

Deeds, words and heart

This exercise introduces an important concept: that underneath our behavioral sins lies a fundamental refusal to rest in Christ's salvation and the drive instead to find our own. (That is the point of Lovelace's reading last week.)

The 'Sin underneath the Sins'

Here is an excerpt from Martin Luther *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520)

All those who do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in God's favor, grace and good-will, but rather seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep the [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined.

Comment: Luther says if you look to your moral performance as the basis of your relationship with God, then you are breaking the first of the Ten Commandments: "Have no other gods before me." If you fail to grasp and believe the gospel of free justification through Christ's work you violate the first command. How could this be?

"If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious and pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him through our works, then all [our compliance with the law] is pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]... Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward [justifying faith]. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth..."

Comment: Luther says that if we obey God's law without a belief that we are already accepted and loved in Christ, then in all our "doing-good" we are really looking to something more than Jesus to be the real source of our meaning, and happiness. We are trusting in our being a good parent, or being a good spouse, or our moral uprightness, or our spiritual performance, or our service to other people as our real "Saviors." If we aren't sure God already loves us in Christ we will be looking to something else as our foundational significance and worth. This is why Luther says that we are committing idolatry (breaking the First commandment) if we don't thoroughly trust in Christ for our acceptability, even if we are otherwise totally moral and obedient to God.

"And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured..."

Comment: All people sin in general because we are sinners, but why do we sin in any particular instance? Luther indicates the First Commandment is foundational to all the others. Why? Because we will not break Commandments 2-10 unless we are in some way breaking Commandment One and serving some idol. Every sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. At the moment we sin it is because we are looking to something to give us what only Jesus can give us. Beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

Case study — A Lie

What if you find that you have a habit of lying? What do you do about it?

Moralistic ways to stop lying:

- Fear: “I must stop doing this because God will punish me, he won’t bless me.”
- Pride: “I must stop doing this, because I’m a good Christian. I don’t want to be like the kind of person who lies.”

In general, you will find that the more you simply lay Biblical principles on your heart, the more your heart resists it. (Rom.7:21 — Paul says “When I [most] want to do good, evil lies close at hand...”)

The gospel way to stop lying:

First, ask the question: “Why am I lying in this particular situation?” The reason we lie (or ever do any sin) is because at that moment there is something we feel that we simply must have and so we lie. One typical reason that we lie (though it is by no means the only one) is because we are deeply fearful of losing face or someone’s approval. That means, that the “sin under the sin” of lying is the idolatry of (at that moment) human approval. If we break the commandment against false witness it is because we are breaking the first commandment against idolatry. We are looking more to human approval than to Jesus as a source of worth, meaning and happiness. Under the sin of lying is the failure to rejoice in and believe in our acceptance in Christ. Under the sin of lying is a kind of heart-unbelief in the gospel, whatever we may tell ourselves intellectually. As we will see below, anything you add to Jesus Christ as a requirement for a happy life is a functional salvation, a pseudo-lord, and it is controlling you, whether it be power, approval, comfort or control. The only way to change your habit of lying is to repent of your failure to believe the gospel, that you are not saved and acceptable by pursuing this goal and serving this master, but through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Consider this case study in light of this excerpt from the Belgic Confession (1561):

Therefore it is so far from being true that his justifying faith makes us remiss in a holy life, that on the contrary without it we would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.

Comment: Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do, whether obeying or disobeying, by pride (“self-love”) or fear (“of damnation”). Mere moral effort without the gospel may restrain the heart but cannot truly change the heart. It “jury rigs” the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior out of self-interest. It would be possible to use fear and pride as ways to motivate a person to be honest, but since fear and pride is also the root for lying, it is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses. Luther was right. If you are obeying the law without deep joy in your acceptance in Christ, you are *not loving God with all your heart*. You are not obeying God for God. You are being moral so that you can put God in your debt, so he owes you a comfortable life. You are being moral so that you can feel secure in your uprightness. You are being moral in the service of self-salvation, out of the fear and pride that arise without an identity built on Christ in the gospel.

Other kinds of word-sins and what they reveal

1. Which of these three kinds of “mouth-sin” is the biggest problem for you? In which area do you struggle most?

- **TALKING ABOUT MYSELF.** Defensiveness rather than taking criticism graciously. Bragging rather than focusing on and complementing others. (cf. Gal. 6:14 – “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord...”)
- **TALKING ABOUT OTHERS.** Talking unkindly about others more often than affirming and sincerely praising. Harsh or sarcastic when giving criticism. (cf. Gal. 5:15 – “...biting and devouring one another...”)
- **TALKING ABOUT LIFE.** Complaining and murmuring more than expressing gratitude and praise. More emphasis on the injustices rather than the mercies of life. (cf. Gal.5:22 – “...the fruit of the Spirit is joy, peace, patience... gentleness.”)

2. Review the following quote from Richard Lovelace:

“The faith that surmounts the evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness...”

Without a deep grasp of the gospel, we believe that salvation/happiness/blessing depends conditionally on something we are or do. Thus everyone builds their identity on something besides Jesus. **Review one psychologist’s categories of four basic ways in which people seek meaning and self-acceptance.** Each of the following four things can become something we depend on to establish our adequacy and worth instead of depending on Jesus.

What we seek	Price we will pay	Greatest nightmare	Others often feel	Problem emotion
COMFORT (privacy, lack of stress, freedom)	Reduced productivity	Stress, demands	Hurt	Boredom
APPROVAL (Affirmation, love, relationships)	Less independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
CONTROL (Self-discipline, certainty, standards)	Loneliness; spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry
POWER (Success, winning, influence)	Burdened; responsibility	Humiliation	Use	Anger

3. Now look at the circumstances surrounding your typical mouth sins. Answer this question: “When I [commit this particular sin], what is it that I am after? What do I feel I must have for self-acceptance?”

(a) If you need to defend yourself against criticism, where are you “warming yourself?” *(Is it to get comfort, approval, control, power, or something else?)*

(b) If you need to run other people down or make them look bad, where are you “warming yourself?” *(Is it to get comfort, approval, control, power, or something else?)*

(c) If you cannot be grateful and happy unless life is going according to your plan, where are you “warming yourself?” *(Is it to get comfort, approval, control, power, or something else?)*

4. Imagine how you could draw on your hope and standing in Christ at these moments and get control of your tongue?