

Abuse of Means

The traditional teaching of the church is that our nature was corrupted at the Fall, as was the earth itself. I moved the corruption back a bit, to just before the Fall. What caused the evil desire in their heart *prior* to the Fall (leading them to trust the serpent instead of God)? The possible causes of such "disloyalty" are suggested in the lesson. It's just a different way of looking at our sinful nature. Traditionally, the church has taught that Adam and Eve had free will prior to the Fall, and a perfect nature. They fell into bondage after the Fall and became "slaves to sin", at which point their nature was corrupted. The Arminian view is a little different, but I won't go into that right now. I was suggesting that our "corruption" results from our inherent tendency toward autonomy (self-rule). That tendency was inherent in Adam *prior* to the Fall. And it was accounted for under the original covenant. Please don't misunderstand. This doesn't minimize the devastating effect of the curse following the Fall. Adam's sin had irreversible consequences for himself, for his seed, and for the world. Creation itself yearns for release from its bondage to corruption caused by his sin (Rom. 8:20-23). When Paul says we are to live according to the Spirit instead of the flesh (Rom. 8:5), he is telling us to use our *recovered* autonomy (we have been freed from the law of sin and death) to willingly submit to the law of the Spirit (Rom. 8:2), and to become bond-servants (*willing* slaves) of righteousness (Rom. 6:18). The means of loving God freely, our autonomy, was abused by Adam and led to our enslavement instead.

What we find in the Fall, is a primary theme of Scripture: our compulsive abuse of means.

God uses means to establish communion with him, to foster reconciliation between us, and to offer comfort to us in the world. Every time we abuse those means, it is sin. God gave Eve to Adam for the purpose of comfort and support, as a means of experiencing those things with someone "comparable" to himself. I suggested that Adam's relationship with Eve, intended to benefit Adam, may have become a stumbling block to him. He became split between his vertical and horizontal affections. He may have come to enjoy his communion with Eve as much or more than his communion with God. After the Fall, that widened from Eve to men in general. When we seek the approval of other people above the approval of God, we sin. Such people-pleasers are what Ayn Rand calls "second-handers." Such people cannot live life directly, but insist on living it through the eyes and opinions of others.

On page 4 of the lesson, you will see that two of our disciplines, solitude¹ (vertical) and fellowship (horizontal), are impacted by this tendency to abuse means. Solitude and Fellowship must be kept in balance, rather than pursuing one at the expense of the other. In Pastor Matt's bucket and pipe theology, when we're buckets (receiving from God but not serving others), we are abusing the means. We stagnate; we no longer have "living water" to offer. When we're pipes (receiving from God and giving to others), we are using the means effectively; the water remains fresh. This is the same idea: don't abuse the means of grace by turning them toward selfish ends.

¹ For purposes of this course, solitude is an aspect of fasting. It is part of an overall program of separating and unbinding. Solitude is not practiced to separate ourselves from the church, or to withdraw from our obligations to other people. It is part of drawing near to God. And yet to draw near to God, we need to distance ourselves from the allegiances that are created by our other relationships. They compete for our love to God. See Matt. 10:35-38; 1Jn. 2:15.

The system of altar and sacrifice became a stumbling block to Cain in this way. Cain was more focused on the altar as a means to gain approval and self-worth, than he was on the purpose of the altar, which was to reconcile himself to God. In the OT, the Law, which was a means to enable God's people to live in the land that God gave to them, became the focus of their faith. It became a source of self-worth and righteousness, instead of a means of receiving God's grace and mercy.

In the NT, our works are supposed to be a means of evidencing our faith, benefiting the Body, and glorifying God. When they become an end in themselves, we are abusing the means. When fellowship becomes an end in itself, instead of a means of enjoying and bestowing God's grace (our "riches in the saints"), we have abused the means. When Bible-study, a means of knowing God, becomes an end in itself, instead of being used to guide our actions, then we have abused the means.

The bottom line is that we are not to worship the altar and sacrifice. They are only a means of reconciliation with God. We must keep God the focus of our attention at all times; his glory is the motivation for our actions. Everything God does is for his own glory, and the good of his people. One is never done at the expense of the other. And so it should be for us. That's a simple phrase to memorize, but its implications are profound.

Let me end with one last means whose abuse may be a little more subtle: Christ is the object of our faith; but even Christ came to bring us to the Father. Christ is the *means* of our reconciliation, the *mediator* of our covenant with God. It is God who is the cause of our salvation. God sent his only begotten Son to the cross to redeem us for his own glory and for our own good. As it is with our prayers, so it should be with our worship: We worship the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. When we confuse the persons of the godhead, we don't give them each the unique glory that is their due. We can't simply say, "the Lord God is One", and then treat the persons of the godhead interchangeably.

As we examine the covenants, we will begin to appreciate the distinctives between them, and specifically, the Father's great love for his people. John Owen once wrote, "for the Son did not hate our sin more than he loved the Father." And so, out of his love for the Father, the Son took our sins upon himself, detestable as they were to him, so that the Father might be glorified. The godhead isn't a good-cop, bad-cop kind of thing. When we examine communion with God later on, we'll learn that we can and should enjoy communion with each person of the godhead individually. It's an eye-opener.