

A Broken Heart (The Noetic Effect of Sin)

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn back together to Ephesians 4. Let me read again verses 17 to 19.!

We're working through a short series just now called Taking Sin Seriously and we're moving towards the end of this series. We'll just, we have one or two more after today. And throughout this we're thinking about the Bible's teaching regarding sin. And often that's not a topic that people want to look at or to think about. Often it's something that people find quite off-putting about Christianity that there's all this emphasis on sin. And yet at the same time the human heart knows that sin is serious. And you see that, that when we see great acts of justice, when we see awful crimes, when we see things being done to people that shouldn't be done, we know that that's serious. And all of that's resonating with what the Bible teaches us about sin. And one of the things that we're trying to highlight is that when we see how serious sin is, we also discover more about how beautiful the gospel is. And as we've said every time in our series, to think seriously about sin is just to think about it in the way that we think about anything in life that's important.

So if you're putting a baby into a car seat in order to go for a drive, you take the click of the clips very seriously. And if you're injured on a hill walk and you're calling for help, you take your location seriously so that you can direct people to where you are. If you're cooking raw chicken, then you absolutely take the temperature of your oven seriously. These are one of a thousand examples that we could give.

And in all of these situations, we're doing the same thing for the same reason. We're taking something seriously to prevent death. We're taking something seriously to prevent death.

And that's why the Bible takes sin so seriously. We do not talk about sin or think about sin to increase our misery or to make ourselves more doer.

[2 : 29] We take sin seriously in order to discover the thrilling, life-giving joy of the gospel. Our title this week is A Broken Heart. Now, when you hear that phrase, a broken heart, we often think about something that's happened that makes us feel very sad.

Maybe when we've been rejected by someone, maybe if we're disappointed with something not happening the way we hoped it, or maybe when we're experiencing a time of grief, we'll often speak about these moments as being broken hearted. And that's a very appropriate way to use the term.

That's exactly how it feels when something like that happens. Today, though, I'm using that term in a slightly different way. Because when the Bible talks about our heart, it's really talking about our whole inner being.

Not just our emotions, but everything that we are on the inside. And what I want us to think about today is the fact that sin has affected that. In fact, sin has damaged that.

Which means that our hearts, our inner being, no longer function the way that they should. Our hearts are broken.

[3 : 40] Now, theologians have described that as the noetic effect of sin. And you might be thinking, well, what on earth does that mean? Noetic is from the Greek word for thinking. And the idea behind that phrase, the noetic effect of sin, is to think about the fact that sin has affected the way that we think.

It's affected us on the inside in very, very significant ways. And that's what I want us to unpack today. And under that heading of a broken heart, of the noetic effect of sin, we're going to look at five things.

Our understanding, our will, our affections, our conscience, and our memory. And so we'll just whiz through each one in turn. So first of all, sin has affected our understanding.

It's damaged our understanding. You see this in Scripture in lots of places. Romans 1, it speaks about those, that though they knew there was a God, though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but became futile in their thinking.

Their foolish hearts were darkened. And then the passage that we read speaks about the same thing, about verse 18 there, being darkened in our understanding. And this is something that you see throughout the Bible, and you especially see it in the Old Testament with the nation of Israel.

[4 : 56] There's so many things that the Israelites failed to understand. So they failed to understand who God really was. Again and again and again, they thought, well, we've got our God, other nations have got their gods, and there's clearly lots of different gods, and we can kind of choose which one they want.

That's to completely misunderstand who God is. God alone is God. The Israelites misunderstood who they were. They were supposed to live as God's covenant people, devoted to Him, and standing out from the rest of the world so that people could see that there was something unique about this nation.

They didn't understand that. They thought, oh no, we'll just be like everybody else. They didn't understand what they should do. God gave them commands, they ignored them and disobeyed them. And then things started to go wrong for them, and the Israelites did not understand why this was happening.

And as you read through the Old Testament, again and again, you have prophets that God raises up to give warnings to the people to say to them, look, everything is going to go wrong for you because you're turning away from God, and they don't listen.

An example of that, a very powerful example of that is in Jeremiah. I just need to skip forward two slides. There's one sitting there that shouldn't be there from last week. In Jeremiah, the Lord raised up Jeremiah, sent him to the people, said, this is what the Lord's saying, disaster's going to come upon the city because you're refusing to listen to me.

