

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** Original Guilt and Corruption

**Sermon Text:** Romans 5:12-14

**Rom. 5:12** ¶ Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

**Rom. 5:13** for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.

**Rom. 5:14** Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

**Main Point:** All people share both the guilt and the corruption of Adam's first sin, and this imputed guilt and inherited corruption reveal why we need Christ's righteousness and grace—because only in the second Adam can our guilt be forgiven and our nature renewed.

## **Outline:**

1. Original Guilt
2. Original Corruption

## **Introduction**

I don't know if you felt this way, but while last week's message might have seemed like a sermon about covenants and covenant theology, it was really a sermon about original sin.

There are two great challenges that we face when it comes to this topic. On the one hand, people know about the doctrine of original sin. Or at least they've heard about it, and to many it seems unfair. And so because of that there have certainly been people who have rejected Christianity in one way or another because they found this doctrine so hard to believe. To some it just seems so unfair that it must not be true at all. Because of this, I felt very strongly coming into this series that we really need to understand this topic, and to make sure we're getting the answers from Scripture.

Now, last week we introduced this idea of Adam's covenantal relationship with God. And in it we saw that Adam was given an important task in the garden: to keep the garden, to protect it, and to obey God as His representative. We also saw that if he obeyed, the reward would be everlasting life for him and all those who were in him, and that if he disobeyed the consequence for him and all his descendants would be death.

And we know that Adam did fail in keeping that covenant of works that God gave to him, and because of that sin and death entered in, just like God promised would happen.

But today we turn our attention to the consequences of Adam's sin: the subject of original sin.

For some this is one of the most upsetting and offensive Biblical doctrines. People struggle to appreciate how it is fair for this man's sin to become our sin: for this man's guilt to then (in a sense) ruin things for the rest of us.

And as we begin today, I want to acknowledge that you may not like the answer that Scripture gives to where we find ourselves, but all of us have to reckon with sin and death, and the nature of these things. Everyone does. The atheist, the secular agnostic or skeptic, the Buddhist ... all people and all worldviews have to admit there is something desperately wrong with mankind. There is no worldview where you get to go, "ah, I don't have to think about this."

The atheist answer often haunts us as people living in the secular west.

Charles Taylor says that to live in a secular society means that Christians are always haunted with the sense that the atheist answer feels plausible in a

way that it may not have 500 years ago. But it also means that for the atheist, the Christian answer also has plausible explanatory power, too. The atheist is just as haunted by the question, “What if I’m wrong?”

You see, if you don’t believe God is there, or if you think he *might* not be there, you still have to admit that something is wrong with human beings, and however you see things, the truth has to line up with the world as we know it. The atheist has to give an answer to this situation just as much as the Christian does.

But for the atheist, the answer to our condition is limited to the material. The explanation for human misery and death has to be something physical... genetic... evolutionary. If atheism is true, then in the end, death is neither normal nor abnormal, and neither good nor bad because nothing is good or bad, and we weren’t created for any reason or purpose. One major problem with this is that it militates against everything that we know about ourselves: we love people after they have died. How does that make any sense in a world full of just atoms bumping into each other? What’s the survival value? And there are many other contradictory truths that run up against the atheist approach as well.

If the atheist is right, then our grief at the grave is irrational. And that goes for other perspectives that have to answer this question as well. If the Buddhist is right, then our tears of loss are simply our failure to embrace our own impermanence. The problem is, we know deep down that our grief is not an illusion. Instead, it’s a witness.

Ultimately all other answers minimize death, but the Bible alone names death for what it is: an enemy. Not a friend. (1 Cor. 15:26). Every funeral shouts to us that death is not the way it’s supposed to be. The resurrection shouts that death is not the way it will always be. So the Christian perspective is not only coherent and based in God’s word, but it also holds an answer to death that isn’t just hand-wringing or denying what we see before our eyes.

But everyone has to answer these questions: even the views that think they’re sidestepping the whole question still have to answer it.

And so you may not like the Christian explanation of death that we find in the doctrine of original sin, but if you are skeptical I hope you will at least consider it.

All mankind has to wrestle with this question: why are we like this... and how did we get to be this way? And is there a time when things were different?

I want to remind you of where we were last week.

Because of that original covenant relationship between God and Adam, we all stood to gain from Adam's obedience, and we stood to lose everything in his disobedience.

Adam did, in fact, disobey, and because of that, we now stand guilty "in Adam." We've spoken about being "in Christ," but we are all born in someone else: "in Adam." And since we were "in Adam" when he sinned, we share in the guilt of his sin. Paul here doesn't merely say, "we imitate Adam," but he says we were "in Adam."

