

Could Jesus Have Sinned?

1689 Confession

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Now we have this subject that we're still dealing with and that is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and we've looked at various aspects of the Incarnation and we're dealing now with the real humanity of Christ. Last week, we saw that the Scripture definitely proves that Jesus Christ was a real man. We don't question his deity, neither did the early church. The time period following the apostles, actually during the apostles' time and just following, there was no doubt that Christ was the Son of God and therefore God the Son, but there was a pre-Gnostic view that perhaps he was not truly man, and so we are dealing with the real humanity of Christ. We saw that the Bible promises and prophecies of a coming Messiah who would be a man. We find that he is called a man, in fact, Peter in his preaching as well as Paul both refer to Jesus as a man which seems odd to us because today we feel as if his deity is the thing that needs to be defended so staunchly based on the heresies that abound, but then it was his manhood that needed to be emphasized. We also saw that Jesus called himself a man, he was conscious of being a man. He had an appearance of a man. The people that watched him grow up as he grew in stature, they did not suspect that he was anything other than a man. Now we know by faith and by revelation that he was more than a mere man, he was the God-man, but those around him had no reason to believe while he was growing up that he was a man. He had the appearance of a real man. He had the body of a man. He had the infirmities that the natural sinless infirmities that manhood has: becoming fatigued, hungry, thirsty, and so on. And we also saw that he has the soul of a man, not just the body. So the deity of Christ did not come down and become the soul of Jesus, Jesus took to himself human nature including a human soul which means a human mind, a human will, and human emotions. And we looked in Scripture and showed how all of these things are expressed and we also quoted some very interesting quotes by Donald Macleod and Wayne Grudem showing that if Jesus indeed has a human mind, then because of the nature of humanity being finite and always remaining finite, humans don't become God. That being the case, then Jesus will always have side-by-side with his deity, he will always have a human mind, a human mind that is continuing to grow in its knowledge just like our human minds will continue to grow even in eternity.

Now we come to a couple of Christological questions which I hope will help crystallize some of these thoughts in our minds about his humanity. There have been a couple of issues that have been raised, one one was raised to me just this morning as I walked in

and I didn't include in our discussion, and that is that Jesus comes to in a gradual way to a realization of his true identity as the Son of God and the Messiah, and that is a very interesting question. I may have to add that to the list for things to consider. But today we're going to look at this first Christological question: could Jesus have sinned? Could he have sinned? And along with that is the whole issue of his temptation because the two are interrelated as we'll see this morning. Now the lesson before you, I don't think but I said this last time too but I don't think it'll take all of our time and so be thinking of some questions if you have any, even from previous lessons, and we'll deal with those at the end today.

The question, then, today is could Jesus have sinned? The issue is not did Jesus sin because we know that is not the case. He did not sin. He was sinless. He was pure and undefiled. He could not have possibly died for the sins of others if he himself was a sinner because his death, then, would only be for his own behalf. He was a sinless Savior. So that's not the issue. The issue is not did he sin, it's could he have sinned, and just from that perspective alone, we need to tread very softly because we get into danger when we start thinking hypothetically, the what ifs. The what ifs really aren't as important as what actually happened because we know that God decrees all things and whatsoever comes to pass comes to pass because God decreed it. Therefore whatever God decreed, most necessarily will come to pass. There's no hypothetical. There's no what if it didn't come to pass. And if God decreed that Christ should not only be sinless as a human being but remain sinless, well, then, of course, the answer to the question is could he have sinned is no because it wasn't according to the purpose of God in his decree. Now saying all of that, we're still going to look into this because I think there's something to be gleaned from it in terms of the temptation of Christ and understanding that his temptations were real.

