

Reformed view of Humans

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[0 : 00] Well, as Andrew said, last week we looked at the way the Reformation changed our perspective on God, how it offered us a clear path to God through Jesus, how it encouraged us to think more deeply about God's righteousness and mercy, and we saw how it pointed to Scripture as the only reliable source of knowledge about God.

Well, this week we're going to look at how the Reformation changed the way we think about humans, about ourselves. There's only two major headings this week. The Reformation offered a more radical view of the human problem, and the Reformation offered a more radical solution to the human problem.

So first, the Reformation offered a more radical view of the human problem. Let me ask you a question. What is it that keeps us from getting close to God? Now, if you're a good Protestant, or indeed if you're a Christian of any sort, I guess you know the answer to that immediately.

Sin. Sin is what keeps us from coming to God. And if sin isn't dealt with, it will keep us away from God forever, eternally.

It'll send us to hell. But when we say that, what exactly do we mean by sin? Is sin just the wrong things that we do and say and think?

[1 : 20] Or does it go deeper than that? Where does sin come from? Well, for some religions and philosophies, it's something that just happens along the way.

We're born innocent, and then we go bad because of our choices and circumstances. A major religion, of course, that teaches that these days is Islam. In Christian history, Pelagianism taught that.

Many strands of progressive political ideology follow that line too. Vice and error are foreign to man's constitution, said Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They invade it from outside and imperceptibly alter it.

But the Bible is a lot more pessimistic than that. It shows us sin as something that has infected our whole race from the very first sin of Adam.

It says that individual sins, the wrong things that we do, say and think, are just the tip of the iceberg. They're the signs of a deeper corruption.

[2 : 27] Jesus likens them to the fruit that show what kind of tree we are. In Mark 7.21, he says that the real problem lies below the surface.

It is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander and arrogance.

The Apostle Paul, of course, also has harsh things to say about human nature. In Romans 3.10, he says that there is no one righteous, not even one.

All have turned away. No one seeks God. In Romans 8.7, he describes humans as naturally hostile to God and unable to please God.

In Ephesians 2.10, he says that before God saved us, we were dead in our sins. That is, dead to God and deserving of wrath. Both Jesus and Paul, in other words, teach that sin isn't just something that we do.

[3 : 33] It's a character flaw that goes all the way to the bone. We sin, but we sin because we are corrupt. Hostility to God and his commands is a basic and defining instinct of our species.

Now, this seems altogether too negative for some people. In fact, maybe you're kind of recoiling from it, even as I describe it. The Catholic Church, too, has seen that as too harsh.

The Catholic position is that we aren't entirely bad. A lot of the time, we're just mixed up. Human nature is like a shopping trolley with a wheel that doesn't go straight anymore.

It won't stay true. It has to be continually forced back onto the straight and narrow. As we read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 404, human nature has not been totally corrupted. It is wounded in the natural powers proper to it. Subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin. An inclination to evil that is called concupiscence.

[4 : 45] For the Catholic Church, we sin because one part of us, namely our desires, or what it calls concupiscence, has become confused.

We can't see that trusting God is better than money, so we steal. We can't see that self-control is more desirable than pleasure, so we misuse food and sex. But for the Reformers, the problem goes much deeper.

It's not just that we're confused. The real problem is that we don't want God telling us what to do, and we don't want to admit our sinfulness. Have a listen to how the Lutheran Augsburg Confession puts it.

Since the fall of Adam, all men, beconded in the natural way, are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence, and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through baptism and the Holy Ghost.

Notice that the Lutherans use the same word as in the Catholic Catechism, concupiscence, disordered desire. But for them, it isn't just a mental problem.

[6 : 00] It's truly sin, an expression of our refusal to trust in God. The 39 articles also speak of concupiscence and describe it the same way.

Here's an excerpt from Article 9. It doesn't use that word, but the gist is the same. Man is very far gone from original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit, and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.

The result of this, according to Article 10, is that humans are unable to please God. The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God.

Wherefore, we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God. So I say the 13 articles. Now what does that mean?

Does it mean that we can't do anything good? Does it mean we can't love our children or be kind to strangers or enjoy going to church? No, it doesn't mean that.

[7 : 18] But what it does mean is that none of these things can address the real problem of our relationship with God. It means that left to ourselves, under our own devices, there will always be, underneath these good things that we do, some area of our lives where we are saying no to God.

No, you can't have that. No, we will not submit to you. It might be in the area of sex and relationships. It might be in the area of justice and forgiveness.

It might be to do with stealing or cheating. It might be to do with career or money. If we're religious or moral people, it may well be to do with pride.

We refuse to surrender our identity as good or spiritual people. We refuse to admit that our sins deserve judgment. We keep telling ourselves that we are basically okay, good at heart, better than the average person.