[6 : 25] And so Jeremiah gives this warning, and you can see it in chapter 20, verse 1, Pasher the priest rises up, and he beats up Jeremiah for giving that warning.

And so there's just, there's such a darkened understanding among the people of Israel. They're getting this clear warning. They're like, I am not listening. In fact, they decide to just beat the prophet that God has sent.

In so many ways, the understanding of the nation of Israel was devastatingly damaged by sin. But we see the same thing in our lives too, don't we?

There's so many ways, so many situations when our knowledge is limited. That happens in a thousand ways. We're trying to figure out what's happening, trying to understand what's going on, and we can't get our heads around things.

There's so many times when our judgment is unreliable. We see a situation, we think, ah, that's what's going on. And then we realize, actually, no, I got that completely wrong. There are times when our reasoning is confused.

[7 : 25] I remember once hearing somebody talk about how they'd seen somebody who was always late, always disorganized, always, and they kind of thought to themselves, why is this person so, you know, why are they so useless, really, was their thought.

Why are they always so disorganized? And then they discovered that the person's mother was dying of cancer. And it was only after the mother's death that they realized, oh, that's what was going on.

And so our reasoning is confused. Our minds are weak, so often we're overwhelmed by things. And sometimes it can be tiny things, but they can just overwhelm us and we make them massive. Often our view of ourselves is too high and very often our view of God is too small.

All of this is showing us that humanity's understanding has been corrupted and damaged by sin. Now, connected to that is an even bigger issue and maybe a teeny, a little bit more complicated issue, but it's definitely one that we need to think about.

So we'll just roll up our sleeves for a couple of minutes as we think about this together because I know that I'm in danger of sounding confusing when I say this, but let's just work through it. One of the things we have to recognize is that sin has corrupted humanity's understanding of humanity's understanding.

[8 : 47] So I'll say that again. Sin's corrupted our understanding of our understanding. And the way we would say that is that epistemological presuppositions are wrong in terms of our theory of knowledge is wrong.

In other words, we don't understand that we don't actually understand as much as we think we do. And what this means, this is such an important consequence for us to recognize, is that we don't actually have the ability to fully understand God and to fully understand ourselves.

But we think that we do. We think that we should be able to understand everything. We think that we should be able to get kind of God sussed and life sussed.

We think that we should understand everything. That's actually a sign of the way in which sin has damaged our understanding because we are expecting a level of understanding and knowledge that goes way beyond our capacity as creatures.

I'm going to give you a complicated sounding quote from a theologian called Cornelius van Til. And he says, man made for himself a false ideal of knowledge. The ideal of absolute inderivative comprehension.

[10 : 10] Now that's just a fancy way of saying we think that we can understand everything. And we especially think that we can understand God. Or maybe not that we think we can understand God.

Maybe it's more that we, maybe it's better to put it this way. We think that God should conform to our understanding. We think God should do what we expect him to do.

He should fit in our box. And you see this very clearly, very, very clearly in something that people do all the time and I hear it all the time. People say, I'll believe in God if you can give me physical proof that he exists.

I'll believe in God if you give me physical proof that he exists. And that demand for physical proof for the existence of God is an example of what that quotation is.

It's an example of a complete overestimation of our understanding. Because it's actually a philosophically absurd thing to say. Because what you're saying when you say give me physical proof for the existence of God is you're saying give me physical proof for the existence of a non-physical reality.

[11 : 18] So God's not a physical thing. So I can give you physical proof for this chair and for these flowers and for the mess of crisps that I left over there. That's all physical reality so they can have physical proof.

God is not a physical reality. God is spirit. God is beyond physical reality. Physical proof cannot prove the existence of a non-physical reality.

It's a bit like me saying to you give me physical proof that you're thinking about the edge of the universe. So if you said I'm thinking about the edge of the universe I said well give me physical proof that you are.

You can't do that. You can't say well here's the edge of the universe. That's what I think you can't do that. So yes you can think about the edge of the universe you can imagine it right now I'm sure all of you are.

But none of you can prove can physically prove to me that that's what you're thinking about. Physical proof cannot prove non-physical reality. And all of this all of this is an example of how we have a wrong understanding of our understanding.

[12 : 24] If we think that we can put God in a box that we can put the absolute of all reality the infinite one that exists before anything else and beyond anything else and upon which everything else depends if we can put him into the box of our understanding then we're misunderstanding our understanding.