Now in continuing with this hypothetical question could Jesus have sinned, let's lay aside in our minds for a moment the unchangeable, unthwartable decree of God. Let's just put that out of our minds for a moment and think hypothetically what if and could Jesus have sinned. Now there's two views on this obviously. There's the view that says, "No, Jesus could not have sinned," and this is the view that I'm calling the impeccability view. Impeccable just simply means not capable of sinning. It comes from the Latin word for sin, peccare. The impeccability view, that Jesus was impeccable, not able to sin. Now there's this other view that says, "Yes, Jesus could have sinned but didn't," and that's the peccability view. So there's the impeccability and the peccability, which one is it? And I definitely have a strong leaning toward the impeccability view, I don't think you can argue sufficiently otherwise, but let's look at these two things.

Those who hold to the peccability view that Jesus could have sinned, they say this, "If Christ could not sin when he was here on the earth during his earthly ministry, then he could not have been truly tempted to sin, therefore he must have been able to sin or else the temptations were not real. So that's their argument. Their basic argument is that if Jesus could not have sinned, then what was the sense, even, in him being tempted? Would these temptations that he experienced even be real if, indeed, he wasn't at least capable of falling and sinning? Now those who hold to the impeccability view respond to

this by saying it is not necessary for Christ to have been capable of sinning for the temptations that he experienced to be real. You see, those who hold to the idea that Jesus could have sinned, they're assuming something and you always have to look out for those assumptions, those presuppositions, because if your presuppositions, your premises are wrong, your conclusions are going to be wrong, and one of their presuppositions is that in order for a temptation to be real, you have to be capable of sinning. Well, whoever said that? Who came up with that? And, well, we find that man came up with that. It's some kind of a presupposition that they're taking for granted but they're not really proving from Scripture. But nevertheless, this is what they say and the impeccability view says, "No, Christ does not need to be capable of sinning in order for the temptations to be real."

Now let's add to the mixing bowl this other thought as we're considering this issue. The Bible seems to have an apparent contradiction but it's not a contradiction, it's just apparently so and when we think a little deeper about it, we find out that it's not a contradiction at all. On the one hand, the Bible teaches that Jesus was truly tempted. Luke 4:2 also Matthew 4, and then Hebrews 4:15, he was truly tempted; yet on the other hand, the Bible also teaches that God cannot be tempted with evil, James 1:13. Was Jesus God? Yes. So God in the flesh could not be tempted, James says, at least not tempted with evil, and yet Jesus was truly tempted. Now there are those who have said, "See, here we have a contradiction," but it's not a contradiction because we have to remember that Christ is one person but he has two natures. Can God get hungry? Can God grow weary? No, but humanity can. And so Jesus was, in one sense, tempted as a man, but in terms of his deity, he was not tempted. Furthermore, James says God cannot be tempted with evil and as we're going to see in just a few moments, even the temptation that Jesus experienced as a man was not in the same sense as we are tempted because we have sin within our hearts, and we have something within us that corresponds with the sinfulness, the sin that's in a temptation. Jesus was tempted but he wasn't tempted with sin, and I'll explain that in just a few moments. We want to take this line-upon-line.

But here we have these two views. Could Jesus have sinned? The peccability view says yes because if he couldn't sin, then the temptation wasn't even real. The impeccability view says, no, he could not have sinned and it's not necessary for Jesus to be capable of sinning for his temptations to be real. They were real and yet he was not capable of falling into temptation.

Now to answer this peccability view which I believe to be wrong, we need to consider two things: the constitution of Jesus and the person of Jesus, and in understanding these two things, we will see how he differs from the first Adam. He was not capable of sinning like the first Adam was. The constitution of Jesus, those who hold to the peccability view, who argue that Jesus was able to sin but didn't, they say that he was the second Adam or the last Adam and, therefore, to correspond with this whole idea of federal theology, the first Adam failed, the second Adam did not fail, we have to hold, they say, to this idea that Christ was put and constituted in the same kind of situation that Adam was in the garden; that is, that if Adam was sinless and yet capable of sinning, that the second Adam should also, therefore, be sinless yet capable of sinning otherwise how could Christ really even be called the last Adam, the second Adam. The problem with

this reasoning is that Christ never was, Jesus never was at any time as a man apart from his deity. He was always humanity and deity. From the moment of his Incarnation until now and forever his humanity and deity are together one, in one person united, not separated out. So right away you can see there is a difference between Jesus and Adam. There's a correlation because Jesus is the last Adam and he does undo what the first Adam did and he does accomplish what the first Adam failed to do, however shouldn't it be obvious that there's a difference between the two Adams because the second Adam is God and man in one person, right? Following? Okay.

