

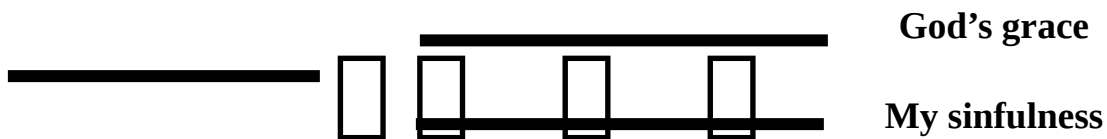
Sin and Idolatry

Introduction

Nothing is more critical to our personal spiritual health and the health of our community than the ability for us to understand and live out of our completeness in Christ (Col.2:9-10).

Put another way, we need to 'get' and live in the grace of God.

For many of us, God's grace begins and ends with our justification. If this is the case, then our understanding of the depths of our need and the extent of Gods grace (reality) is never apprehended. We rarely sense His presence. The grace of God never expands past the atonement.



The two sons - [read Luke 15:11-32]

Depending on our personality & upbringing we either end up being the good son or the prodigal son. Both keep us from experiencing the goodness of the father. Really, both ways (moralist or 'sinner') help us avoid the father.

The obvious sinner says, "No" to the father doling out his gifts in his time and his way. "Give me what I want and I'll spend it when and how I choose. I don't like how you handle things." Self-rule & self-provision leads them to exploitation of others, attacks on others and deception of others. At best they have negotiated relationships with people that last as long as they pay off. During hard times he complains, "Where is God?" He lays the blame for his bad fortune on God's doorstep; claiming that He is unjust, impotent or unloving. Only when he completely runs out of resources and any hope for new resources does he come to his senses.

The dutiful moralist, the good person, is no more intimate with God than the wayward son. But, though well concealed, he is just as full of lusts of the flesh, eyes and pride as the other. In Christ's story, this is the Pharisee who hopes to leverage his good behavior into God (or someone else) owing him (i.e. spiritual karma or paying forward). Moralism often makes relationships into a "blame-game". This is because a moralist is traumatized by criticism and maintains his self-image as a good person by blaming others. Because he has been so moral, he feels he doesn't really deserve suffering. So moralism tears him apart from the inside out. For, at one level he thinks, "What did I do to deserve this?" but on another level he thinks, "I probably did everything to deserve this!" He is unwilling to take risks because failure endangers his soul. During hard times he complains, "Where is God?" He lays the blame for his bad fortune on God's doorstep; claiming that He is unjust, impotent or unloving. Only when he is completely crushed under the weight of his hidden sin and Gods silence, does he come to his senses.

The deceitfulness of the flesh

Sin is a potent hallucinogen. More accurately, there is a sin that accompanies most every sin which warps our capacity to see things the way they really are – our stunning propensity for self-justification.

Self-justification is the habit of twisting reality to make it seem as if we are not really so bad or maybe even virtuous in our sin. It creates a mental perspective that diminishes others and promotes self. Sin and self-righteousness are inseparable. Our flesh seems willing to endure any pain but the pain of self-condemnation.

Even secular social psychologists are beginning to recognize what Jeremiah¹ spoke of that humans are so self-deceived and self justifying that they should not trust their own accounts of themselves.²

Sinning by omission

When I have a positive intention that I don't act upon or when I am told that I should have considered doing a particular good deed, I automatically begin to justify myself. This involves elevating my goodness, diminishing the goodness of the one I should have served and also amplifying the importance of any circumstance that might conceivably have been the 'reason' I didn't do the right thing.

Consider the fleshly responses to the thought, "*I should spend time with my friend.*"

But, let's say that I don't spend time with them for selfish reasons. What I immediately do it to justify myself and diminish them.

justify myself

victim
hardworking
important
fair
sensitive
good person
tired

justify my needs

I've had it hard lately
I need to rest
another thing blocked me

blame them

lazy
inconsiderate
unappreciative
insensitive
faker
lousy person
demanding

diminish their needs

she has it easy
she rests any time she wants
someone else will help

Sinning by doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.

Now let's consider the opposite fleshly response to the thought, "*I should spend time with my friend.*" In this case, let's say that I do spend time with them but for selfish reasons.

Again, like before, I immediately and persistently justify myself and diminish them.

extol self

martyr
hardworking
important
fair
sensitive
good person
tired

pity self

I've had a hard day
I need to rest

judge them

lazy
inconsiderate
unappreciative
insensitive
faker
lousy person
demanding

cold-hearted toward...

She has it easy
She rests any time she wants

¹ Jeremiah 17:9 -10; Hebrews 3:12-13

² *Mistakes were made, but not by me*, Aaronson & Tavis

Another thing blocked me

Sinning by commission.