Now why am I saying all this? Why is all this important? Well it's actually this is actually revealing to us one of the most serious effects of sin and that you see everywhere. Sin leaves us thinking that we are smart enough to move on from God.

And so many people think that. And they actually think that to believe in God is a bit dumb. It's not really what an intelligent person does. It's not really what a rational person does.

All of that is to completely misunderstand our level of understanding. Sin has had a powerful effect on the understanding. It's also had a very powerful effect on our will.

Now by will we mean our decision making process. Now I'm going to give you a wee summary here of how sin has affected our decision making process and it comes from the Westminster Confession of Faith.

[13 : 38] So Westminster Confession of Faith, a short document, it summarizes biblical teaching around key areas of theology. And chapter 9, that's the whole of chapter 9 right there, it's just one page and it's all about our will and it's talking about how the will has affected, how sin has affected the will.

So just read it all and I'll read it slowly. It's not complicated, you should be able to follow it okay. So God's endued the will of man with that natural liberty that's neither forced nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil.

That basically means when God created humanity we had free will. We've got free will, we can make decisions, we're not determined or pressured in either way, we have freedom. 9.2, man in his state of innocency had freedom and power to will and do that which is good and well pleasing to God, yet mutably so that he might fall from it.

So Adam and Eve free to do good but yet also free to make the wrong choice, which is what they did and that's captured in paragraph 3. Man by his fall into a state of sin has wholly lost all ability to will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.

So as a natural man being altogether averse from that which is good and dead in sin is not able by his own strength to convert himself or to prepare himself thereunto. So that's talking about how when we sinned, that's sin isn't just a bad choice, it was a bad choice but the consequence of that choice is that our decision making has now been corrupted.

[15 : 12] And we'll talk a little bit more about that in a second. 9.4 speaks about the restoration process. God, when God converts a sinner translates him into the state of grace, he frees him from his natural bondage under sin and by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good yet so as that by reason of his remaining corruption he doth not perfectly not only will that which is good but also that which is evil.

And that's speaking about the struggle that we have in our choices now as Christians. We want things that are good, we want to know the Lord, we want to love him but we're also still struggling without the choices that gravitate towards sin.

And as paragraph 5 says, we're only completely restored and free when God takes us to be with him in glory. Now that's summarising what theologians have often called a four-fold state of humanity.

And that's setting out the four great kind of eras of redemptive history. The fact that there's creation and then there's fall and then there's redemption and then there's renewal.

I'm going to run out of room, sorry. And that's really, those four things summarise the whole of the Bible, the whole of redemptive history. Creation is Genesis 1 and 2, fall is Genesis 3, redemption is Genesis 4 right the way through to Revelation 19 and renewal is Revelation 20, 21, 22.

[16 : 44] The new heavens and the new earth and the final judgment. And our will is different across all these stages. Here our will is free, but here our will is now in bondage as we're fallen into sin.

Here our will is being restored, but it's a battle. And then here our will is finally restored to everything that it was made to be. Now, why am I saying all this?

Why is all this important? Well, the key thing we have to recognise is two things. One, sin has not obliterated our will. We still have a will. We still make choices.

As the theologian William Cunningham says, when we fell, we weren't changed into a stock or a stone or into an international animal. We still make decisions. But the problem is that our choices are now under the powerful influence of sin.

And that means that we gravitate towards bad decisions. things. We gravitate towards things that are sinful and harmful. And we see that in lots of ways.

[17 : 55] There's a famous Scottish theologian called Thomas Boston, and he uses an illustration to describe this reality, the fact that our will gravitates towards bad choices.

And the illustration he uses is what he calls the untowardness of children, which is a little bit amusing, but I think probably true. When you think of when children are wee, when they're tiny, there's so much that's cute and beautiful and wonderful about them, but there's also, like, they can be a bit stubborn and a bit defiant and a bit difficult, and you think, I didn't teach them that.

But you see it emerging in them as it emerged in us. And all of it is telling us about the effect of sin. And, I mean, tiny children's, you know, not so serious an example.

As we get older, as we get older, our choices have an incredibly powerful effect on our lives. And if we think about the things in our lives that we regret most, if I think about the things that I wish that I had never done, if I think about the things that I cringe at, one of the things that makes them so bitter is the fact that they were still choices.

I chose to do those things that I wish I'd never done. And it's all because sin is resolutely committed to influencing our choices.

