

The Image Attacked

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Last week, we saw how the doctrine of our creation as God’s image bearers—every single human being equally made to reflect their Creator—must compel those who follow Jesus to reject any hint of racism among us as we work with the Spirit of God to see more of Christ in us. That’s last week in a nutshell.

This week, we’re going to see how sin takes aim at that mission. We’re going to move just a couple chapters further along in the Genesis storyline so as to establish how sin divides us and attacks the image of God. It’s a very messy and ugly history with consequences which we’ve had to deal with ever since—terrible consequences that bruise and batter people and grieve the very heart of God.

Let’s read our two passages of Scripture together. (Set each up in context.)

Genesis 3:8-12

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

¹⁰ He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

¹¹ And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

¹² The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Genesis 4:8-10

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.

Well, as sin enters creation, we see its awful effects immediately. Sin spreads. It spreads like a disease. And, it changes our human disposition towards our Creator as well as our fellow image bearers. These two trajectories stand out in today's texts. (1st) We, in our sins, attack God. We set our sights on or take aim at the image Giver. (2nd) We, in our sins, attack others. We wage war on people who are equally created in the image of God.

Let's take a look at each of these.

1. **We, in our sins, attack God (Genesis 3:12).**

Human beings are expert at shifting blame. We're expert at pointing the finger at someone else whenever we screw up. I've had lots of opportunities to witness this in my work as a pastor. When a married couple comes to me for marriage counseling or when two members of the congregation have a dispute, typically what I encounter as we begin are two accounts of why the other person is to blame. And, it all begins when we are very young. Every parent can testify to this. There's something in us—there's something in our fallen nature—which is quick to lash out and attack others whenever we're confronted with our sins.

And, it doesn't matter how righteous or generous or kind the other person is. In our sins, we will attack them. We'll blame them. Anything to avoid our own sin. Anything to justify ourselves.

We see this in our first passage. We see it in the most ironic way possible. When God comes looking for Adam and Eve after they have disobeyed his one rule, the only prohibition he gave them, Adam doesn't only try to shift the blame to Eve but to God as well. He attacks the image Giver.

Look at what Adam says when God asks if he's eaten from the forbidden tree.

*The man said, "The woman **you put here with me**—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (v. 12).*

"God, it isn't my fault that this woman gave me the fruit you said not to eat. And don't forget, God, that you gave me the woman—that you put her here with me. It's really your fault if you think about it." Do you see how he subtly attacks God? Do you see how Adam shifts the blame?

And, friends, this is the most ironic attack when you consider its context.

Man is created at the pinnacle of creation, but the Lord notes that it's not good for him to be alone (Genesis 2:18). This is the only time in all the creation account when something is not good. God has created a beautiful garden for man to dwell in. He has given him authority to rule over it as his vice-regent. God walks with the man and communes with him. Yet, God highlights that Adam needs something more—something more than good, something “very good.” So, the Lord creates the woman. God creates Eve—one like Adam, one to share in the glories of creation with Adam. She's the highest dispensation of God's grace to Adam.

But, because of his sin, Adam blames Eve and blames the Lord for putting her in the garden with him. He blames the Lord for giving him the gift of companionship. Friends, ***note how blind and delusional sin has made him!*** Adam blames the Giver of all good gifts. He attacks the very Image of love and goodness and grace.

I remember being a sixteen or seventeen-year-old and chafing at some rule which my mom and dad had imposed. I think it had something to do with my curfew. I never liked my curfew. I don't recall why or how the conversation became heated, but it did. And in my sinfulness, I recall blaming my parents for even having me. That I didn't like my curfew—in my teenage logic—was their fault for bringing me into the world. *And I really believed that! My sin blinded me!*

Friends, sin blinds our thoughts and hardens our hearts, even towards our God. That's what it does to Adam here. And that's what it's done to everyone since Adam. We attack and blame and push away God.

Now, shouldn't this revelation from Genesis engender humility in each of us? Shouldn't it make us hesitant to think we see ourselves and the world clearly?

- When I'm at odds with my spouse for pointing out that I'm being distant and cold to her and the kids, shouldn't I be slow to speak and quick to listen because I know my sin can blind me to what she can see more clearly?
- When I see a sin in someone else, shouldn't I be careful to examine myself before highlighting it since there are surely planks of sin in my own life?

- **Or**, when we talk of systemic evil or systemic racism, why would we think (because we don't quickly see it) that it must certainly not exist?

Friends, when we attack the Lord, we are not just attacking the image Giver but, also, the order he's brought to the universe—the good systems of God's creation. And, we're trying to replace his good ordering of things with our own sinful ordering of things. So, Adam blames God for giving him Eve. He charges the Lord with evil. He tells God that his system was the problem. And, ever since that seminal moment, sinners (like you and me) have tried to order creation for ourselves.

Brothers and sisters, why would we deny that systemic evil and racism exists when all systems are simply the constructions of sinful individuals like you and me? And why would we think we see our sin clearly—as well as the various institutions which our sin has shaped—when the Bible tells us that our sins blind us?