There is no question that humanity is sinful. I don't think anyone questions that. But the question is, why are we born this way if it was only Adam who sinned?

How did this happen?

Why are people born with this nature that is naturally turned against God, opposed to his will, and in fact opposed to *Him*? It's not enough to say, well we just are.

The Bible answers this question, and it tells us that not only are we sinful, prone to sin, with hearts set against God, but it tells us that we are guilty of Adam's first sin, and that as a consequence we all experience the same corruption of nature that Adam experienced.

When we speak of original sin, we are really speaking of two things. First, we are speaking of original guilt. In other words, we share in the guilt of Adam's first sin in taking the fruit. And second, we are also speaking of original corruption.

Those two things together are what we mean when we speak of original sin. And they're going to be our outline.

My hope is to show you today not only that these things are biblical, but that they are part of the church's historic teaching, and also that they are important. That we're not just playing theology games, word games, but that we are speaking about truly consequential and important things. That in these doctrines we really

are doing what Paul said to Timothy when he told him to “guard the deposit entrusted to you” (1 Tim. 6:20). That’s what we’re doing when we teach, explain, and defend the doctrine of original sin.

## **1. Original Guilt**

First this morning, we see Paul teaching not merely original sin, but original guilt.

What do we mean when we speak of original guilt? We don’t mean that we are guilty of every sin that has ever been committed by every person who has ever come before us, whom we are genetically related to. What we mean is the liability to punishment that we all experience because of Adam’s first sin in taking the fruit in the garden.

There are some who deny the idea of original guilt.

Pelagians, for example, said that there is no sin passed on to one’s children except a negative example. And so the Pelagians said, the reason the world is so full of sin is that people keep following the bad examples of their parents and those around them. But, they said, a person could be perfect if they tried hard enough.

Eastern Orthodoxy also denies the idea of original guilt. They admit that people get sick and die, but they say this isn’t because we’re guilty of Adam’s original sin. They say the reason is that we are physically connected with the guilty one: Adam. But they say we aren’t guilty of Adam’s first sin. We’ve just inherited the sickness of sin.

In both of these views, however, when you deny original guilt, you truly have a race of human beings who are not guilty, but many of whom still die in infancy. So this is not just a scriptural problem, but it’s a very real moral problem for God.

Scripture tells us that death is the “wage” of sin. Death belongs to us just as much as anything else we do because we have earned it. Death is a punishment. A punishment that was part of God’s original covenant with Adam.

But if the Eastern Orthodox are right, or if the Pelagians are right, then massive swaths of the human race die – often in the womb, or at a young age before they have done good or evil – of something they are not guilty of *in any sense*.

They are experiencing, in other words, the judicial judgment of God even though they are not guilty. Again: this is if it's really true that people do not bear Adam's original guilt.

So in their view, death becomes separated from sin. It becomes something that happens even to those who have no guilt and it becomes something that is really just a part of the natural order. But that's not how God speaks about the consequences of taking from the tree in the garden to Adam. He says, "In the day that you eat of it you shall die." Death is the result of disobedience, not a part of the natural world. There is nothing more evil and unnatural than death.

But if we deny original guilt, then we find that God treats many human beings as guilty when they are not.

In the Eastern Orthodox view, the reason mankind is corrupted but not guilty of Adam's original sin is that they are very opposed to these legal categories of "guilt," "acquittal," "imputation," and "judgment." They prefer to think of sin in ontological and therapeutic terms. What they mean is, they don't see sin as a legal offense that deserves judicial condemnation; they see sin as a disease or a corruption that disfigures human nature and alienates us from God. Because they think the problem is not legal, they think the solution is also not legal. So instead of being forgiven and brought into a right standing with God, they think that we need to be healed of our sin. Do you see that difference?

Now, here's the problem with that: if we can't speak of our sin in legal terms, then it restricts us from using biblical language. You see, the problem is that in Scripture, sin is not either legal or moral, but sin is both legal and moral. We need to be forgiven of our sin, *and* healed of our sin. But the Eastern view rejects original sin because it rejects the legal.

The Bible does not describe sin *merely* as a hereditary weakness or sickness. The Bible also describes a legal guilt that brings condemnation before a holy Judge. Paul declares that "the whole world [is] held accountable to God" (Rom. 3:19) and

that “the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation” (Rom. 5:16). Here Paul was showing that Adam’s sin is imputed to his posterity so that “by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners” (Rom. 5:19). Adam disobeyed, Paul says, and we were “made sinners.”

Scripture *consistently* frames our plight in courtroom legal terminology: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and apart from Christ “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). In Scripture, death is not merely a natural consequence but a *penalty* for sin (Gen. 2:17). We are described as “children of wrath by nature” (Eph. 2:3), under God’s righteous sentence even before conscious acts of disobedience.

