

“Why So Hard to Reach?”  
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 Sermon for 9 November 2025  
 Text: Luke 15:11-32

Have you ever wondered why some of your loved ones are so hard to reach? Well, I have a theory and it goes like this: some people are hard to reach because they are convinced that they are good people. This position is held by many different people. However, it is seldom the case that they simply believe that they are good. No, the tenet that “I am good” typically comes in a package of erroneous opinions. We could describe this package as a “faulty sociology,” or bad anthropology. It can be more a felt, than a carefully thought out philosophy. It could be wishful positive thinking of a progressive mind.

Some people then, like the ancient Pelagians (5th century AD heretics) believe that we humans are born “morally innocent”—this position mirrors that of the Romantics who believe that either we are born as a blank slate (amorally neutral beings on which society then inscribes moral values (virtues and vices) arbitrarily via socialization the process by which learns/assimilates the mores and customs of one’s social group). They are deniers. Others believe that we are born *essentially good* and that original “goodness” is SUBSEQUENTLY distorted, or degraded by external forces such as family, parenting or education— society imposing its norms, expectations and roles—they are blamers.

According to social determinism (both deniers and blamers are determinists), and much child psychology, there is a natural unfoldment process, *maturation*, by which a child develops into adulthood and moral formation is simply part of growing up human. This popular optimistic view of human nature creates, *insulates us from a sense of sin*, enormous difficulties for “the problem of evil.’ I HAVE IN MIND THOSE WHO ASK WHY THERE IS EVIL, WHY WOULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW EVIL IN HIS CREATION. AND THE ANSWER IS THAT WITHOUT EVIL THERE WOULD BE NO REDEMPTION FROM IT. If evil didn’t come from us, where does it originate from? Positing a sin nature enables/affords those who ascribe to original sin a helpful philosophical/religious explanation for one source of evil, our corrupted hearts. However, if evil is merely a derivative of ignorance; OR THE ABSENCE OF “GOOD,” all that is needed is enlightenment and evil can be abolished by better education. THAT HAS NOT HAPPENED! There is no need for a God, a rescuing Savior/Redeemer, Christianity, or the church—just training, conditioning and positive reinforcement. It is easy to see how explaining things this way makes God expendable—puts humanism, man-centeredness in place and relegates faith to either superstition, or obsolete worldviews! These considerations are not just ideas, but hurdles to be overcome if a biblical worldview is to prevail in public schooling and modern politics. There are three areas of erroneous doctrine I should break down: 1. Original sin; 2. Human will, freedom and grace; and 3. Biblical salvation.

- **Original Sin:** Pelagius rejected original sin and believed Adam's sin only affected Adam and that each person is born in a state of moral innocence. Muslims carry this thinking one step further and they affirm that Jesus’ atonement could only affect him—no one can bear another person’s sin!

On the other hand, Augustine argued that humanity inherits the sinful state resulting from Adam's disobedience (this constituting original sin), and we inherit that sin nature, which requires, necessitates even, a special intervention of God's grace for redemption.—to wit, the gracious sending of a Savior to atone for sin, redeem the lost. If we believe on, or trust in the finished work of Jesus, we receive forgiveness of sin and are spiritually renovated by the indwelling godhead—both of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

- **Human Will and Grace:** Pelagius contended that humans have the free will, long before Arminius arrived to espouse his doctrine, to choose good and live a life of perfect righteousness

(now perfect righteousness is that original state of the perfect Adam in paradise)—such a perfect man could choose to rebel, or not. [One complication occurs when the perfect man ceases to be perfect—does he not lose his free will?] He argued that God's grace primarily provides helpful examples (like Christ) and the ability to choose (somehow preserved from the fall?).

On this doctrine Augustine maintained that fallen humans are not free to choose good without God's grace, which he saw as a necessary prerequisite for salvation and for righteousness.

- **Salvation:** The debate questioned whether salvation was achievable through human effort (self-salvation) or was entirely dependent on God's divine intervention (rescue from heaven, or outside the sinner's heart).<sup>1</sup>

I hopefully have helped us see how those who believe that they are good—not with the goodness that is gifted to all believers as a fruit of the Spirit, but as an inherent state or condition of heart—actually see no need for repentance, rescue, redemption, salvation, or even a Savior. That and demonic opposition (**the god of this world has darkened their minds!**) go a long way towards explaining their imperviousness to the gospel. They are ideologically inoculated against the gospel.