When I am about to sin or after I have directly or indirectly sinned against someone the same process of self-justification occurs.

So, let's say I sin against them by functioning/working too much; by 'vegging out on...' too often; by having an angry/sarcastic outburst; by withdrawing from them; by telling others about their faults; looking at porn; flirting with others; drinking too much; spending too much or etc..

A little voice in my head immediately begins justifying me; telling me why it was O.K. for me to do that: it wasn't that bad; others do worse; she does worse; her behavior forced me to do what I did and on it goes.

Sinning by not doing the wrong thing but for the wrong reasons

Of course one can resist doing the wrong things for the wrong reasons too. I might not do the wrong thing by screaming at them, calling them names or stomping out of the room but I only resisted doing the wrong thing because I didn't want to deal with the blow back of sinning against them. I certainly didn't forgive them – give up my desire to hate them or condemn them in my mind.

When I am sinned against

We are frequently the 'victim' of other people's sin.

Our friend & co-worker fails to serve us in our need and whether this is really sin or not, we quickly run through the same process of bolstering our self and diminishing the other person.

Similarly, when someone sins directly against me or sins overtly in some way that affects me, off we go down the same trail.

Most of the time we end up sinning back (vengeance) out of our sense of personal injury. But we feel even more justified because what they did or failed to do '**made us**' behave badly.

My friend does not initiate/respond to me relationally so we think _____ and then we do _____.

My friend says something harsh/cruel so we think _____ and then we do _____.

My friend keeps nagging me about _____, so we think _____ and then we do...

My friend insists on having their way, so we think _____ and then we do _____.

My friend is a wet blanket, so we think _____ and then we do...

My friend expects too much of me, so we think _____ and then we do _____.

My friend is insensitive, so we think _____ and then we do _____.

When deluded people clash.

Compounding this problem is that the person we're in conflict with is just as inclined toward self-justification as we are, especially if they feel the blame that is roiling around in our heart. And they surely will, after all, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks – our behaviors will betray our heart to them.

Now the two of us are locked into a battle of delusions – each convinced that the other is less than human; their needs, less important than our own and their self-justification weaker than our ‘righteous reasons’.

As mentioned earlier, a key feature of this battle is our inclination to ‘mind read’ our deluded conclusions back onto the offender. We ‘know’ why he did something or why she failed to do something. Whether we are right, wrong or only partially so, doesn’t matter. We do not know, nor can we know all that contributed to their action/inaction. We are not mind readers.

But, even if we knew with perfect clarity what motivated them, we cannot help the situation because of our need to be right. We cannot deal with their speck because of our log.³ We may even go through the process of communicating but our heart’s not really in it because our need to be right and our need for them to be wrong subverts every word that comes out of our mouth and every action we take.

He is an hour late. Let’s say he didn’t call, explain (satisfactorily) or apologize (enough)

She thinks - *He’s irresponsible, self-important, hiding something evil he’s done, insensitive, unloving*

Maybe **she pouts, withdraws, cries, yells, investigates or demands...**

He thinks - *She’s a nag, clingy, nose-y, unloving, pushy, demanding, unreasonable, unappreciative, unsympathetic, unloving...*

Maybe his behavior is wrong but she cannot successfully address it from her house of mirrors because she needs to be right and she needs him to be wrong to sustain her righteousness.

Maybe her reaction is wrong but he cannot successfully address it from his house of mirrors because he needs to be right and he needs her to be wrong to sustain his righteousness.

We might realize, at some level, that we did something wrong but the compulsion to be justified is so intense that humble repentance makes us vulnerable. This is a competition after all, a battle for righteousness, and giving ground is losing. To apologize and leave it like that will just help them feel more righteous and more justified, so we don’t.

Ultimately we end up in a stalemate. Maybe things simmer down but our commitment dims. Our engagement falters. We make problems. We create conflict. We feel stress. We lack trust. We make ourselves unaccountable. We cannot really communicate. We cannot cooperate. And the very next time than any behavior appears to validate our critique the fire roars back to life all over again. Eventually, unchecked, the relationship ends.

The flesh morphs

One of the most disheartening features of our flesh is that it can quickly take over the best inclinations we have.

If we see that we are wrong, we confess our sin but then our flesh assures us how righteous we are for confessing.

We help someone with a problem and then feel superior to them or trust only our own wisdom to ‘help people.’

We make sure we let others know how helpful we were or we indulge ourselves in pleasures or refuse to help anyone else b/c we're all tuckered out from our good deeds.

"Wow, what a tedious exercise!" you might think. True, this is exhausting to think about. When we reflect deeply on our corruption, we can easily dismiss it or despair about it but this bad news is important to understand or else the sense of our need for God is limited. We really need God in order to really love another person well.