[19 : 27] And we see that, maybe in our own lives, we also see it in the lives of others. Because you can see people, and you will all know people that you love, and you see them making choices that are so bad, and yet you're powerless to stop them.

All of that's part of the effect of sin. As Ephesians 4 says, we've given ourselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Sins affected our will. Sins also affected our affections. By that, we mean that sin has had a very profound effect on our desires. So we're made to be holy, pure, beautiful, glorifying God, enjoying Him forever, and yet sin has left our desires misplaced, and our affections have become disordered.

There's a theologian, a very famous theologian, one of the most famous theologians of all, who spoke about this. Augustine, who lived from 354 to 430, super, super famous theologian, and he wrote a book called Confessions, and the book Confessions is kind of his life story.

It talks about his conversion. He was this brilliant academic, but yet he struggled in loads of different ways, struggled with sin in particular, tried all sorts of different philosophies, and eventually came to faith in Christ.

[20 : 53] And he's got this amazing line in that book, Confessions, where he says, our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Jesus. In the book, he speaks about how sin has left our desires misplaced, and our loves are all disordered.

And there's a very famous account where he speaks about stealing pears. So Augustine was from a well-off family, and he said, but we had, you know, we had plenty, we had loads, but in our next-door neighbor's garden, there was a pear tree.

And he said, the pears were actually quite rubbish. They didn't look very good, but a few of us, himself and his friends, they were probably in their teens, they were like, we want to steal them.

And so they would go, they'd shake the tree, they would steal the pears, and they would take a bite, and then they would throw the rest of them to the pigs. And he tells this account of his own life because he says, we didn't want the pears, we had loads of pears ourselves.

And our pears were actually better because those pears weren't particularly nice, and we didn't even want to have them, we were going to throw them away to the pigs anyway. We just wanted the thrill of stealing.

[22 : 02] And he's got this really powerful line, he says, it was foul, and I loved it. And then he talks about other examples. He speaks about how, you know, he used to disapprove of the theater.

Now, the theater back in those days was maybe a little bit different to what it was, now similar in some ways, different to others. But he had this total disapproval of the theater, and yet he said, at the same time, I'm captivated by it.

And then he spoke about another friend who was sort of saying to him how awful the gladiator shows were. You know, if you've seen the film Gladiator, if you know about the time of the Roman Empire, you know about all of that.

And he knew of this somebody who thought that these gladiatorial shows were awful, disgusting, violent, terrible, and yet he went to one, and he was hooked. And I think all of us know how that feels in different ways, where there's just this awareness that something's wrong, and yet we're attracted to it.

One more example from Augustine. He's got this really powerful prayer. He used to struggle a lot with sexual temptation, and he says, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.

[23 : 14] I was afraid that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust, which I prefer to satisfy than to suppress. It's like, I know it's wrong, and I know I want to stop, but not yet.

Maybe that sounds familiar for us in some ways. And so in all of this, Augustine is teaching us what the Bible emphasizes, that sin has had a massive effect on our desires.

Just to move on in the interest of time, Paul picks this up. He speaks about putting off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life, and is corrupt through deceitful desires.

Next, we have the effect on the conscience. It's also been effected by sin. The conscience is their discernment of right and wrong. And again, I'm running out of time, so I'm just going to, I'm going to skip a couple of things.

The tension, the conscience reveals the tension that exists in the human condition. So the fact that we have a conscience, the fact that we can sense right and wrong, that shows that we're image bearers.

[24 : 24] But the fact that our sense of right and wrong is now fallible shows us that we're sinners. And often our conscience can actually misguide us. And sin has affected our conscience in a number of ways.

It can leave our conscience active, but misdirected. You see that in Romans 1, where you see that sort of devastating verse that describes people who turn away from God, do things that are wrong, and not only do they do them, they give approval to those who practice them.

And so we see this again and again throughout history in our own society. There's things that are wrong, and people not only are saying, no, no, do it, they're actually saying, do it. And actually, that's the right thing to do. And so their conscience is active, but it's making the wrong judgment.

Our consciences are active, but misguided. Other times, our conscience can be blindfolded. So it's kind of, it sees something, but it's actually blind to the truth.

You've got a really famous example of that in the Old Testament. After David sinned with Bathsheba, God sent Nathan the prophet to him to confront him. He says, there's two men in a city, a rich man and a poor man.

