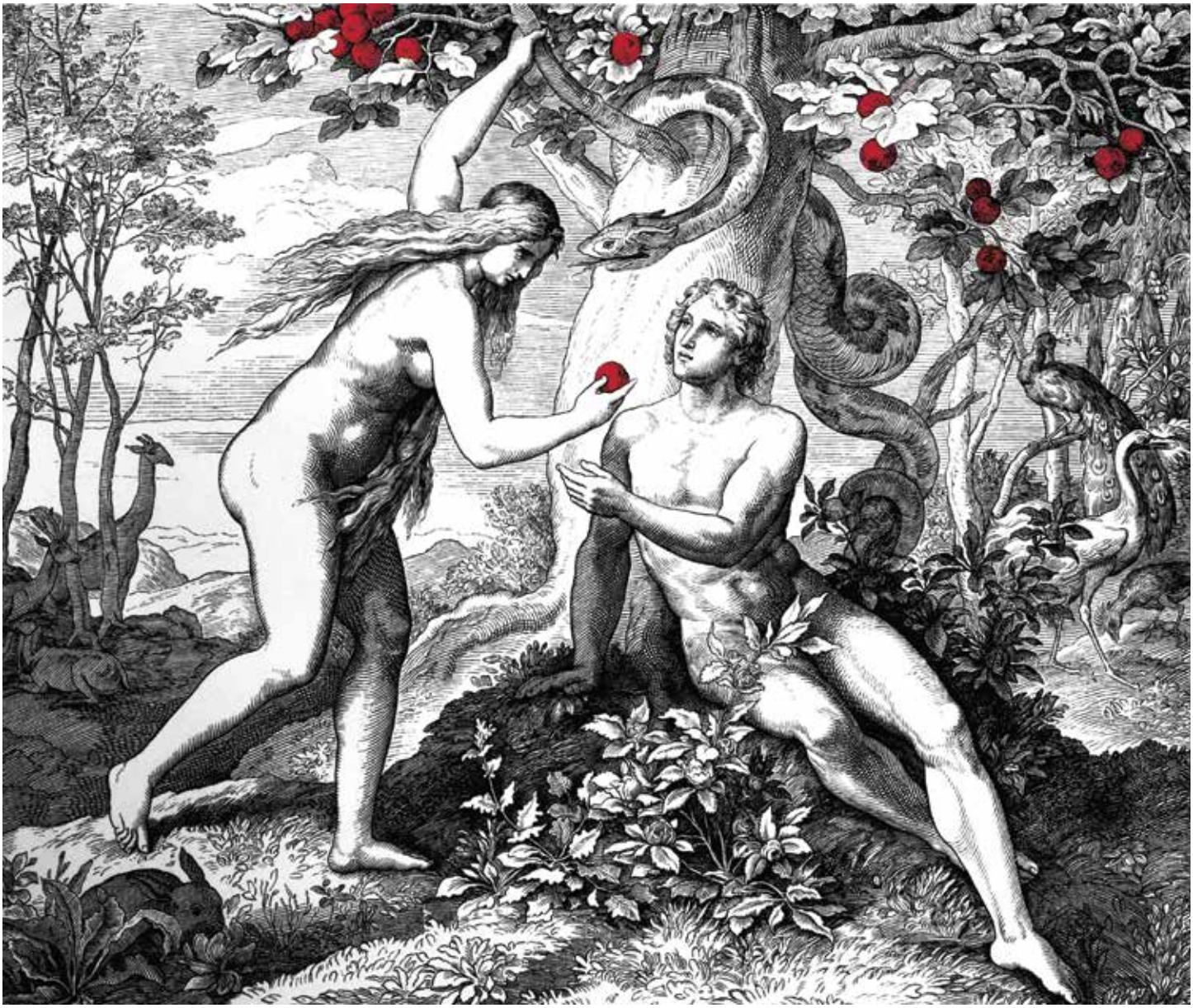


What is sin?