Now tuck that away in your mind because that's huge. There is necessarily a distinction to be made between the two Adams in their very constitution and that makes all the difference in the world as to how we answer this question of peccability, but the second way in which we need to answer the question is regarding the person of Jesus and here's where I'm gonna read my notes because I don't want to say anything that deviates, it's carefully worded here. A moral act, be it good or evil, would necessarily be attributed to the person of Christ. A person, a person commits good or commits evil. A person, not a nature. God doesn't send human natures to hell, he sends persons to hell. The person is the seat of the moral consciousness. The person is the one who either is accounted righteous or accounted guilty.

Now keeping that in mind, a moral act, be it good or evil, would necessarily be attributed to the person of Christ. Yes, Christ experienced hunger, thirst and weakness as a man, not as God, but these were not moral acts. It was not immoral for Christ to experience hunger or thirst. The righteousness or the guilt of a moral act would be credited to the person of Christ regardless of which of his natures did it. The person of Christ would stand or fall but the person of Christ is both God and man. A sinful moral act would implicate the entire person of Christ, including his deity. Because Christ is both God and man, the person of Christ is both God and man. If his man part of him committed a sin, the person of Christ would be guilty and you can't just say, you can't take a little scalpel and say, "Okay, it's just his humanity that's guilty but not his deity," because he's united into one person and it's the person that takes the blame, not the nature. Okay, now, are you following me?

A sinful moral act would implicate the entire person of Christ, including his deity, which would have introduced sin into the Godhead. Now listen to what Wayne Grudem says. He says, "Therefore if Jesus had sinned, it would have involved both his human and divine natures, but if Jesus as a person had sinned, involving both his human and divine natures in sin, then God himself would have sinned and he would have ceased to be God, yet that is clearly impossible because of the infinite holiness of God's nature. God is unchangeably holy. He's not holy by choice alone. He is holy by his very nature which is immutable, it's unchangeable. Therefore the person of Jesus being both God and man could not be implicated in sin otherwise God would no longer be God, there would have been change within the Godhead with respect to the very essence of his being, and this is holiness."

So the answer to the question, I believe, can be safely given that because Jesus, though he was the second Adam, was more than just a mere man, he was also God. He was the God-man and the two natures, though distinct, can never be divorced. They're both in one person. The person of Christ no matter how you look at him, no matter what aspect you look at, the person of Christ could not have sinned because it would have involved the Godhead in sin, and God cannot change, he's unchangeably holy.

Alright, so if you followed me so far, now we come back to the issue about the temptation of Christ, was it real? If we hold to an impeccability view that Christ could not have sinned, then what do we say to those who hold to the other view, who claim that the temptations, therefore, were unreal? What was the big deal? If Jesus couldn't sin, what was even that testing and probation period mirroring what Adam went through, what was all that about? Well, that's why we need to go on this little excursus here for the rest of our time.

The temptation of Jesus, was it real? Well, here's what the Scripture says, Hebrews 2:18, "For in that he himself has suffered, being tempted, he is able to help them that are tempted." He was tempted. The Scriptures say he was tempted. They don't qualify. They don't hedge. They don't say, "Well, he wasn't really, he was tempted but not really." It doesn't say that. It just says he was tempted. Hebrews 4:15, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are," that's strong language, "yet without sin." So the Scriptures don't seek to explain this phenomenon, rather they point out the fact that because of those temptations he experienced, he is able to be a sympathetic high priest. He's one who understands by experience what it is to be tempted.