Also, there is another way to look at this restless self-justification and self-deception. There is a sin under all of these sins, that if understood, is remarkably simplifying & clarifying – idolatry.

Idolatry – the source of all sin

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

Jonah 2:8 NIV

An idol is anything raised up above God, from which we hope to draw our needs.⁴

In their proper place, many of these idols are good and appropriate longings but they become idols when they get elevated to ultimate importance in our hearts and when we become the administrators of those needs - We ourselves are the 'little gods' behind the idols.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James 4:1-3

What are these desires? Well, anything can be elevated to ultimate status but commonly the following are found in our private temple:

Comfort/Pleasure

Approval/Desirability

Security/Control/Power

Significance/Meaning

Since Christ is God & we are in Christ – we have everything we need according to Colossians 2:9-10. We no longer need to extract these needs from others or from the world.⁵

Sande describes *The Progression of an Idol*, in his article *Getting to the Heart of Conflict*.⁶ He says idolatry begins with a desire, which morphs into a demand about which I judge and punish others

How can we identify our idols?

Well, interestingly, we find God often leads us into circumstances explicitly intended to expose them.

Often we can look back at certain disappointing or exasperating themes in our life and spot a whole series of circumstances or conflicts related to disruption of our comfort/pleasure OR that have left us feeling like we are powerless in the world OR we become aware, one after another, of people who don't like us and won't resolve things OR we keep failing at things we find important and meaningful.

When He does so, our inordinate emotions, our sinful behaviors & our mental focus point to our idol(s) like a compass.⁷

4 This is why the NT properly identifies pleonexia as idolatry Colossians 3:5; In this sense, idolatry is 'overdesire.'

5 We don't need to take from others (3:5-10) – using, attacking & deceiving others is evidence that we don't know or believe we have everything we need.

6 See the bibliography

7 Colossians 3:11-17

Emotions – we feel anger when a desire is blocked, anxious when it is threatened, bored when it isn't available or devastated when it is lost to us.

Beyond all this, we all walk around with a sort of emotional 'background music' in our soul that reflects what's going on in our hearts.

Under grace it's joy, peace, faith, gratitude & hope.⁸ In the flesh, under the influence of our idolatries, it's pretty negative – sadness, anxiety, anger, self-loathing, hopelessness, complaining and dread.

Behaviors – using, attacking & deceiving people to get or protect our cherished desire. This is so different from the affection & service that spontaneously flow toward others for those in Christ who 'get' grace and are living in it.

Mental focus – preoccupation with re-playing grievances; rehearsing responses, planning strategies.

Repentance & Rest – the only way out.

In repentance and rest you will be saved, In quietness and trust is your strength.

Isaiah 30:15

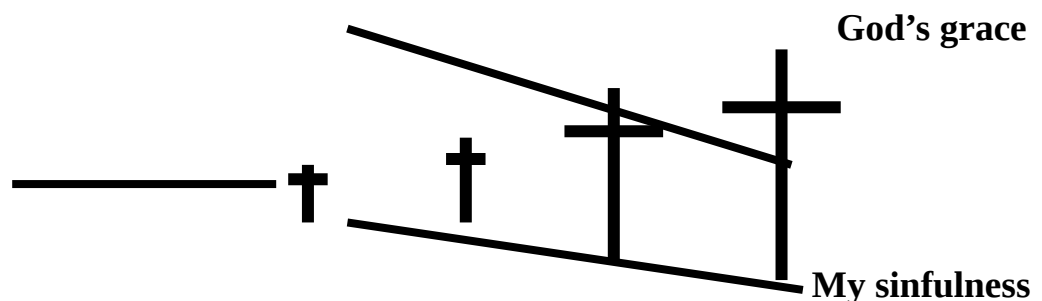
Christ is the only God whom, if you serve Him, gives great reward and pleasure and whom, if you fail Him has already died for you. Every other idol leaves hungry when you serve it well and crushes you when you fail it.

We must repent and confess our infidelity to Him and to others.

So, we must preach the gospel to ourselves. We must remind ourselves that we have all we need in Christ. The gospel doesn't stop at our justification. It's the heart of our sanctification too.

Then, we must take our stand in Christ – that He knows and will provide for every need; that we are complete in Him; that we can completely trust Him with our life.

When we do this our sense of our own sinfulness and God's grace grow such that the Cross of Christ grows with it and so our appreciation of it.



⁸ Moreland & Issler use the mnemonic Glad – Sad – Mad – Dread - Dreams to ask themselves questions that might evoke emotional insight. In *The Lost Virtue of Happiness*, p.61