[25 : 30] The rich man had loads of sheep. The poor man had nothing but a tiny lamb. And a guest came to the rich man and he says, oh, I'm not going to use any of my sheep. I'll take that one lamb from that poor guy. And he took it, slaughtered it, ate it.

And David's anger was greatly kindled. You can see at the bottom of the slide there. And he says, that man deserves to die. And so there's a conscience. He recognizes that's wrong.

But the conscience is blind because Nathan says to him, you are the man. And in that moment, David realizes that he's the one who's done something that's so wrong.

So our consciences can sometimes be blinded. But perhaps most seriously of all, sin can leave our conscience numb. And again, you see that six, many places in scripture.

I'll give you an example from Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 36, Jeremiah dictates a scroll, again warning the people that disaster is coming if they don't repent of their sin and turn back to God.

[26 : 36] The scroll was written down, taken to the officials. It was read to the officials and they were like, we need to listen to this. So their conscience is pricked then. And we need to take this to the king.

And so they took it to the king. And so they took it to the king, read it to the king. And as the king read it, there was a fire burning before him. You can see it there. And every time Yehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire pot until the entire scroll was consumed.

So you've got this devastating message of judgment written in a scroll. The officials are all saying, king, you have to listen to this. And he's just like, just burns it. I'm not listening to any of that. Because his conscience was numb.

And that's like, I guess a numb conscience is a conscience that just doesn't take sin seriously. And everything we're trying to say in this series is that we've got to take sin seriously.

And then last of all, sin has affected our memory. Here's a fascinating quote from Thomas Boston, a Scottish theologian.

[27 : 49] He says, even the memory bears evident marks of this corruption. Sorry, that's a typo. It should say this, not his. What is good and worthy to be remembered as it makes but a slender impression, so that impression easily wears off.

The memory as a leaking vessel lets it slip as a sieve that's full of water, full when it's in the water, lets it all go when it's taken out.

So it's the memory with respect to spiritual things. But how often does it retain what ought to be forgotten? Sinful things so bearing themselves upon it that though men would have fain have got them out of their mind, yet they stick there like glue.

What's Boston saying? He's saying there's loads of important stuff that God's teaching us and it just slips through our minds. And there's a whole ton of things that we wish we would forget, but we can't.

It sticks there like glue. And that is so often the case, isn't it? The stuff we wish we remembered slips away.

[28 : 52] The stuff we wish we could forget plagues us. And sometimes our memories are actually very cruel towards us. Bringing back memories of things that are sore and that open wounds again.

All of this, all of this is teaching us about the effect of sin. Now, just to round it all up very, very quickly as we finish.

Two things I want to say as we finish. One is that you actually see all of these things in the narrative of the fall in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve sinned.

Adam and Eve sinned because they were deceived. Their understanding was wrong. They listened to the lies of the serpent. Their will became corrupt.

They made a choice and they made the wrong choice to disobey God. They did that because their affections had become disordered. Eve said, the fruit, it's good to look at. It's desirable to eat.

[30 : 00] And so it was through her affections that her sin came. For a moment, their consciences were numb, ignoring God's command. And then as soon as they did it, they were filled with shame.

Their conscience bore negative testimony to them for the first time. And memory, this is maybe the most powerful one of all. The whole reason the fall happened is because Adam and Eve forgot who they really were.

They forgot that they were already like God. That they had dominion over the creatures and they absolutely did not need to listen to the devil.

Even more importantly, in the gospel, all of these are awakened and renewed by God the Holy Spirit. And so, becoming a Christian is not about being perfect in any of these areas.

It's not. But it is about being changed. And so if you see changes in your life, if you think, actually, I do understand that I'm a sinner. And if you can see changes in your will and think, actually, I want this.

[31 : 09] I want to know Jesus. And if you see changes in your affections where you think, actually, I love praying and I love the Bible in a way that I never did before. And if your conscience is kind of maybe more active than it used to be.

And if you are remembering the Lord more and more, it's all a sign that He's working in your heart. All of this culminates in one massive lesson.

And I've taken, as always, half an hour to tell you one big thing that I want you to remember. And this is maybe going to sound a bit depressing, but it's one of the most important things that we can ever learn.

This whole idea of the noetic effect of sin tells you this. It tells you that we can't trust ourselves. Ultimately, we can't trust ourselves.

And that's why the whole gospel is about trusting someone else. It's about trusting Jesus. Amen.

[32:19] Amen.