

Evangelism Training

Truth 2: Man is a great sinner.

I. Introduction

In the last lesson, we considered the character of God and how this relates to our evangelistic work. There we learned that the holiness of God, His perfect moral purity, provides the foundation for gospel proclamation. This lesson will focus on what the Bible teaches about man, and we will see why man stands in need of salvation through Jesus Christ.

II. Understanding Sin (Gen 8:21)

a. Definitions

The word “sin” essentially means “to miss the mark.” It is living in a way that fails to meet God’s standard. Sin therefore has no independent existence. It is moral failure—any thought, word, or act which violates the will of God.

“Sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

“Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Westminster Shorter Catechism).

“Sin is not to give God what is owed to Him” (Anselm of Canterbury).

Sin is “the deprivation of the good” (Augustine).

Expanded Definition: Sin is disobedience to God’s law, the failure to love God, the refusal to order one’s life according to God, self-determination, self-enthronement, self-worship.

b. Illustrations

Sin is compared to poison (Deut 32:32), rottenness (Matt 7:17), corruption (Rom 3:13), venom (Rom 3:13), filth (Isa 64:6; Zech 4:4), and crimson stains (1:18). These pictures all emphasize the repulsive and offensive character of sin.

c. The Prototypical Sinners

- i. Satan – Created good but became proud, rebelled against God, and enticed the first humans to sin.
- ii. Adam – Created good but believed the lie of Satan, became proud, and rebelled against God.

d. Major Themes: Unbelief, Pride, Autonomy, Hatred.

III. The Doctrine of Original Sin

The doctrine of original sin explains how Adam's sin affected the human race. Since Adam represented humanity, the guilt of his sin was imputed to all his descendants. His corrupted moral nature is also transmitted to them. Therefore, every individual is born in a state of guilt and moral corruption. This explains man's universal need for salvation. Romans 5:12–19 is the primary text for this doctrine. In this passage we learn that Christ is a new representative for humanity. While Adam's one sin brought condemnation and death upon the entire human race, Christ's sacrifice brought justification and eternal life to God's chosen people (Rom 5:18).

See also Eph 2:3; Psa 51:5; 1 Cor 15:22.

IV. The Doctrine of Total Depravity

a. Definition

The doctrine of total depravity claims that man is spiritually dead and unable to please God or respond to the gospel apart from the miracle of regeneration.

b. Biblical Evidence

Genesis 6:5 Then Yahweh saw that the evil of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 8:21 The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.

See also Jer 13:23; 17:9; Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:1–3.

c. Explanation

Everyone is born in a state of pervasive moral corruption. There is no true love for God in the human heart. Scripture describes man as dead, not sick. This does not mean that man is incapable of social good or that each person is as bad as can be. Rather, the point of this doctrine is that man's will is bound in sin. A miracle of spiritual resurrection is necessary before he can respond to the gospel.

d. Objections

- i. Pelagianism: claims that man is good and able to earn his salvation.
- ii. Semi-Pelagianism: claims that man is morally corrupt yet still good enough to respond to the gospel.
- iii. Arminianism: similar to Semi-Pelagianism except that it claims man is able to respond to God as a result of "prevenient grace" (not saving or regenerative grace, but a kind of semi-restorative grace).

e. Unbiblical Evangelism

Unbiblical evangelism is the fruit of unbiblical anthropology. If man is able to choose God without undergoing a spiritual rebirth, then evangelism is just a matter of persuading unbelievers to choose God. No miracle is necessary. Evangelism then becomes a matter of connecting the gospel to man's felt needs. If we can figure out what the unbeliever already wants, then we can show them how Jesus can help them with that. The problem is that the unbeliever has corrupted desires. Therefore, this kind of evangelism will always result in a distorted gospel where sin and repentance are seldom mentioned.

V. Truths to Remember

- a. You are dealing with a spiritually dead heart in need of rebirth (John 3:3).
- b. The unbeliever is hopelessly committed to rationalizing his sinful behavior (e.g. Gen 3:12 – Adam blamed Eve and God for his sin).
- c. The gospel will always sound foolish to the unbeliever (1 Cor 1:18). Therefore, it is a fool's errand to try to make the gospel more palatable.

- d. The unbeliever still has a conscience, albeit corrupted (Rom 2:14–16).
- e. You are trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to work the miracle of regeneration as you proclaim the gospel (1 Pet 1:23; James 1:18). Your role is to pray, to proclaim, and wait for God to perform this miracle.

VI. Example Conversation

You: “Do you believe that God exists?”

Friend: “Yes, of course.”

You: “What about heaven and hell?”

Friend: “I believe in heaven, but I’m not sure about hell. I don’t think a loving God would send people to hell.”

You: “But what about evil people: murderers, war criminals, and people like that? Don’t you think that a good God should punish evil?”

Friend: “I suppose...”

You: “At the very least, we can agree that a good God should have some standard of justice and that He should enforce that standard, right?”

Friend: “I don’t know much about the Bible, but I guess I agree.”

You: “Ok, so what about you?”

Friend: “What do you mean?”

You: “Since you acknowledge that a good God should not only reward good but also punish evil, where do you think *you* stand with God? Do you think you are going to heaven?”

Friend: “I think so. I mean, I’m not perfect, but I try to live a productive life and make the world a better place. For example, I work at _____ because I want to contribute positively to society. I use some of my spare time volunteering at _____ because I want to help relieve some of the suffering around me. I don’t commit crimes. I pay my bills. Etc.”

You: “What about God?”

Friend: “What do you mean?”

You: “You mentioned some good things, but I didn’t hear you mention God. Good works are not just about doing good things for other people. Good and evil are concepts that relate first and foremost to God. The things you mentioned are good, but God requires more than that. In Mark 12:30 Jesus tells us that God requires us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Doing good things is not enough to please Him. Everything we do must also be done with a godly motive and a sincere desire to glorify Him. Do you think you are living this way?”

Friend: “Well, no. Not when you put it like that.”

You: “Romans 3:23 says that, even though some have sinned more than others, we have all failed to earn God’s approval. And since God is holy, He cannot leave our sin unpunished. Unless we obtain forgiveness for our sins, we will all stand guilty before God on judgment day and be sent to hell.”

Friend: “Wow, so you think I deserve to go to hell?”

You: “It’s not about what I think. It’s about what the Bible says. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said that hell is reserved not just for murderers but also for those who become angry and insult other people (Matt 5:21–22). Hell is not just for adulterers but also for those who secretly lust in their heart (Matt 5:27–30). The same goes for every other kind of sin. God judges the secret thoughts and motivations of our heart (Rom 2:16). He sees through our so-called righteous deeds and sees a heart that is proud and unwilling to give Him the worship that He deserves. The Bible says that we are all sinners in need of grace.”

Note: Unless the Holy Spirit is working in the unbeliever, he will do everything he can to evade responsibility. His sin nature will lead him to contradict self-evident truths, such as the existence of God or the authority of the Bible. It will also lead him to defend himself at all costs as you try to show him his sin. Be patient and pray for God to open his eyes.

Homework

- Memorize Truth 2 and at least one verse from this card.
- Write a paragraph that explains why everyone stands in need of salvation. Use language than the average unbeliever can understand.
- Read *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, pgs. 7–14.
- Read *Essential Christian Doctrine*, pgs. 150–156, 269–274. If you have the larger version, *Biblical Doctrine*, then the same readings can be found at pgs. 255–267, 522–535.
- Keep praying for your three unbelieving friends or acquaintances. Try to schedule some time with one of them where you will have time discuss non-trivial things.