That inoculation is what needs to be explored. Yes, and the reality of spiritual opposition, too. There are other approaches.

One such approach is the subject of fear—everyone experiences being frightened, and most people experience a dread, or fear of consequences. And everyone longs for safety, or a sense of security. Why else put up security systems, and why lock your cars, or homes? Such natural fears can be harnessed to discussions of insecurity, fear of ridicule, mockery, rejection and loneliness and from these topics one can segue to judgment, condemnation and the possibility of divine wrath *as one builds a vocabulary to assist in more robust theological, moral and “religious” concerns*. Of course, the freedom from fear and the benefits of forgiveness are the goals for this preliminary discussion. We want to arrive at a discussion of sin but we have some miles to put in before we get there. The same is true for the peace that comes from reconciliation with God.

Doubt is another human universal topic. It is positively a motivation for inquiry, for curiosity. You wonder why something works the way it is and you question your explanations—this is merely testing hypotheses and doubters excel at that. However, on a more personal, deeper level, many of us can identify with self-doubt—doubts as to our purpose, significance, identity, our value, our work. Knowing that we are **children of God**, or precious to anyone, valuable and valued are foundational concerns and there is doubt in each of these categories. Wondering if we matter is very close to questioning that we matter, and these considerations bring doubt front and center! The Christian concern, assurance of salvation, can be broached by exploration of these subsidiary concerns. Knowing that doubt is something we can work through is of vital importance. But while the discussion needs to end up biblically framed, the road to getting there can be more diffuse, indirect—more a matter of asking questions and fielding responses.

How about sin as our third option? Well before one can discuss sin as a biblical category, one might explore the human experience of disappointment, of falling short, missing the mark—all of which are figures of speech used to describe sin. They are admittedly some distance from revolt, rebellion,

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<sup>1</sup>**Heretical Condemnation:** Pelagius's teachings were condemned by Church councils, notably the Council of Carthage in 418 AD. Another heresy was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD (namely Docetism which held that Jesus was not truly human, a Gnostic error.) The current controversy concluded with Pelagianism being rejected and Augustine's theology/doctrine of original sin being affirmed.

treason and disobedience but each of these categories of experience are shared in both the human and the spiritual realms. Breaking the rules is a revolt. And it is great to be kept from serious transgression by correction over little defiances. Surely that is bridge people can walk across before it becomes full-fledged biblical! Our experiences in family life are mirrored in the pages of scripture (and this is an important exercise of one's faith) but they can start off in a much more homey and intimate accessible manner. We explain why following directions, and heeding warnings is beneficial perhaps long before we study those things in the word. Disobedience is dangerous, we explain, it can put you at risk . . . no, we don't have to know why exhaustively *the reasons for the warning* before we can benefit from the warning. Yes, it is a matter of trust and disobedience is a matter of distrust in very down-to-earth practical terms.

So, through the three pathways of fear, doubt and sin we can prepared the way for a deeper conversation with the self-righteous about their need for a Savior—someone to assuage their fears of rejection, condemnation and the futility of life. Someone who can render them fearless in these areas of insecurity. We have introduced the universal fact of doubt and addressed both its positive and negative aspects. Of course, the long range objective is to prepare the heart for the good news that living by faith produces certainty and confidence. And we have opened up a discussion of sin which deals with guilt quite apart from feeling guilty. We can share about injustice, and immorality and cruelty as facts of life and then move on to the good news that we can be liberated from the guilt, shame and power of sin through the sacrificial life of Jesus—yes, even broaching the matter of a blood sacrifice as the only way for atonement to transpire. Freedom from indictment, accusation and curse of sin are arenas in which the altogether ungodly are set free. **Christ came to save sinners** guarantees a bottom-up approach which insures that no one is left out. The inescapably and fundamental evil, who seem incapable of any good—Christ came for them. Truly the righteous have no need of salvation—but ask who's righteous, who's perfect, who's whole, complete and entire in this world? No one. Who longs for those things? Almost everyone.

Those who need nothing, get nothing and those who need salvation obtain everything through faith in the gracious work of Jesus Christ. All they have to do is turn to, run to and trust in Jesus.

**Amen.**