad seeds planted by Satan had already taken root. In fact, you might say that eating the forbidden fruit was only the fruit of the corrupt tree that Satan had planted with his lies. Their first mistake was to let the bad seed grow: the bad seed of the thoughts that we can't trust God, that we have to take care of ourselves and look after our own interests, and that we can get the desires of our hearts by going *against* what the Lord has said. Their evil actions came from hearts that they had already allowed to become corrupted by lies and distortions. To see the other side of it, you can see how Jesus contends with Satan's seeds of temptation and deception in today's Gospel. He never gives them a chance to grow. Every time Satan makes an innocent sounding suggestion, Jesus replies to him, "No, you're *wrong*; *this* is what God has said." He takes his stand on the Word of God and refuses to entertain other ideas. *That's* the way to beat temptation.

But that's not what Adam and Even did. And we also know from the first chapter of Genesis that during the creation when God made the plants and trees, he made them so that each would bear fruit with seeds, and each according to its own kind; which means that apple trees bear apples containing apple seeds, and kumquat trees bear kumquats containing kumquat seeds, and so on. But this is more than a statement about botany. Having allowed Satan's bad seed to grow in their hearts, our first parents became bad trees bearing bad fruit containing bad seed. And we could look at this in two ways. One is that by having become internally corrupt, they naturally produced acts of sin. And make sure you've got that: they were no longer good people who sometimes committed evil acts; no, they were at that point evil people doing what comes naturally to those who are evil: doing evil things. Ah, but these two people produced another kind of fruit: not just their sinful actions, but also their *offspring*. Their children too were the fruit of evil trees. They were spawned from bad seed. They were natural born sinners. Or, to be more precise, according to Scripture they were naturally *conceived* sinners. And like their parents before them they produced only one kind of fruit in the same two ways: they produced sin, and they gave birth to more sinners. And so, the race of man was plunged into darkness and came under the curse of death and decay.

What we're talking about here is what theologians call *original sin*. It's the inherited corruption and guilt we all carry within us, and that taints with sin everything we think, say, or do. As Jesus said, bad trees simply cannot produce good fruit. Nor can they produce good children. Parents, if you don't like the way your children are behaving, you know where they got it from. And a word of warning here to children: when your parents are angry and yelling at you because of some misdeed you did, it's best not to remind them of this. You're likely to end up suffering more for the sake of this inconvenient truth.

Unfortunately, a lot of people in the Christian Church deny the doctrine of original sin. They say that we all have "free moral agency"; that is, the ability to choose good or evil. They hold that we really aren't corrupted thorough and through; but only weakened. Some say that we are born in a state of moral neutrality, and that sinful behavior is something we learn, and that we can unlearn by turning to God's Law and trying to live by it. And this is where the Gospel gets pulled in to treat symptoms rather than the real problem. The idea is that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is motivation that enables a sinner to overcome temptation and to stop sinning. It's the extra added boost the weakened will needs to choose and to do good.

Scripture knows nothing about it though. And what this approach ends up doing is simply to fertilize a bad tree. And do you know what you get then? You get a big, strong, green, leafy, great-looking *bad tree that produces even more bad fruit*.

No, this original sin we have is real, totally corrupting sin. And it carries with it real guilt and consequences. As we say, "Adam's fall condemned us all". This is what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle. He's showing how that not only sin's corrupting effect adheres to us, but also the *penalty* of that first sin is passed down through the generations. His argument is quite interesting. He asks us to consider all those people who lived in the time between Adam and when God gave the Law to Moses several thousand years later. They didn't break any commandments, and yet they died. And please understand that we aren't talking about questions of right and wrong, and whether or not they sinned; we're talking about the power of the Law to condemn and impose penalties. Paul says, "Sin is not counted where there is no Law." He means that you can't prosecute and punish someone for something if there was no law against it when they did it. For example, when the Internet was a new thing, there were no laws against creating and spreading computer viruses. The first people to think them up and inflict them on the world knew very well that what they were doing was morally wrong, and they caused billions of dollars worth of damage to businesses and individuals. But however despicable their acts were, they could not be charged with anything because there were no laws against what they did at the time. Now there are.

But going back to the point, we know that in eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve broke the law – *which was the only law that was on the books* – and as a result they came under the *penalty* of the law, which, as the Lord had said, was death. But what about their descendants? They *didn't* break the only law that was punishable by death. They couldn't; after all, their parents had been banished from the garden where the forbidden tree was. And yet, though they didn't commit the death penalty sin, they all died. That's what Paul is saying: "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam." And again remember: the question isn't whether they sinned; of course, they did. The question is, "On the basis of what crime did God charge them that they should have to pay the penalty of death?" The answer is: *Adam's sin*. Because the seed of all people was in Adam when he sinned, all *through Adam* sinned. And thus, the curse of death was passed to all. Say it another way: you are guilty of Adam's sin.

Now, this whole original sin thing might seem to be a bit unfair. We were corrupted and condemned by the temptation and sin of someone else. We are fruit of bad seed who can do nothing else but produce bad fruit containing bad seed. And we're condemned to be chopped down and thrown into the fire for it. And it's actually worse for us than for the others we were just talking about because now we do have the *whole* Law of God. Ever since the time of Moses, there have been a lot more Laws on the books that we are commanded to obey; laws that we cannot help but break, but that also condemn us. So, we're even *guiltier* before God than those others were.

Sounds like a bum rap. But the truth is that this situation we're in is not really unfair. That's the wrong way to look at it, and it does us no good to think of it that way. The fact is *that's the way it is*. We are the spawn of bad seed. *That's* the problem we have. But having identified and described the problem accurately, we are now able to understand and apply the solution.

And what we discover is that the same mechanism that seems so unfair by which we were corrupted and condemned actually works to our advantage in Christ Jesus. He is the Man

produced by the Good Seed: the long-promised Seed of the woman whose Father is the holy God. He was planted in this world to produce a different kind of fruit: good fruit with good seed that saves us from sin and its penalty. As we've seen, when tempted by Satan he did not fall. And so he lived a perfectly righteous life full of good fruit: the fruit that ensures life. But he was, nevertheless, condemned as bad seed on our behalf. Like rotten fruit he hung on the tree scorned and rejected by God. And now, just as eating the fruit of the bad tree condemned our first parents, those who eat the fruit of the cross are given life and salvation for they are receiving to themselves Christ Jesus and his atoning sacrifice. This is what Paul is saying: Just as the sin of Adam condemned all who were in him, so the sacrifice of Christ is counted to the credit of all who by faith are in him. And just as the sin of Adam was imputed to those who are his seed, so the righteousness of Christ is imputed to those who are born again of heavenly seed: which seed is the message of the Gospel when it is heard and takes root and grows. That is, when a person trusts in Jesus and the sacrifice he made, the good fruit produced by Christ is counted as having been done by the believer. And no, it may not seem to be exactly fair; but it's the only plan of salvation we have been given by God's super abounding grace. And it's what actually gets to the root of the problem.

In a short time, the Lord in his mercy is going to give us another opportunity to receive his Good Seed from the Fruit of the Tree of Life, which is the cross of Christ. May his body and blood planted in us grow and flourish unto the strengthening of our faith and the production of his righteous works. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***