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

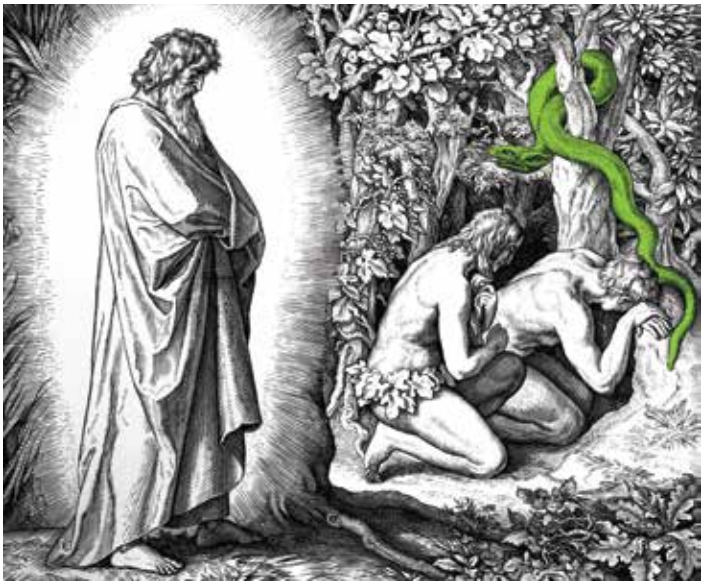
Romans 5:19

Because of the fall of Adam and Eve, humans are born with *concupiscence*, the inclination to sin. Since this inclination is a part of our nature from the day we are born, we should take some time to try to understand sin and its effects on our lives.

What is sin? We may feel inclined to answer this question by reducing sin to an action we do or some words we say. But how do we know what a bad word or action is versus a good one? Who sets this standard? Even when we look at different societies or countries, we find different sets of laws and regulations. Which are correct? When we consider these questions, we can come to understand that sin is more complex than something that is "bad." Sin is: a turning away from God. We can see that the definition also becomes the consequence of sin – we are turning ourselves away from our God. Every word or action that disorients us from God's will makes a mark on us that continually pushes us away from Him and warps us into a being He did not intend us to be.

In Romans 3:23, Paul wrote, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…* We need to understand that the sins we commit do not begin with just the things we do or say. Understanding

our sin starts with who we are. We are not good people who sometimes sin. We are sinful people who sometimes do the right thing. It is a part of our nature. We are permanently in a state that is separate from God, because He can't be where sin is. We are sinners in need of a Savior. When we become aware of how much we *fall short*, we begin to comprehend our dependence on our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is through Him that this divide can be mended.



Before a person comes to know or believe in Christ, they cannot understand their need for a Savior. Unbelievers are trapped in sin because they either remain tolerable of their sin, or, without accepting Christ as their Savior, they think they can save themselves.

Believers in Christ understand that they are dependent on Him. When they accept Christ in their lives, they have to work to transform from their old, sinful nature into the new nature of Christ. The battle against sin, which tries to prevent that new creation from growing, is between the believer's old nature and their new nature. It's not just about the things you might do each day that are sins, but rather, that you are a sinner and that's why you do those things. This fight between the old and the new nature is more than just trying to change our behaviors or actions, it is about changing who we are. It is possible to change our actions on our own. But we cannot change our underlying, sinful nature. To do that, we are completely dependent on Christ and His sacrifice. Only the power and freedom from sin we have through Him gives us the ability to overcome our nature and transform into His image. It's not about *doing* something, it's about *becoming* an new person in Christ.



When we come to the realization that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, we are led to confess our sins and to repent for them. Until we are made perfect through God's grace, we will always be sinners. Martin Luther, in his 95 Theses said,

> "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ...willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

Reflecting on our sin and turning to Christ must become a daily practice or discipline.



Following Christ does not mean that we are just trying to be a good person or that we want to be nice to those around us. Following Christ means our sinful nature dies daily. But until His Spirit wholly consumes our old nature and we are re-joined with God, we will be sinners. Because of this, let us always humbly and joyfully embrace God's gift of repentance, which we will talk about in the next Vision Newsletter. - VAA / MJB





What is repentance?

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoeo*, which means, "rethinking." This evokes the idea of completely re-evaluating a matter, which then results in a change of one's direction, condition, or behavior. Repentance is the act of being remorseful for what you have done, turning away from sin, and resolving not to return to that behavior.

In the pre-Reformation church, *metanoeo* was translated as "penance," rather than repentance. Penance is an act of self-abasement or devotion performed to show sorrow or repentance for a sin. This interpretation implies that we are to pay retribution in some way in order to be in right standing with God. The concept of "penance" leads to the false understanding that when we do good works, we can attain some degree of righteousness before God; this is a dangerous path of thinking. Because of our sinful nature, there is ***nothing*** we can do to be worthy or righteous in God's eyes. Only Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and His payment for our sins avails us of the grace to be righteous before God.