But the outcome of all these is the same. These little holdouts, these pockets of resistance in our lives, are signs that we don't really want God to be God.

[8 : 30] And that means, of course, that we can't be saved. God can try and save us. He can give up his son to pay for our sins.

He can send preachers into the world to tell everyone the good news. But it won't do any good. People won't want to hear it. It will be foolishness, as Paul says.

It will be the stench of death, as he says in 2 Corinthians. The only way that we will ever truly respond to the gospel is if God changes or remakes our hearts by his Holy Spirit.

As Jesus says, No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit.

Only the Spirit can enable us to see the kingdom of God. Paul says the same thing. In 2 Corinthians 4.6, he likens conversion to an act of new creation.

[9 : 37] 2 Corinthians 4.6, In the very next chapter, in verse 17, he's even more explicit.

If anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation. Please note, by the way, that this is what lies behind the reformed doctrine of election and predestination.

People sometimes see these as ugly doctrines, as if God were arbitrarily sending some people to hell and others to heaven. But in its most important aspect, it's really about God sending his Spirit to create faith and repentance in some, changing hearts that would otherwise always be hostile and resistant to the gospel.

As Calvin puts it, our mind has such an inclination to vanity that it can never cleave fast to the truth of God. And it has such a dullness that it is always blind to the light of God's truth.

Accordingly, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing. Faith is much higher than human understanding. A singular gift of God, both in that the mind of man is purged so as to be able to taste the truth of God and in that his heart is established therein.

[11 : 09] In other words, we need the Holy Spirit to change our minds and change our hearts so that we understand the goodness and desirability of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now this brings us to our second heading. The Reformation offered a more radical solution to the human problem. What happens to you when you become a Christian?

What changes inside you? What changes with regard to God? Here I want to spend a couple of minutes looking at how the Catholics see it and then how Reformed theology sees it.

I think this will be helpful and that we'll see some striking similarities and some significant differences. Now I have some slides to show though we've got a summary of the pictures that are going to go up on your sheet.

So if we have trouble with the slides, you can look at your sheet as well. Anyway, let's have a look at the way Catholicism sees the process of conversion. Here is a person before they're converted according to Catholic doctrine.

[12 : 21] That is, humans are naturally guilty, guilty because they inherit the guilt of their ancestor Adam and because, before long, they have their own guilt.

We all sin, in other words. We also, along with our guilt, have a broken nature that nature described as concupiscence, the tendency we have to go off the rails, the tendency we have to desire the wrong thing.

That by itself, as we saw, isn't regarded as sin, but it produces sin. That's the natural person according to Catholicism. So what happens when you become a Christian according to the Catholic Church?

Can we have the next slide? Thanks, Mark. Okay. So what happens when you become a Christian according to Catholicism is that you are joined to Christ by the Holy Spirit through the Church and its sacrament of baptism.

Yes, there is faith involved in adult baptism, of course, but in infant baptism, baptism, the sacrament itself does the work. And what work does it do?

[13 : 34] Baptism completely purges your guilt and makes you innocent in yourself. It doesn't change your nature because that nature wasn't sinful to start with according to Catholic doctrine.

So once you have been baptised, you are completely innocent. innocent from God's perspective but innocent in yourself. You are truly righteous in yourself.

Now what happens after that? Now you've been cleansed at baptism. Now you've received this great dose of grace. What happens next? Well, now in Catholic doctrine, you have to guard and preserve your righteousness.

Thanks, Mark. As you go along, you will sin. After your baptism, your righteousness will become sullied and smeared.

There will be minor sins or venial sins and if they're not dealt with, they will send you to purgatory. And there will be major or mortal sins and if they're not dealt with, they will send you to hell.

[14 : 54] They will kill God's grace in your life as the Catholic Catechism says. Destroy charity. Now what you have to do is you have to keep going to the Catholic Church to have its ministrations of grace to help you.

You need to keep getting grace parceled out to you through confession and penance through indulgences in the medieval world and sometimes today too.

All the graces and sacraments and sacramentals and charisms of the church are meant to help you and to preserve you in your righteousness and strengthen you to resist concupiscence.

But the great act of grace that you received at baptism is in the past now. Now you must maintain it with help from the church piecemeal.

Now in the Catholic Church you receive a great infusion or dose of grace at the moment of baptism a momentary forgiveness. With reformed conversion the sinner is united to Christ by the Holy Spirit and remains in union with Christ.

[16:12] The most fundamental element of the reformed doctrine of salvation is union with Christ or being in Christ. How does that work? Why is that significant?

Well because when we are united to Christ his death becomes our death or our death becomes his death we might say. And when we are united with Christ his righteousness becomes our righteousness.

Have a listen to how Martin Luther puts it. Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery as the apostle teaches Christ and the soul become one flesh.

Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own. And whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own.

Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries a poor wicked harlot redeems her from all her evil and adorns her with all his goodness.

[17:21] Her sins cannot now destroy her since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. and she has that righteousness in Christ her husband of which she may boast as her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell.

That's Martin Luther's idea. Carl Trueman says that is really his favourite way of thinking about the relationship between Christ and the believer. But Reformed theology has the same model.

This is how Calvin puts it. By the grace and the power of the same spirit we are made his members to keep us under himself and in turn to possess him.

That joining together of head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts, in short, that mystical union, are accorded by us the highest degree of importance so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.

Notice Calvin says this is of highest importance, highest degree of importance for us. It's mystical union, he means, when he says mystical he just means mysterious, through the Holy Spirit, in a way that's beyond our understanding.

[18:42] We are united with Christ and share in all that he has. So with the Reformed idea, you see, as we see in this diagram, there's no suggestion that we ourselves have become innocent.

we remain sinful people within ourselves. Our righteousness comes wholly from Christ. We stand in the forgiveness of Christ, in the righteousness of Christ.

As time goes on, according to that picture, the Holy Spirit will kind of work his way in from the outside and start to change us to be like Christ in the different parts of our lives, beginning with faith itself.

our salvation never depends on that. Our righteousness is always Christ's righteousness. We're right with God because Jesus has died for our sins and because he covers us with his righteousness.

But I hope you can see, maybe we can go to the next slide now, thank you, that there are two vastly different ways of thinking about being righteous here. the Catholic system gives us grace and tells us that we have to keep it.

[19:55] The reform system dumps us into grace and leaves us there. It says we're justified by being united to Christ entirely apart from works.

Now, there's an objection, of course, that immediately arises from that, and that is this. Does that mean that reformed believers will abuse God's grace and just live any old way if it's got nothing to do with works?

This has always been the Catholic protest against the reformed doctrine of sola fide, faith alone. And truthfully, it's also been the way some evangelicals have treated it in modern times.

Revival Christianity in particular has been notorious for producing this kind of attitude. I have my ticket to heaven, now I can go away and live however I want. How do we answer that objection?

Well, one answer, and this one is usually ascribed to Lutheranism, and yes, it finds strong expression in Lutheranism, is that if we really understand God's grace and forgiveness, then that gratitude will make us want to live for God.

[21 : 10] In other words, reflecting more deeply on our justification, justification will produce a mind and heart that longs for sanctification, longs for change.

I think that's true, and we can probably find a couple of New Testament passages, such as Romans 12.1, that point in that direction. In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

But I'm not sure that it's the majority report in the New Testament. There is another way of describing it, and Luther also gives this answer, I think, and this is, well, I'll read it out.

Luther says, some people are excellent preachers of the Easter truth, but miserable preachers of the truth of Pentecost. Christ has acquired redemption from sin and death for this very purpose, that the Holy Spirit should change our old Adam into a new man, that we are to be dead to sin and live unto righteousness, as Paul teaches in Romans 6.2, and that we are to begin this change and increase in this new life here and to consummate it hereafter.

For Christ has gained for us not only grace, but also the gift of the Holy Ghost. What Luther is saying here is that Jesus didn't come simply to save us from sin, he came to save us for a new life through the Spirit.

[22 : 44] And this, as he quotes, is exactly what Paul says in Romans 6. Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means. We are those who have died to sin.

How can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

So why should we struggle with sin? Well, because if we're Christians, that's what our life is about now. When we became Christians, we were baptized into Christ's death.

We got to claim Christ's death as our own. We became free of guilt because we'd already died through Jesus, as it were. But we didn't just get to share in Jesus' death.

We were buried with him in order to share in Jesus' new life. Everything about his resurrected life, his relationship to God, his rule over creation, his victory over Satan, his judgment of creation, all those things now belong to you and me if we belong to Jesus.

[24 : 01] Some of those things we've already been given. Like a perfect relationship with God. Some of those things we won't get until Jesus returns, like his immortal body. But some of them we have to struggle for now, like Jesus' character.

And if we don't want to struggle to be like Jesus, then it means we haven't really understood the gospel. It might mean that we aren't actually Christians at all. We've believed a different gospel. Paul says, the reason why we died is so that we could belong to Christ.

You also died to the law through the body of Christ that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead in order that we might bear fruit for God. Romans 7 verse 4. Or 2 Corinthians 5 15.

The point is, of course, we have been given not simply death in Christ, but new life, a new reason to live.

[25 : 08] And the point is that we don't need to make threats to make us change. The best way to motivate Christians to obey God isn't to tell them that it's up to us to be good and keep ourselves out of hell.

That's the way to produce fearful and reactive and rule-based faith. A faith that's always trying to avoid things. But the gospel of Paul and the reformers leads us to Christ who has already opened the gate of eternal life and who wants us to share in that life now.