At this point, it's important for me to say I'm speaking as a white evangelical and to white evangelicals, since I think we've been guilty of ignoring these realities as well as our guilt and responsibility when it comes to them. We may have argued that we aren't personally racist. We may claim we've never intentionally participated in acts of racism. We may be quick to condemn racism in this world. Nevertheless, we may still be part of the problem and, like Adam, blind to it.

Pastor Tim Keller explains our situation in this way.

*Systemic racism excludes and marginalizes people on the basis of race, even though most of the individuals in the system are not probably intentionally trying to do it. The individuals who aren't intentionally trying to discriminate are still part of a system that's doing it, and, therefore, they share in the guilt of systemic evil.*¹

Maybe you think this isn't a biblical idea. Maybe you think sin is individual and that God doesn't hold people accountable for the systemic sins of their society. However, far from being an unbiblical idea, this idea is at the very heart of the Bible. In fact, it's at the very heart of the gospel.

You see, we're all guilty in Adam. We're all guilty because of our relationship to him. Moreover, we're all responsible for the systemic evil which Adam and Eve

¹ Tim Keller, *Racism and Evil: A White Guys Perspective*. See his full talk [here](#).

introduced into creation. Yes, your personal sins condemn you, but you were a sinner from birth. You were part of Adam's systemic evil in utero. *This is biblical truth!*

We chafe at it though, don't we? We don't like to think of ourselves as guilty because of our relationship to Adam. We don't like to believe that we're responsible for the sin he and Eve introduced into creation. The Bible, however, tells us we are. Our God tells us that we are. But, here's the irony. We never chafe at our salvation. We never chafe at being accounted righteous through our connection to Christ Jesus through faith in him. We don't object to being ushered into the glories of the system he's introducing—that he's redeeming and reordering.

Why? *Because our sin blinds us!* We're happy to benefit from systemic good. And yet, we're not happy to own systemic evil.

Friends, we can't shift blame or point our finger at someone or something else when it comes to racism or systemic racism any longer. To do so is simply to behave as Adam did before God. To do so is to attack the image Giver. To do so is to ignore what he tells us in Scripture—as well as to reject the gospel itself!

Well, let's turn briefly to our next theme.

2. We, in our sins, attack others (Genesis 4:8-10).

Adam attacked Eve in his sin, and that pattern has been repeated ever since. Just a chapter later, we see its ugly escalation when Cain murders his brother, Abel. Our sin and separation from God has catastrophic effects. The image of God in us is under attack. We don't see others or think of others rightly. Our hearts are hardened to one another. This is readily apparent when the Lord confronts Cain.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" / "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" (v. 9).

This is the coldest answer. Yes, it avoids blame. Yes, it sidesteps the question. Yes, it mocks the knowledge and power of God. **But**, don't miss what is on display. Don't miss what sin has done to Cain's heart. He's so hardened, *so compassionless!* He thinks only of himself—of what's good for him. Sin has mastered him (4:7).

And friends, it's my worry that if we're not careful we could become hardened much like Cain was hardened. And, this is a serious danger when it comes to racism and our calling to serve God by loving our brothers and sisters who are under attack.

The Lord calls each one of us to tenderness and love and compassion like Christ's. In short, God does call us to be our brother's and sister's keeper.

It is too easy to turn a blind eye to the pain and suffering of those around us. It is far too easy for us to resign ourselves and say there's nothing we can do to help. The Lord doesn't ask us to do everything. Our Savior simply asks us to trust in him and do something. It's just one step at a time as we battle racism in us and the world around us—*one step at a time, one day at a time!*

In my hometown just last Christmas, four white teenagers broke into a church which was founded by slaves in the 1800s. The teens, after entering the sanctuary, proceeded to destroy the building. They broke windows. They crushed wooden pews. They shattered toilets and sinks. They ripped plaster off the walls. From the pictures, I'd say they did around a hundred thousand dollars' worth of damage to the building. In the words of the county sheriff, there was "an extreme amount of damage [done in] a despicable act of vandalism."² And friends, that's simply the financial damage. Just consider the mental and emotional damage inflicted on that small congregation, *being targeted in such an ugly and hateful way!*

One of my school friends attends Mount Vernon Missionary Baptist Church. She admits that they've often been the target of vandalism over the years.

Friends, I attended a predominantly white church during my entire childhood, and it (to my knowledge) was never vandalized. I pastored a church for nine years in that community, and it was never vandalized. Yet, here's one of my old friends (like me in many ways but for the color of our skin) whose normal church experience is to periodically paint over ugly graffiti or to replace windows or to clean up garbage around the building where she gathers with her church family to worship each week. Why didn't my friend tell me this? Or ...why didn't I listen? Why didn't I ask her? Why didn't I care enough to ask her and know her? *My sister in Christ!*

Well, one good thing came out of the incident. The church that I used to serve, as well as many others in town, had their eyes opened to Mount Vernon's experience. And, those churches acted. They took responsibility and gathered around the church, gathered in support of their brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, my former church

² You can read the news report [here](#).

has put itself under the care of another African American church in the community in order to learn from them and grow in their own racial sanctification.

I'm proud of them for taking that step. *One step at a time, one day at a time!*