Now let's turn in our Bibles to Matthew 4 where we find the account of Christ's temptation. And by the way, let us not think for a moment that this was the only time Jesus was tempted by the devil. Remember Peter suggested that Jesus should take the easy route and escape his sufferings, escape the cross, and Jesus said to him, "Get thee behind me, Satan." Satan was dogging our Lord all along with, as we'll see in just a moment, the same temptation, the temptation to avoid having to suffer the wrath of God and to go an easier way. But here we find this passage, Matthew 4. I'll read the section that we're looking at. Verse 1,

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the

devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ""You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."" 11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

There is the account of the temptation of our Lord. There's three specific temptations mentioned and there's been much said about these three temptations, but I want you to notice these three things. The temptation for Jesus to make stones into bread was a real temptation because Jesus' flesh legitimately craved nourishment. There was nothing wrong with bread in itself and there was nothing wrong with Jesus actually feeling inside his body a craving for that which was being suggested by Satan because bread in itself is not a sinful thing, and for Jesus to have made bread on any other given occasion would not have been a sinful thing. The hunger he felt was a temptation but not a sinful one. When I walk down Seal Beach and I walk past that bakery and I smell that stuff that they're purposely blowing out into the street for everyone to smell, I fell incredible temptation. Am I sinning? No, I'm not sinning. No. That's as far as I'll take the analogy.

The second thing here, the temptation for Jesus to fling himself in the air for the angels to catch him was a real temptation. He took him up to the top of the temple. What's happening below? The temple was always a busy place. Busy, busy, busy. All these people doing their thing. All of his fellow countrymen down there, and the temptation for him to fling himself in the air for the angels to catch him was a real temptation because Jesus legitimately craved visible expressions of the Father's love which would have definitely been the angels, the angels coming to rescue him, as Scripture had said they would lest he dash his foot against a stone, would have been a visible expression of God's love, the Father's love. And this flinging himself, flying through the air, as it were, would also have been a visible demonstration of his identity, thus eliciting the rightful attention from the people that he deserved as the Son of God. But this was his time of humiliation, not exaltation. Here it was not an issue of was this a wrong thing, it was an issue of is this the right time for that. But the thing in itself was not sinful for Jesus to have craved, that very thing.

And so Satan is tempting him, he's feeling the temptation and, thirdly, the third temptation concerning all the nations of the world, that was also a real temptation because Jesus legitimately craved that inheritance of nations which the Father had promised him, Psalm 2:8 and 9, Revelation 11:15. In each case, what Satan was tempting Christ with was not inherently sinful but legitimate. The strength of the temptation lay precisely in that fact. So to say that the temptations weren't real is overlooking those three things. They were real. Jesus felt them and everyone who likes to split hairs here, who says, "Well, Jesus didn't, these temptations never really entered inside him," yes, they did. They really did. Not the sin that was mixed in with it, but the legitimate things that Satan was putting forward were very real temptations and Jesus felt drawn to them for that very reason.

Now listen to what Geerhardus Vos says. This man here is most of the time incredibly difficult to read and understand, but here in this quote he says something very profound. And let me say this first, in all three cases Satan was urging Christ to satisfy his lawful appetites but through unlawful means. Geerhardus Vos says, "What was not inherently sinful became so in His case, because of the law of humiliation and service under which His life had for the present been put." You see, this was his time of humiliation, not his time of exaltation. That would not happen until his resurrection and ascension. "The animus of the temptation, from Satan's point of view, consisted in the attempt to move Him out of this spirit and attitude of service and humiliation, so as to yield to the natural desire for His Messianic glory without an interval of suffering." Skip over the suffering part, Jesus. "And this preliminary phase of Messiahship," of humiliation, "Satan suggests He should overleap," same thing Peter suggested and that's why Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan." Always tempting him to skip over the humiliation, be done with it, be done with the suffering. Why? Because Satan knew right well that it was through the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ ultimately culminating in the cross that would save his people from their sins.

