ever-shifting feelings and a world we cannot control. Cain became caught up in the swirl of the contents and lost sight of the reality of the glass. He doubted his belovedness, and he resented the belovedness of Abel.

So we return to the words God spoke to Cain: "Sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." How? The mastery lies not in crouching but in resting. As counterintuitive as it may seem, we do not strike back first. We rest first in blessing. We ground ourselves in the space of God. We remember we are enveloped by a relationship with God that isn't going anywhere. And then we look with wiser eyes to find a path that will guide us toward life.

Sin crouches, but we rest. I remember as a child finding it so strange that Psalm 23 describes God as preparing a table before us in the presence of our enemies. Who wants to eat in front of her enemies? I couldn't imagine it would make for an enjoyable dinner. But when I think about resting in blessing, it now makes sense. Sin crouches. Our enemies stand over us. But we are just fine, resting here in the arms of God's blessing. We can pass the potatoes and sip our wine. Our enemies may stand nearby, but they cannot take away our blessing. We may find that we feel more capable of mastering sin when we reside peacefully in blessing. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We're Blankets, Not Sheets of Steel

When Isaac Newton was trying to explain and understand gravity, he described space as static and flat. If an object didn't have anything in its way, it would naturally move in a straight line at a constant speed. When Einstein came up with his theory of relativity, though, he argued that space is not static or flat. Space is constantly in flux, and it curves around objects based on mass and energy. While Newton saw space like a flat sheet of steel, Einstein saw space like a blanket. If you put a weight on the steel, it doesn't budge. But put a weight on a blanket, and everything changes.

As it turns out, Einstein was right. In fact, the more we learn about the world, the more we realize there's only one constant in the whole universe: change.

When we think of the way we understand human nature, we're continually debating a similar kind of idea. Is it nature or nurture? Is it talent or practiced skill? In recent years, a number of scientists, psychologists, and sociologists have shown studies proving humans are far less determined than we tend to think. We are not human sheets of steel. We are

far more like Einstein's blanket, curving around the weight of whatever forces we encounter. We are not static beings, but people constantly in action and reaction.

Plato scoffed in *The Republic* at the idea that an old man can learn new things, joking that he can no more learn much than run much. But we live in a world where no fewer than twelve octogenarians ran in the 2015 Boston marathon, so perhaps Plato underestimated them. As it turns out, humans are exceptionally pliable. While we used to think the brain stopped being capable of learning after a certain age, we now know that the human brain is capable of adaptation, no matter the age. And though the human body moves toward decay, we have also seen a compelling number of our elders show us that old bodies do not need to be weak and immobile. An old dog may be stuck in his old tricks, but he's not incapable of learning a new one.

Blessing Has Growth in Mind

As a parent, I've seen a veritable onslaught of advice in recent years on how it's actually not a good idea to tell your child she's smart, or a natural at art or lacrosse. It's a strange thing to hear after so many years of being encouraged to shower our children with an endless stream of self-congratulatory compliments. Surprisingly enough, it actually causes children to perform worse in the long run. A smart student now has something to lose, and feels pressure to keep it up, which ends up affecting her performance. Or a star athlete feels gifted, and consequently doesn't put in the same amount of time

practicing as the other members of the team. Kids perform far better when they perceive themselves as adaptable, even if their current performance doesn't necessarily demand it. So instead of telling your child he's smart, it's much better to commend him for understanding that material, and applaud his efforts to listen in class and study it at home. He'll see his grade as a reflection not only of his intellect but also his effort, which is exactly what it is. Psychologists call this a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset.

A fixed mindset assumes a child is born with a certain level of capability, whether academic, athletic, or creative. If you're smart, you only have to ride the wave of your lucky DNA. If you're not smart, well, there's just not much you can do about it. A growth mindset, while acknowledging some natural limits, recognizes the remarkable range of potential available to everyone. With practice and effort, you wouldn't believe how much you can improve. If you're not good at something now, it doesn't mean you're doomed forever to be bad at it. You aren't a person who doesn't get any math, ever. You're just a person who doesn't get this math right now.

