

The Need For Advent

Genesis 1:26-31, Genesis 6:5-7, Romans 3:9-18

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As we officially enter the Christmas season, one of the biggest challenges a Christian and the church has is to keep our attention focused on the real meaning of the season.

To help us do that, over the next four Sundays we're going to celebrate Advent. Now, on that fourth Sunday, it will also be a celebration in song as do the Lessons and Carols program.

Now, in doing this, my desire is to help us focus on the Christ of Christmas instead of the commercialization of Christmas.

Advent means "*the coming*" or "*the arrival*," so in speaking about the advent of Christ, we're speaking about the coming of Christ into this world.

Historically, Advent has been a time for Christians to reflect on the meaning of the coming of Christ.

But it struck me that, before we can reflect on the meaning of His coming, we must first determine if there was a need.

Sometimes when we try to help someone we think is in need; we're met with resentment because the person or family we think is in need doesn't believe they're in need and so they take exception to our charity.

I think that's part of the problem in our world today. People don't think they need a Savior.

They don't see the need to be saved from their sin and so, when we tell them about Jesus, they not only resent our message, but us as well. We're stating they have a need when they feel they don't.

So, on this first Sunday of Advent, I want to address whether there was a genuine need for the advent of Christ.

Therefore, the title of today's message is *The Need for Advent*, and to understand this need we must start at the beginning.

Genesis 1:26-31, *"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.'" And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day."*

And so, by God's own declaration, the human race is declared "very good." Then something changed.

Genesis 6:5-7, *"The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled."*

So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them."

Something dreadful and drastic has happened. Man became sinful. If we could've stopped the story at end of Genesis 2, there would've been no need for Advent, but sin forever changed the picture.

It's like this story of the scorpion and the turtle. A scorpion, being a very poor swimmer, asked a turtle to carry him on its back across the river.

"Are you mad?" exclaimed the turtle. *"You'll sting me while I'm swimming and I'll drown."*

"My dear turtle," laughed the scorpion, *"If I were to sting you, you would drown and I'd go down with you. Now where is the logic in that?"* *"You're right,"* cried the turtle. *"Hop on."*

The scorpion climbed aboard but halfway across the river he gave the turtle a mighty sting.

As they both sank to the bottom, the turtle said, *"Do you mind if I ask you something? You said there is no logic in your stinging me. Why did you do it?"*

"It has nothing to do with logic," the drowning scorpion replied. *"It's just my nature."* As with the scorpion, men and women are sinful by nature.

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If we were to sit down and think about sin, and the effect it would have on our lives if we chose it, we could easily see how illogical it would be to choose sin. But as the scorpion said, *"It has nothing to do with logic. It's our nature."*

Now you're not going to hear that from modern man. Modern man likes to believe he's basically good. In fact, psychologists, counselors and a great many religious leaders reinforce that belief.

No concept is more important to the gurus of modern psychology than the concept of self-esteem. According to the self-esteem ideology, there are no bad people - only people who think badly of themselves.

For years, educational experts, psychologists, and a growing number of Christian leaders have championed self-esteem as a panacea for all sorts of human miseries.

According to the purveyors of this doctrine, if people feel good about themselves, they'll behave better, have fewer emotional problems, and achieve more.

People with high self-esteem, we're told, are less likely to commit crimes, act immorally, fail academically, or have problems in their relationship with others.

But does self-esteem really work? Does it promote higher achievement? Unfortunately, there's plenty of evidence to suggest it doesn't.

Morally, our culture is in trouble. Evidence strongly suggests that society is at an all-time moral low. Because of this, we might expect people's self-esteem to be suffering as well.

But statistics shows Americans are feeling better about themselves than ever. Incredibly, while the moral fabric of society continues to unravel, self-esteem is thriving.

Yet, all the positive thinking about ourselves isn't doing anything to elevate the culture or motivate people to live better lives.

Does the Bible back up this notion that there are no bad people only people who think badly of themselves?

We could look at a lot of Scripture, but I want us to focus on only one passage that'll answer this question for us.

One of the doctrines that came out of the Reformation was the doctrine of man's total depravity. Now you must be careful when you use that term "*total depravity*" because many people misunderstand it.

Total Depravity doesn't mean that unbelieving sinners are always as bad as they could be; that the expression of sinful human nature is always lived out to the fullest.

Total Depravity doesn't mean that unbelievers are incapable of acts of kindness, benevolence, or goodwill or that non-Christians cannot appreciate goodness, beauty, honesty, decency or excellence.