Well, with respect to the first temptation of making stones into bread, it was not the Father's will for Jesus in his time of humiliation and kenosis, that time of laying aside his glory, it was not the time and not the will of the Father to sidestep suffering through an act of his own divine power. There was nothing wrong in making bread for himself per se, but it was not the right time to do so. As Geerhardus Vos says again, "When Satan suggested that He should turn the stones into bread, He was endeavoring to move Jesus out of His humiliation into an attitude of independent sovereignty such as properly belonged to His exalted state only."

With respect to the second temptation, it was not according to God's will that any man should experiment with God, put God to the test. Man is to trust the promise of God. The Father had promised the Son, "I will take care of you. I have legions of angels waiting to come to you when I say so. You are to trust my promise." Now for Christ to have flung himself off the temple would have been not just a presumption, something we ought never to do, but it would have been an act of unbelief. It would be a doubting of God's promise. "Okay, the Father's made this promise to me, I'm gonna see if he really meant it. I'm going to test him and see if he really meant that." But what is that? That's a species of unbelief and many Christians live that way. Man is to trust in the promise of God. Experimenting with God is in itself a calling into question the dependability and trustworthiness of God and his word. It was right and natural for Jesus to have longed for further expressions of the Father's love and care for him, but not if it meant tempting God and thus doubting his promises. So there was something in the temptation that was legitimate but something that was illegitimate. Jesus' temptation was real because there were legitimate things in those temptations that he felt that tugging and that pull.

Now with respect to the third temptation, it would've been an act of sheer idolatry for Christ to have bowed to Satan. It was right for Jesus to have longed for an inheritance of nations but not if it meant committing idolatry. And note just for our own edification, this is the way Satan oftentimes works with us. He capitalizes on our lawful desires but then

lures us into fulfilling those desires by unlawful means, or at an unlawful time, or to an unlawful degree. Many of the temptations that we fall into are because Satan knows that a bald-faced temptation to sin is not going to be sufficient, he has to deceive us, and so he coats it with something that is legitimate and lawful, and many Christians fall into sin precisely because they think the only criterion for a decision-making process is, "Is this lawful or not?" But that's not the only criteria because all of the things that Satan was tempting Jesus to do were lawful in and of themselves but they weren't by the right means, they weren't at the right time, and with us, he tempts us to take part in things lawful but to an extreme, overmuch. Is it wrong to eat food? No, but it's wrong to overeat. Was it wrong for David to transport the ark from one place to another? No, but it was wrong for him to use the wrong means. And Satan is always doing this because he's a deceiver and this is what he was doing with Christ.

So we have to come away with realizing that the temptations of Christ were all too real. Though Jesus did not have an inward bias to sin like we have, and never for a moment entertained the thought of sinning, yet he was still tempted in that each of his temptations had an element in them that was true and lawful. The tugging that he felt was the same as what he felt in Gethsemane when he cried out, "Father, if it be thy will let this cup pass from me." The desire to avoid suffering, the wrath of God, was a very rational normal and sinless desire. Don't look at the garden of Gethsemane and think that Jesus is somehow borderline sinning because he's struggling with the thought of being the object of God's eternal wrath in a finite period of time. No, that, he was perfectly rational to fear that and it's the person who's irrational who doesn't fear it.

The same temptation to avoid suffering and to enter into his rightful glory was the temptation that dogged Jesus his entire career on earth, and this is what Satan was tempting him to do, this is what Satan through Peter was tempting him to do, this is what Satan through even Mary and his brothers were tempting him to do. "Jesus, you're out of your mind. You need to come home. You're offending the rulers here. This is not going anywhere. In fact, it's gonna end up pretty nasty." All the time he was being tempted to deviate from the Father's will, to deviate from his state of humiliation and to immediately and suddenly be brought into a state of exaltation, thus bypassing the cross, thus leaving us all damned, thus not fulfilling his own covenant promise to the Father in the covenant of redemption, thus introducing sin into the Godhead. You realize that every step of the way Jesus was feeling a real temptation not to sin per se, but to escape that which ought to be feared but we find in the garden of Gethsemane saying, "Nevertheless not my will but thine be done."

So could he have sinned? No. Were his temptations therefore not real? They were real and both are true.