When you think about it, this makes perfect sense. No one gets motivated by a lost cause. Nobody wants to take on a project that is doomed to go nowhere. If someone told you you'd never improve at math, you would never bother with your algebra homework.

Original blessing is a growth mindset. Rather than dooming you to a static sin nature you have no ability to control much less change (talk about a fixed mindset), original blessing gently reminds you that God's mercies are

new every morning. You have been given gifts and talents, to be sure, and you're called to use them. But more than anything, you have been given potential. Every morning, that potential awaits your movement.

I'm reminded of Jesus' parable of the sower who tossed seeds on a path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil. The seeds on the path were eaten by the birds, the seeds on rocky ground grew quickly but were just as quickly scorched by the sun. The seeds among thorns were eventually overtaken by them, and the seeds on good soil grew thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold. Each of the seeds carried the potential for life within them. None of the seeds were defective. But the potential of the seeds had to be received, and not just briefly, but deeply enough for them to take root and grow. Potential can be a spark that blooms into life, generating good things when properly nurtured. Or it can be a step that moves your feet along a path where your best gifts will be overgrown by thorns. But there's never any question of whether the seed has potential or not. A seed carries within it the promise of new life.

Though original sin has told us a story of being stuck in our sin, when we turn to scripture, we actually find a very different story. Though modern science has just come to realize how amazingly malleable people are, the wisdom of scripture has told us this all along.

What Does Sin Mean in Scripture?

Other than that awkward moment when you're reciting the

Lord's Prayer in church and you don't know whether to say debts or trespasses, sin is the word Christians universally use to describe any movement away from God. In English, sin is an all-encompassing word. It can mean stealing a candy bar or dropping the atomic bomb. It can be personal or communal. In cultural terms, it can even be religious or unreligious, connoting something that is simply seen as bad but doesn't necessarily relate to God. While it's pretty impressive to note the range of the word "sin," it has also caused problems as subtlety has gotten lost in translation. Much like the fabled tale of Eskimos having fifty words for snow, the Bible has far more than one word for sin. For us to get a clear picture of what we mean when we talk about sin, it's important for us to take these words and their contexts into consideration.

There are fifty different words for what we call sin in biblical Hebrew, which is the language of the Old Testament. Three of them account for the vast majority of verses. The most common, *hatta*, occurs 595 times and can be described as missing the mark. Like an archer aimed at a target, a *hatta* is an action or intention that did not hit the bull's-eye. The word *awon*, which is used 231 times, implies being twisted instead of straight, bent instead of upright. This is often translated "crooked." Lastly, the word *pesa*, used 136 times, means a willful violation of the law. It carries with it the connotation of rebellion, with political undertones. We could use the word "uprising" or the term "breach," either of a contract or a social norm.

When we turn to the New Testament, we see that Greek

also has a number of words we translate as sin, though only one is used in what could be considered a majority of settings. *Hamartia* is used 173 times. It is very near the Hebrew word *hatta*, and is similarly translated as missing the mark. In both the Greek and the Hebrew, missing the mark is not just about a target but more broadly about a relationship. To miss the mark is to have a falling out, or a drifting away. It describes a relationship that has been broken and will need to be mended. Hamartia literally comes from the combination of the words "not" and "a part." So *hamartia* also describes not being part of something, or being separated. When we miss the mark, we move away from God. To repent, then, is to live in God, and with God.

The second most common Greek word is *adikia*, which is used only twenty-five times. *Adikia* is most often translated as iniquity or unrighteousness. A judge who rules unfairly, or a person who cheats another person, would be guilty of *adikia*. There are also words for lawlessness or social chaos (*anomia*), a lapse or a turning away (*paraptoma*), irreverence (*asebia*), and walking in the wrong direction (*parabasis*), to name a few.

If you look over the list, they do not describe a state of sin in which people exist that drives their natures to evil. There's no fixed mindset at work. These words describe actions and choices, not the very nature of a person. And they can just as well describe the actions of a group, a community, or a society, which is important for us to remember. Not all sin is personal sin, even if that's the primary way we tend to think about it in our highly individualized view of society.