It's a more radical solution to a radical problem. So there are our two headings. Let me finish with three reasons why we should prefer the reformed view of sin and salvation.

Firstly, it offers a more honest assessment of sin and sinfulness. The Catholic system, as we saw this week and last week, is full of little caveats and excuses. Sin is bad, but some sin isn't really bad.

Human nature produces sin, but isn't actually sinful. It's possible to do more than we should and earn merit with God. But the Bible, I think, is ruthlessly honest about God's absolute holiness and our absolute corruption.

[26 : 28] salvation. Romans 7, 18, for I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is my sinful nature, my flesh. What a wretched man I am, Romans 7, 24, who will rescue me from this body that

is subject to death.

If it's up to us to secure our righteousness or preserve our righteousness, then we are lost. The Bible tells us that our only hope is in Jesus.

As Paul writes, here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

But for that very reason, I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

The Reformed Perspective offers a more honest assessment of sin and sinfulness. The second reason why we should prefer it is that it doesn't limit God's grace. The Catholic Church has always believed in free forgiveness through Christ, but it rations it out as it were in buckets and tumblers. [27 : 38] We get a nice bath of it at our baptism, but after that we have to come begging. After that, we're in a state of peril. Jerome, the fourth century translator of the Latin Vulgate, spoke about how he wished that the grace of baptism could go on and on.

If it were possible for us to be always immersed in the waters of baptism, sins would fly over our heads and leave us untouched. The Holy Spirit would protect us, but the enemy assails us. And when conquered, does not depart, but is ever lying in ambush, that he may secretly shoot the upright in heart. But the Bible doesn't talk about us being simply dunked in grace and then sent away.

It talks about us being baptized into Christ and remaining in Christ. As Paul says in Romans 8.1, therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

Because through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. The reformed doctrine of justification, the reformed doctrine of conversion does not limit God's grace.

[28 : 49] Thirdly and finally, it provides a sure comfort. Jerome speaks about the enemy, the devil, lying in ambush and shooting at the upright in heart. That's exactly right, of course. The devil continually accuses us of sin.

But how much more vulnerable we are to that accusation, if our eyes are on ourselves rather than Christ? If it's up to us to keep ourselves out of his clutches?

Luther, I think, gives us a much better and more colourful way to respond. When the devil throws sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, you tell him this.

I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? For I know one who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God.

And where he is, there I shall be also. So last week, I said the main thing about reformed theology was that it was all about Jesus.

[29 : 55] Jesus is the key to knowing God. But I hope you can see that Jesus is the key to knowing and coming to terms with ourselves as well. For the reformers, the basis of assurance and the whole of life is always about Christ.

Are you a sinner? Put all your faith in Christ. Have you failed to live out your faith as you should? Go back to Christ. Do you find yourself weak and discouraged?

Look to Christ to give you his spirit. Reformed faith is able to look honestly, to stare honestly at human hearts because it has a clearer picture of what God has done about it in Jesus.

He hasn't just forgiven us our sins. He doesn't just give us grace now and then. He unites us to his Son by the bonds of the Holy Spirit. If we really belong to Jesus, all our struggles and failings already belong to him too.

And by that same spirit, Christ himself is ours. J.I. Packer in his classic Knowing God tells us that the key to living as a Christian is knowing what God has already done for us and how Christ has joined himself to us and made us friends with God.

[31 : 19] He says, the secret of the Christian life, of a God-honoring life, is this. Do I, as a Christian, understand myself? Do I know my own real identity?

My own real destiny? I'm a child of God. God is my Father. Heaven is my home. Every day is one day nearer. My Savior is my brother. Every Christian is my brother too.

Say it over and over again to yourself. First thing in the morning, last thing at night, as you wait for the bus, any time when your mind is free, and ask God that you may be enabled to live as one who knows it, to be utterly and completely true.

another great writer and an inspiration to J.I. Packer himself was Richard Sibbes from the 17th century.

In his great work, *The Bruised Reed*, he speaks about how the Holy Spirit comforts us and shows us Christ again and again.

[32 : 24] The Holy Spirit comforts us with truth about Christ. He died and has reconciled us to God. Therefore now God is at peace with you. Christ our Savior and head is alive and is now in heaven.

Therefore we ought to rise to holiness of life. The Holy Spirit brings everything from Christ in his working and comfort, and he makes Christ the pattern for everything. Christ is a son.

The Spirit tells us we are sons. Christ is an heir. The Spirit tells us we are heirs with Christ. Christ is the king of heaven and earth. The Spirit tells us that we are kings and that his riches are ours.

Thus we have grace for grace, both favor and grace in us, and privileges issuing from grace. We have all as they are in Christ. The grace and sanctification we have is not in our own keeping.

It comes in answer to our needs, but the spring is inexhaustible. It never fails. The spring is in Christ. Amen.