The Law stops “every mouth” and renders “the whole world... guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19–20). In Scripture, the opposite of condemnation is not therapy or healing, but justification—“God is the one who justifies” (Rom. 8:33), counting righteousness apart from works (Rom. 4:6–8). This is also legal and forensic language.

Paul even speaks of “the record of debt that stood against us with its *legal demands*” which God has “set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14), proving that our problem is not just corruption but liability to judgment (“we should be judge for what we’ve done”).

And also you again see there Paul using intentionally and specifically legal language again to describe our relationship with God. “With its legal demands.” This word “legal” is about as forensic as you can get. It’s like Paul is saying, “if there is a legal judgment of guilt hanging over us, it has to be dealt with before we can have peace with God and be welcomed by him or united to him.” This is why justification is such a huge emphasis in Romans. We don’t just need to be healed, we need to be forgiven and to have the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

The Bible also specifically speaks of Christ’s obedience being *imputed* to us for life (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 4:3–5). Here in today’s passage Paul is saying, “That’s right. And that’s also what happened with Adam’s sin. His disobedience is *imputed* to us for death.”

What we see, then, is that God's regard for sin in Scripture is forensic and legal: our sin incurs guilt, it demands judgment, and only in Christ's substitutionary death and resurrection can that verdict be overturned into acquittal and righteousness.

There is nothing wrong with speaking about sin, as the Eastern orthodox do, as being dealt with in therapeutic terms. After all, Revelation tells us that the leaves of the tree in the garden were for the "healing of the nations." Mankind does need to be healed of sin and the effects of sin. But when people deny the legal categories when it comes to sin, they are forced to explain away or ignore a very prominent biblical explanation for how God regards our sin.

And this isn't just me and my Bible. St. Augustine wrote on this topic during his lengthy debates with the Pelagians. But Augustine didn't invent these doctrines.

I would argue they started with Paul, and I hope you can already see that for yourself. But the early church fathers spoke this way about the guilt of original sin, too. They actually bring these categories both together. The early Fathers spoke of sin in forensic *as well as* therapeutic terms. And the point is that guilt and condemnation are part of humanity's plight even before Augustine's influential work.

*Irenaeus* insists that Adam's trespass brought "condemnation of death" to all humanity (*Against Heresies* 3.23.7), describing Christ as the second Adam who "undoes the sentence" passed on the first.

*Tertullian* argues that Adam's sin "transmitted both guilt and death" to his descendants (*On the Soul* 40), and in *Against Marcion* (2.23) he stresses that divine justice "condemns the guilty."

*Cyprian* appeals to infant baptism as proof that children must have guilt remitted, since (*Letter* 64.5). Baptism is a sign and seal of washing of sin. Why, Cyprian asked, would we baptize someone who bears no guilt? And his answer is, children are guilty even before they can commit an actual sin.

*Ambrosiaster* (the 4th-century commentator on Paul) directly teaches imputation when he explains Romans 5:12 as "all sinned in Adam... because

in him human nature *itself* sinned” (*Commentary on Romans 5:12*), thus making Adam’s guilt the cause of our condemnation.

I share these quotes to you because I want you to be persuaded that these things were not invented by the western church, or the Roman Catholics, or by the Protestant Reformers or the Puritans; they were a part of the church’s teaching from the time of the Apostles onward and up to the present day.

I’ve spent a lot of time on this. I’ve argued that original guilt is true. But why is original guilt important for us to affirm? It’s because Paul hangs the very gospel itself on it. Look closely.

Here is Paul’s logic: if we deny original guilt, we unravel the very fabric of the gospel. Paul insists that “one trespass led to condemnation for all men” just as “one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all” (Rom. 5:18), and without Adam’s guilt imputed to us, Christ’s *righteousness* can’t be imputed to us. That’s what’s at stake.

If we reduce sin to a mere hereditary disease, we strip it of its moral weight, and to turn the cross into little more than therapy. But Scripture shows that Christ bore not just our weakness but our guilt: He was “made sin” (2 Cor. 5:21), He bore “the curse of the law” (Gal. 3:13), and God “canceled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands... nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).

And so if we deny that we are guilty in Adam, then we have to deny the justification that we experience in Christ. But if we affirm our guilt in Adam, then the glory of Christ’s substitution shines all the brighter. Why? Because Christ bore our condemnation so that we would be declared righteous and live.

This original guilt that we have in Adam is a liability to punishment. We deserve to be treated as lawbreakers because in Adam we really are lawbreakers.