The most predominant word for sin in both the Hebrew and the Greek assumes in its very definition our ability to hit the mark. We can't miss the mark unless we assume the mark is where we're aiming, right? In 768 instances of the word "sin" in the Bible, we are described as people who are standing with a bow and arrow, aiming at a target that we miss. That's not a sin nature, and it's definitely not total depravity. That's novice, or perhaps distractedness, or bad aim. It could be any number of things. But the idea that we are not designed to hit the target set before us would be completely antithetical to the way sin is put forth in the vast majority of scripture.

When scripture calls us to goodness, to repentance, to grace, it's not like telling a fish to ride a bicycle. It's not something so contradictory to who we are and what we can do that it's an impossible notion. Salvation is available to us because God has offered it, but also because God has designed us to be capable of responding to it. We can take aim at the target simply because God chose to make us that way. Yes, we miss the mark. None of us gold medal in righteousness or goodness day after day. But that doesn't mean we are without any ability to play the game.

One Greek word on the list, *adikia*, tends to confuse us the most. It shows up a number of times in the book of Romans, and as I mentioned, it's usually translated as unrighteousness or iniquity. *Adikia* is often (and wrongly) used to define the idea of a "sin nature," but that isn't what it means. The context is far more interesting than that. Adikia is actually the name of a Greek goddess. She and her sister, Dike, are often

depicted in art battling one another, though Dike always has the upper hand. Adikia is the goddess of injustice, and Dike is the goddess of justice. In classical Greek literature, their names became terms used to describe actions between people as either just or unjust. When the New Testament writers used these words, they added a new dimension, so that justice was not only what was right but specifically what was right in the eyes of God. Justice is the goal, or the target. Injustice is anything that points away from that target. With *adikia*, there is a sense in which a string of actions or decisions has resulted in a way of life, and it has become ugly. In fact, the goddess Adikia is actually portrayed as ugly in art, in comparison to the more beautiful Dike. Some may want to call that a sin nature, but it's different for at least two reasons. One, it's created and not inborn. It comes out of a long line of choices. Two, it's reversible. There's no sense in which anyone other than Adikia herself is condemned to be stuck in a pattern of injustice.

If you've ever read Oscar Wilde's brilliant novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, you already understand how this happens. At the beginning of the story, Dorian Gray is a handsome and likable fellow, even if he's a little inclined to pride. As the story progresses, however, Gray's compounding bad choices begin to affect him, drastically altering how he perceives himself. By the end, he feels he's become unrecognizable to himself. He is no longer handsome or likable. He becomes overwhelmed by where he has let his life take him, and he struggles for a way to confront what he's become. Dorian Gray knows nothing of blessedness, so he's

left with nothing but his shame. It's a heartbreaking story. It certainly shouldn't be anything like the Christian story we tell.

Sometimes people (and groups) get into patterns of behavior that can alter who they are. But there's still no need to call that an innate and unchangeable sin nature. We call them bad habits. And they can always be changed, even though it can be incredibly difficult to do so. Dike always stands over and above Adikia, even if the battle is lengthy and arduous.

Missing the mark, twisting something around, walking the wrong way: the Bible talks about sin as something that ought to be called out, but not something that ought to be condemning to the point of shame. In this list of words, sin is an action, a choice, or if we've made a number of them in a row, a path or a habit. There is nothing irreversible or determinate about it. Sin is not a state of being. It is a way of being in the world that is always and every moment in flux, based on our choices. It's a growth mindset, not a fixed one.

To put this another way, there is a difference between having fallen and being fallen. Sin (*hamartia*, *hatta*) means that we have fallen. It doesn't mean we *are* fallen. We may be in flux depending on our last action and our next intention, but we aren't simply tossed around on the waves of our own competence. We reside in the boat of blessed grace, which holds us steady even as we falter and sway from day to day. We may have fallen, but we *can* get up.