Yet, repentance comes with a certain amount of suffering; we feel the weight and pain of *our* sin. When we contemplate that Jesus carried the weight of our sin to the cross, we feel remorse. With the realization that every sin separates us further from God, we recognize the need for His grace and the necessity of repentance to receive forgiveness, so we repent and run back to Him.

In 2 Timothy 2:24-25, we read: ***…if God perhaps will grant them repentance,*** *so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.*

Therefore, we can appreciate repentance as a gift from God, which opens the way to forgiveness and a close relationship with Him. As we "rethink" and change our minds through repentance, we are led out of darkness, and, with God's help, we allow the new nature of Jesus to unfold within us.

...if God perhaps will grant them repentance...

Repentance starts with **awareness**. Often, our sinful nature is not apparent to us. We must stop and take time, perhaps at the end of the day, to meditate, reflect, and examine our thoughts, words, and actions. It's important to explore the underlying reasons for sinful words or actions. Maybe anger or bitterness causes us to speak or act in a way that is hurtful to others. Perhaps fear or doubt causes mistrust or jealousy, or envy leads to hostility, or selfishness creates apathy. We should compare ourselves to the example of Jesus in the Scriptures and notice where we do not align with His nature. Self-examining in this way permits space for God to enlighten us to our sin, so that we become mindful of the sin and its effects on those around us. Only by realizing how far away we actually are from God can we take the steps to move closer to Him.

We find two examples of this God-inspired assessment in Genesis. In chapter 3, after Adam and Eve sin, *the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:9), and then in chapter 4, when God asks Cain, "What have you done?" to call attention to the terrible deed that Cain, in his self-righteousness, could not recognize. As human beings, we are sinners and therefore enemies of God and His righteousness. We are perpetually sinful; alone, we cannot climb out of this condition. As He questioned Cain, God questions why we have rebelled and fought against Him. Why have we again allied ourselves to the evil one after our Father has continually approached us with love and compassion? It is an act of grace that He questions us, so that we can see the true perspective of our being and recognize that we are far from Him. God is waiting to forgive us, but we must first see our true state so that we understand our dependence on His grace. We are running in the wrong direction and we need to turn back.

The intended result of the awareness of our sin is **remorsefulness**. Once we come to this understanding, we suffer because the relationship with our God and Father has been disturbed. We sink down into the realization of our sinfulness and distance from God, as David did (2 Samuel





12). We are humbled because we realize that we deserve nothing. We deeply mourn our sinfulness as it is juxtaposed with God's goodness and benevolence.

In this state of unrest and turbulence in our souls, we **confess** our sins to God. Confession is the natural progression as we come to the awareness of and remorsefulness for our sin. Apostle John wrote, If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). This confession does not just happen in the moments of the Lord's Prayer in the divine service, but needs to be wrestled with daily in our prayers.

At our baptism or confirmation, we promised to renounce the evil one and surrender ourselves to the triune God. Remembrance of this promise inspires **our resolution** to keep fighting against sin. Our old nature resists this, but we fight on because we want the new life of Christ to emerge in us and extinguish the old nature that continually drives us away from the One we love. His love inspires a longing and willingness to change and evolve. Even though we may have resolved a hundred or thousand times before, we resolve once again because we know that God will not remember the sins He forgives.

As we experience God's everlasting love for us through the gift of repentance and forgiveness, we come to understand His wish for us to also **forgive others**. If we want to be close to God, we cannot let pride or self-righteousness stand in our way. Jesus clearly stated in Matthew 6:14-15: *For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* Although we may have suffered an injustice or terrible offense from our brother, sister, or neighbor, we are resolved to journey down the path toward forgiveness and seek reconciliation. We realize that if God forgives our many sins against Him, then surely, we can strive to forgive the transgressions of others.

Joined with all of our brothers and sisters, with anxious hearts, we express our confessions, feelings, and resolutions to the almighty God, our Father, in the Lord's Prayer. He, alone, is able to restore us and set us on the right path for His is *the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever!*

With a deep longing, we wait for the comfort we find in the absolution. This is the assurance of God's forgiveness and His willingness to always give us a fresh start by the merit of Christ's sacrifice. This greeting of peace gives us the confidence that He will never forsake us, no matter how many times we fall. The words, "The peace of the Risen One be with you all," are like balsam that washes over our troubled souls, and, released from sin, we rest securely in the assurance that the Lord loves and accepts us once again.