That's not what "*total depravity*" means. What it means is that when man fell [sinned] in the Garden of Eden he fell in his totality.

In other words, sin contaminated every aspect of our humanity - our heart, mind, personality, emotions, conscience, motives and will and therefore we're incapable and undesiring of coming to God.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "*Man is wrong at the center of his being, and therefore everything is wrong.*" That's why salvation requires a new creation.

So contrary to what people are taught and want to believe, men and women are not naturally good. Just the opposite is true.

We're by nature enemies of God. We're sinners, lovers of self and in bondage to our own sin.

We're blind, deaf, and dead to spiritual matters, unable even to believe in redemption apart from God's gracious intervention.

Therefore, the first step to a proper self-image is a recognition that these things are true.

That's why Jesus commended the tax-collector rather than rebuking him for his low self-esteem, when the man pounded his chest and pleaded, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."*

The man had finally come to the point where he saw himself for what he was. He was so overcome that his emotion was released in acts of self-condemnation.

The truth is, his self-image had never been more sound than at that moment.

Rid of pride and pretense that tax-collector now saw that there was nothing he could ever do to earn God's favor, therefore he pleaded with God for mercy.

So, what does the Bible say about this teaching that there are no bad people. Using Old Testament Scripture, Paul, in Romans 3:10-17, showed the universality of human depravity.

He underscored this universality of sin by using the phrase "none" or "not even one" six times. His argument was constructed in three parts.

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First, he addressed how sin corrupted our character.

Romans 3:10-12, *"As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"*

Here Paul makes 6 charges. He says that because of people's innate depravity, they're universally evil, *"there is no one righteous."*

Paul used the term "righteous" in its most basic sense of being right before God, of being as God created man to be.

Obviously, people are able to do many things that are morally right. But Paul's not speaking of specific acts or even general patterns of behavior, but of man's inner character.

His point is that there's not a single person who has ever lived whose innermost being can be characterized as righteous by God's standard.

We must get out of this mindset of comparing ourselves with others. The comparison is to be made with God.

At one time a minister had a small white Highland terrier which he kept spotlessly clean by frequent washing, brushing, and powdering.

One night a winter storm dropped a fresh blanket of snow on the countryside, and the next morning the whole world seemed to glisten under the splendor of the morning sun.

As the minister stood gazing out his window, he saw a drab-looking dog walking across the snow. He wondered whose it was, then suddenly realized it was his own well-groomed terrier!

It was as clean as always, but against that dazzling background of the fresh snow it appeared dirty.

In much the same way, our corrupt nature is clearly revealed when our lives are measured by the absolute standard of Divine holiness.

The Bible says, *"all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."* Some think, *"but I don't fall as short as some people I know."*

That doesn't make any difference. God does not grade us on a sliding scale of A+, A, A-, B+, etc. No, according to God's scale there are only 2 grades: pass or fail.

It doesn't make any difference if you think you don't fall as short as someone else, you still get a failing grade.

Regardless if we make a favorable impression when we compare ourselves with other people, none of us can stand up against the pure whiteness of the character of God.

So, because of their innate depravity, people are universally evil, *"there is no one righteous."* They are spiritually ignorant, *"there is no one who understands."*

This means that, without exception, the thought processes of people are so affected by sin that there will always be some degree of deficiency in their grasp of the truth which can only be found in the knowledge of God.

This naturally leads to confusion in everything else because all things have their meaning in God.

For example, the politician who's confused about God will be confused about God's world, which leads inevitably to a confused world view and inadequate political solutions.

The point is that sin corrupts. Chuck Colson said this about the Clinton Whitewater scandal of 1994, *"The most astonishing thing about Whitewater is that we are astonished by it. Our reaction and the press's feeding-frenzy and politicians' posturing reveals how deluded we are about the most destructive myth of this century: that man is good, and that with technology and education we can achieve utopian societies. So, we regard Watergate and Whitewater and all "gates" in between as dreadful aberrations. Our founders were not so naive.*

They understood the Judeo-Christian truth that man is a sinner. We moderns have forgotten this foundational truth."

A number of years ago the Minnesota Crime Commission released this statement: Every baby starts life as a little savage.

He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it - his bottle, his parent's attention, his playmates' toy, his uncles' watch, etc.

Deny him these once and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous were he not so helpless.

He is, in fact, dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent.

If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal - a thief, a killer or a rapist. Sin corrupts.

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Next, Paul tells us how sin has defiled our conversation.

