

Michelangelo, *The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden*.

Web Gallery of Art

How can original sin be inherited?

Dear Father Kerper: I've always had a huge problem with original sin. It seems so unfair. I can understand punishing someone who has broken a law. That's perfectly just. But why should someone who's done nothing wrong get punished for what someone else did millions of years ago?

Many people share your understandable reaction against the doctrine of original sin. As you've expressed so well, it does indeed seem to violate the basic norms of fairness. But it really doesn't. How so?

To overcome this charge of unfairness, we must do two things: first, reconsider the meaning of punishment; and second, rediscover the social nature – and social consequences – of sin.

We usually think of punishment as something painful – physical, emotional, or financial – imposed on a rule breaker by a legitimate authority.

For example, a speeding driver zooming along a city street at 80 miles per hour will receive a ticket, pay a large fine, and probably have trouble getting auto insurance.

Because individuals – not families or groups – drive cars and are personally responsible for speeding, it would be outrageous to penalize the speeder's grandmother, spouse, children, or grandchildren for the illegal act.

In the case of speeding, the punishment – say a \$200 ticket – is always imposed directly on the specific person who committed an isolated illegal act. Moreover, the punishment is designed to prevent dangerous and illegal behavior by creating terribly unpleasant consequences, namely costly fines and eventually the loss of one's license.

Now, let's consider the sin of Adam and Eve and the subsequent "punishment" – original sin that infects every human being.

The inspired writer of the Book of Genesis, which includes the story of the fall of Adam and Eve (cf. Genesis 3:1-24), describes the first human sin as the single act of eating of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. On the surface this seems quite trivial, something like young children disobeying their parents. What's the big deal? Indeed, it seems much less serious than, say, breaking the speed limit.

Now, let's look beyond the mere act of eating the fruit. Yes, Adam and Eve

sinned against obedience. But this act represents much more: they actually rejected friendship with God and, even worse, attempted to supplant God as God.

To see this more clearly, we must rewind the Genesis tape back to chapter 1. Here we find that God had created the first human beings "in the image of God." (Genesis 1:27) As such, they immediately enjoyed friendship and even kinship with God, who had lovingly created them so that they could share everything with Him.

Though Adam and Eve had everything that human beings could possibly enjoy, the serpent tempted them to seek even more. Recall the serpent's words to Eve: "God knows in fact that the day you eat it [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods." (Genesis 3:5)

By eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve attempted to seize equality with God through their own efforts, having forgotten that God had already bestowed on them the blessing of being "in his image and likeness." To put it another way, Adam and Eve demand the impossible: to be equal to the one true God!

God's punishment of the sin of Adam and Eve differs radically from the speeding ticket. Rather than imposing a narrow penalty for a single illegal act, God allowed Adam and Eve to have what they desired: to be their own self-proclaimed "gods" liberated from their original friendship with God.

Of course, horrible consequences flowed from this rupture with God:

work become hard, conflict invaded marriage, bodily life became subject to disease, and, worst of all, death replaced immortality.

This was no arbitrary penalty like a speeding ticket. Rather, God simply allowed Adam and Eve to orient themselves away from God. Now, God could have destroyed Adam and Eve and created a new set of human beings. Instead, God allowed the human race to continue through offspring born of Adam and Eve. Their descendants, including us, now appeared “in the image and likeness of Adam and Eve,” not “in the image and likeness of God,” as the first humans had appeared.

Because human beings are profoundly social, children resemble their parents; and the evil and goodness of one person inevitably affects other people. Convincing evidence of the reality of original sin appeared immediately in Adam’s first sons. Cain killed Abel. Already, grievous sin had emerged. And we don’t need to look very far to see it today.

But isn’t this still unfair? No.

First, every human being receives life directly from God as God’s free gift bestowed in love. Without God’s creative act, we would have no existence. In light of this, we have no right to complain about defects, even the most serious.

For example, I inherited color blindness from someone in my gene pool. My sister did not. Otherwise, I am blessed with good eyesight. Should I protest to God that I can’t tell the difference between blue, pink, and purple? Has God been unfair? Not at all. I can see. And I exist.

Second, and even more important, God has provided us with the ultimate “cure” for original sin: the saving grace that flows to everyone from the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ.

Here the “unfairness” of our inevitable solidarity with Adam and Eve is replaced by the “unfairness” of our solidarity with Jesus Christ, the New Adam.

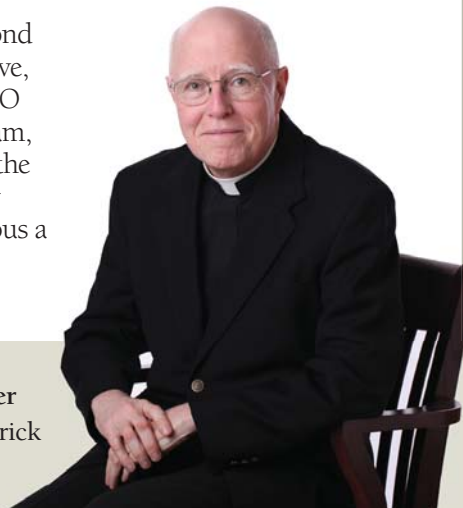
Saint Paul explained it this way: “As it was by one man that death came, so through one man has come the resurrection of the dead. Just as all die in Adam, so in Christ all will be brought to life.” (1 Corinthians 15:21)

Yes, original sin would be grossly unfair if each of us were completely self-made, independent of everyone else, and always good. And if God had left us alone, wallowing in the aftermath of our First Parents’ sin. But God did not.

The ancient Easter Proclamation explained it poetically:

“O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave, you gave away your Son! O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ! O happy fault that earned so glorious a Redeemer!”

Unfair?



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