Martin Luther, in his 95 theses, said,

> When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

The daily journey of realizing our sin and coming to repentance creates a tension in us because the old nature must be slain and supplanted by the new life of Christ. For this newness to grow, it is necessary for us to continually embrace God's gift of repentance. LRK



MADE IN HIS IMAGE

There's a fascinating story in the Bible – one that is about us.

It starts with these words:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:26-27

We may know these verses as part of the creation story, where God created Adam and Eve to be in fellowship with Him in the Garden of Eden. But this isn't just about Adam and Eve – these verses apply to us; we were created in God's image.

What does that mean? As human beings, the crown of His creation, God has given us godly attributes. Animals function based on what God instilled in them - instincts. But we are distinct from animals and the rest of creation. Humans have speech, the ability to reason, freedom, and with it, responsibilities, consequences, and the ability to love. All of these attributes are from God and are specific to us.

Just as God exists in relationship – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – He also created us to exist in 3 fundamental relationships:

With God:

We can recognize His presence and hear His voice, we can pray to, worship, and praise Him, we can experience His love and respond to it with trust and obedience.

With each other:

We were created for community, we depend on and support each other.

With the rest of creation:

God commissioned humans to live in harmony with creation. To protect it, care for it, unfold it, and develop it.

When we live in fellowship with God, each other, and creation in this way, we experience it the way God intended. Just think of the description of the garden of Eden; Adam and Eve walking and talking with God in the cool of the evening, caring for and existing off of the beautiful environment that God had created for them.

But with the fall into the sin – *everything was shattered.*

With one catastrophic choice, all of the relationships were broken, and this we still experience today:

Our relationship with God went from intimacy to fear. Because of our sinfulness, we became remote from God and lived as prisoners to the evil one, with an unrelenting propensity to sin.

Our relationship with one another went from community to conflict. Though man and woman were still seen as equals in God's eyes, they tried to rule over each other, which produced jealousy and hatred.

Our relationship with creation deteriorated from care and sustenance to toilsome labor. We have become enslaved to material things and greed to the point that we stop caring about our fellow man. We exploit the creation's resources in a selfish manner without worrying about the cost of our behavior to others.

However, when the fall occurred, God promised Adam and Eve that a Savior would come to restore these broken relationships.

With the coming of Jesus Christ ***everything changed.***

Jesus Christ is the image of God, the second Adam, and through His life we see, again, what God intended for humanity:

A close relationship with God

Jesus nurtured a close relationship with His Father through an intense prayer life, a perfect love, continually trusting and obeying Him, and faithfully living according to His Father's will.

A servant-minded relationship towards those around Him

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. He showed love and concern for all – men and women, rich and poor, children and outcasts, the upright, as well as the sinners. He treated everyone as equals.

A correct relationship with creation

As a human, Jesus experienced needs and enjoyed earthly things just like we do, but it had no influence on His relationship with God or others. His commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" also became a guiding principle for how mankind should behave in caring for and using the resources that God gives them.

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

We must believe in Jesus Christ and follow His example. Through our rebirth out of water and Spirit we become a new creature, a new man and woman, with the possibility of aligning our life to His.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Romans 8:29-30

The Lord has predestined us for this – to be a new person in Christ! As we grow into His image, with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can also begin to live in renewed and reconciled relationships.

The Holy Spirit strengthens our relationship with God. Our prayers evolve. No longer just calls for help or wish lists, they become genuine exchanges with God, filled with worship and thanksgiving. We speak more of God's works rather than our own and we express our love to God through our trust and obedience to His will.

Our relationships with one another also begin to change. The Spirit helps us overcome our differences and we truly begin to understand and live by the words found in Galatians 3:28 – *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* We love our neighbor regardless of their heritage, culture, social class, or gender. We love each one as God has made them.

We realize that we are sent to serve and do good to others and also show them that God loves them, through our actions. We can start this right in our congregations as it exhorts us in Galatians 6:10 - *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

The Spirit gives makes us wise and frees us from the dictatorship of money. Our decisions are not profit-driven but rather take into account our responsibility to others. We consider questions such as; What could I do to give back to society? How could I do good for someone around me? How are my actions impacting future generations?

The story that began in Genesis with the creation isn't over yet. Let us live in relationship with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation, as new creatures in the reconciling power of Christ.

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight– if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel...

Colossians 1:19-23

- LRK / VAA / KAK