Romans 3:13-14, *"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."*

A person's character will inevitably manifest itself in his conversation. Jesus said that *"the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart."*

Sin completely contaminates the conversation: it defiles the throat, corrupts the tongue, poisons the lips, and pollutes the mouth.

Then Paul shows how sin has perverted our conduct.

Romans 3:15-17, *“Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.”*

We are a destructive people. A Scottish evangelist in the 19th century wrote, *“The most savage animals do not destroy so many of their own species to appease their hunger, as man destroys of his fellows’, to satiate his ambition, his revenge, or his greed.”*

At one time a national survey was conducted with only one question. The question: *“Would you choose 1 of the following choices and if so which one.”*

The individuals were then presented with several radical choices and asked, if they could win ten million tax-free dollars by selecting one of the choices, which would they choose. Two-thirds said they would be willing to choose 1 of the choices.

Here is the breakdown: 25% would abandon their family; 25% would abandon their church; 23% would become a prostitute for a week; 16% would give up their American citizenship; 16% would leave their spouse; 7% would commit murder; 6% could change their race; 4% would change their sex; 3% would put their children up for adoption.

Did you know that here in the United States, with its Christian heritage, since the turn of the 20th century, twice as many people have been killed in private acts of murder than have been killed in all the wars of our history as a country.

According to researcher Arnold Barnett, a baby born in the 1980’s is more likely to be murdered than an American soldier in WWII was of being killed in combat.

If lack of self-esteem is the problem of the human heart, as we’re told, why, it must be asked, is the murder rate so dramatically high in a society where self-esteem is also growing.

It's because self-esteem is not the problem. Self-esteem is no solution to human depravity because people are sinful to the core.

But Paul doesn't mean to convey that all the characteristics of sin listed in Romans 3 are in evidence in every person.

As Frédéric Louis Godet has wisely written, *"Some, even most of them, may remain latent in many men: but they all exist in germ in the selfishness and natural pride of the ego, and the least circumstance may cause them to pass into the active state."*

Jewish author Dennis Prager said, *"To believe that people are basically good after Auschwitz, the Gulag and other horrors of our century, is a statement of irrational faith."*

On *60 Minutes* Mike Wallace once interviewed a survivor of Auschwitz, a key witness against Adolf Eichmann, the mastermind of the Holocaust.

Upon entering the courtroom and facing Eichmann, this witness began to tremble. Weeping uncontrollably, he collapsed.

When Mike Wallace asked this man why he had collapsed -- was he reliving the memories, the nightmares, and the griefs?

The man answered: *"No. I collapsed because I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am exactly like him, capable of this."*

It's hard to shake up Mike Wallace, but this answer did. He almost couldn't ask the next question.

He stared at the man, then turned to the camera and said, *"That poses a question. Was Eichmann a monster, a mad man, or something even more terrifying? Was he normal?"*

When Kofi Annan was Secretary General of the United Nations, he traveled the world visiting areas of some of the worst violence and cruelty in human history.

Few men have the responsibility to face such evil worldwide. Fewer still must attempt to find a solution to such complex and insurmountable problems.

When Annan prays, he often wonders about man's cruelty to man. *"I'm still struggling with evil,"* he says. *"I don't understand how there can be so much evil."*

Recounting his meetings with former Serbian leader and indicted war criminal Slobodan Milosevic, he said: *"Milosevic will talk about the days when he was a banker here in New York City. He speaks English, sounds like a rational, reasonable person, and yet he is capable of all sorts of acts. How does someone behave like such a normal human being and suddenly turn so evil?"*

It's because man is sinful by nature and therefore sin has corrupted our character. It has defiled our conversation and has perverted our conduct. We are totally depraved.

Romans 3 truly presents a painful, yet clear and accurate picture of the human race.

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Conclusion

Now let me ask you something: In light of Romans 3, was there a need for Advent, for the coming of Christ, our Savior? Was there really a need?

Well. let me tell you, there was no greater need in all the world! We have much to rejoice in during this Advent season.

Maybe your response to the message is to feel it was kind of depressing. Maybe you're tempted to say, "*That sure wasn't a very upbeat message.*"

Well, it would be depressing and hopeless if it wasn't for Advent. That's why we can rejoice. Because after seeing what kind of state we were in, Christ still came. What a glorious message Advent is.

Steven Curtis Chapman in his book, *Speechless*, writes: "*In the gospel, we discover we are far worse off than we thought, and far more loved than we ever dreamed.*"