## **2. Original Corruption**

Second today, to understand original sin, not only do we need to grasp the covenant God made with Adam, not only do we need to understand the original

guilt we have inherited, but we have to appreciate the corruption of our nature that we have inherited in connection with our guilt.

Let me remind you of the difference between guilt and corruption first. Remember: Guilt is a liability to punishment. Guilt is God's judgment that we are sinners and must be treated as sinners. But corruption is distinct. When we talk about the corruption we experience in Adam, we're talking about the inward depravity within our nature that inclines us to evil. So it's not just that we're guilty of sin... the difference is that we want to sin.

Herman Bavinck, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch theologian said it well: "Original [corruption] is a punishment for original guilt" (RD II, p. 324).

Notice the ordering here: because we are guilty in Adam, we experience the corruption of sin. Now, I'm sort of belaboring this order here: we are not guilty because we have been corrupted by sin. We are corrupted by sin because we are guilty. And our corruption is a part of God's judgment for our guilt. It's part of the death sentence that Adam received.

Here is what is important to know: original sin is not transmitted biologically as a substance. Instead, it is a moral condition of each of our hearts, arising from God's judgment of Adam's sin. The corruption of sin is not a *thing*, it's not a *substance* that passes from person to person like a disease. Instead, it is an inner spiritual condition where we not only are missing righteousness, but where we have an active proclivity toward sinning. Toward disobedience. Against God.

The way Calvin once described it was like this. He said, "Whatever is in man, from the understanding to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with this [disordered desire for sin]."

And that may seem harsh, but Paul has already said this:

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-12).

The Bible is not shy in spelling out for us just how dark the situation is for us as sinners. The early church fathers echoed this. Cyprian of Carthage, for example, says this:

“We all are born in sin, as we derive our origin from Adam ... no one is free from the taint, not even an infant who has lived but one day upon earth” (*Letter to Fidus on Infant Baptism*, Ep. 64.5).

Now, Origen held some odd views and so isn't technically considered a church father. However, he was by far the most prolific writer during the first three centuries of the church, and Origen says this, which again echoes what we've been saying:

“Every person that is born is polluted by the filth of wickedness and sin ... and if it should seem unjust that one should bear the sin of another, let us remember that all men are one in the first man, Adam” (*Homilies on Leviticus* 8.3).

Notice again, even in the early centuries of the church, they see what Paul sees: that our sinful condition is connected with our guilt in Adam, and that it pervades every part of us. It is the covenant of God with Adam that helped the church fathers to make sense of original sin, where it came from, and why we do have a desire for something that is so destructive to us.

And I know I've been belaboring this, and perhaps today's sermon especially felt like more of a theology lesson than usual.

## **Conclusion**

Now, I mentioned that the topic of original sin is really important, and this is why I put so much effort into the message from the past two weeks. But there is another reason why this is important especially in our own day and time: many people know that there is something wrong with the human race. But they also don't think much about how we got this way, and whether there is any hope for change. So we live in a pessimistic time where many have become hopeless and cynical. They do have a low view of humanity, but not in a biblical sense.

Biblically speaking, God gives us the deep, serious, major bad news about ourselves, but always because he is preparing the soil of our hearts to hear the good news of the gospel.

Christians have always taken the problem of original sin seriously. But we're also not a hopeless or pessimistic people. Why? Because the light of the gospel means that God himself entered into our deep dark predicament. He was born as one of us, he suffered as one of us. He endured pain and life in this fallen world for us. He suffered at the hands of men who were corrupted through and through with sin... and he did it for us.

God, in other words, gives the answer to our sin and suffering, not by remaining distant but by embracing us with all our filth and corruption. Like a person who fearlessly hugs a leper.

Paul is saying, "If you don't have the imputation of guilt from Adam, then you can't have the imputation of righteousness from Christ." Without the bad news, you don't have good news. You still have a world of sin, but now there's no escape, solution, or rescue. Even in the bad news of Adam, the good news is there.

Writing in the 300s, the Bishop Ambrose said this:

"In Adam I fell, in Adam I was cast out of paradise, in Adam I died. How will God call me back, except he find me in the second Adam? For just as in Adam I am guilty of sin and owe a debt to death, so in Christ I am justified." (*On the Death of His Brother Satyrus* 2.6).

This is why Paul is writing all of this: he wants you and me to be justified in Christ. And the only way that happens is by having a new head instead of Adam. And so he takes us to Christ. The answer is this: that we repent of our sin and place our faith in Christ, confessing our guilt, confessing our sin, and not only being declared righteous, but also in experiencing the healing water that Jesus gives.

There is hope. Adam has failed us. And in Adam we did fail. But Christ is a mighty savior. And next week Paul will show us how we can have a different representative head who will never fail us: and that is Jesus Christ.

*Let's pray.*