

Signs vs. Means of Grace

Sin harms people. It wounds us, and those around us. Confession is the first step toward healing those wounds. But confession is not a work of the Law, nor does it convey Gospel grace. In Lesson 3, we examined the relationship between the Law and the Gospel, and between works and grace. There is danger in commingling the two, as if they were compatible. They're not. The Law condemns. The Law defines sin. "Except for the Law, I would not have known sin" (Rom. 7:7). It brings wrath and death (Rom. 4:15; 7:9). The requirements of the Law are an unbearable burden that no one can satisfy (Gal. 2:16). By contrast, the Gospel removes the burden and the debt of the Law. It bestows mercy where no mercy is owed. It forgives. It brings life. Yet, apart from the Law, there would be no grace, no mercy, no need to forgive. There may be a relationship between the two, but not compatibility. When we confess, we acknowledge that grace is ours for the asking, because it was obtained by Christ's death and resurrection. Confession is a *sign* of that precious grace, nothing more.

Therefore, if we confess in order to atone for sin, we are trying to use the Law to fulfill the Gospel. This is an unholy mixture. It is true that we are commanded to confess our sins (James 5:16), for without confession, we cannot obtain forgiveness or cleansing (1Jn. 1:9). But we are not to convert our confession from a plea for mercy into some kind of meritorious work. We must not change what is a *sign* of grace into a *means* of grace. When we abuse confession in this way, it becomes a way to do penance instead of a way to gain reconciliation. We cannot pay for each sin with a corresponding act of contrition. That's a Roman Catholic concept. Instead of trying to earn God's favor, we need to remain dependent on God's grace in Christ. Remember, Christ paid for ALL our sins, past, present, and future, not just the sins that preceded our conversion. We are not involved in a *quid pro quo* payback for each sin, as if applying for a portion of God's grace to cover each transgression we commit. That mechanistic approach is what characterizes non-Christian theology. We are *free* of debt; we are *completely* and *eternally* free.

The Tie That Binds

You've heard me say before that we have a pre-existing relationship with God that binds us to him under a covenant. We are not trying to earn, develop, or sustain our relationship with him by our behavior (Job 35:6-7). That is foreign to Christianity. Our relationship is independent of our behavior.¹ We are God's *children*. We are blood relations to Almighty God through Jesus Christ. He was firstborn among many siblings (Rom. 8:29). Let's look a little closer at this idea of belonging to a spiritual family, and how it relates to sin and confession.

Let's say my marriage would end tomorrow if my wife discovered that I failed her. There would be no security or freedom in our relationship if that were true. I couldn't be open and honest with her. I would be terrified of jeopardizing my marriage by

¹ That is, the behavior isn't what defines our relationship to God. It is the relationship that defines our behavior.

admitting my failures, shortcomings, and mistakes. I would take the same approach that Adam and Eve took in the Garden: I would hide my presence, and my offense. I would confess nothing that might lead to my condemnation. If my marriage depended on my perfect behavior, it would be on shaky ground indeed – it would be unhealthy in every way. Marriage is based on trust; trust is based on commitment; and commitment is based on the “tie that binds,” meaning my marriage covenant. If I were to loosen that tie by suggesting it might not be permanent, I would lose my wife’s trust. In fact, I would lose my freedom if I untied myself from my marriage vows, paradoxical as that may sound. I would no longer be free to press against those bonds, to test and try them to reassure myself that our love for one another, and our capacity to forgive one another, remain strong. That is true of children testing a parent’s love. When any relationship is based on *quid pro quo*, it is a dead relationship, because it is based on works, not on faith (trust).

That’s how it is in our relationship to God. We confess our sins to God because we trust his unfailing love, and his mercy, which are new every morning. Lam 3:22-24. We confess our sins to one another because it is the *sign*, not the *cause*, of a healthy relationship between us. Our relationship with one another in the Body of Christ does not exist because we subscribe to it by joining a local church. It exists because we are all in Christ to begin with – in him we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 17:28). Our relationship with God and with each other isn’t conditioned on our behavior, because the love that defines it is *un-conditional*. And because these things are true, we don’t *want* to sin, we don’t *want* to hide, and we don’t *want* to be separated from one another by betraying that loving relationship.

If I base my relationships on bartering, giving tit for tat, value for value, then it’s all about me. It’s all about what I owe somebody, or what somebody owes me – did they give me as much as I gave them? Am I living up to their expectations? Are they meeting my needs? That isn’t Christianity. We don’t put strings on our relationships in the Body, ever. Why not? Because God does not.

Relationship is Everything

Try this one on for size: I don’t have a *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ, despite what the bumper sticker says. I have a *corporate* relationship with him. What I mean by that is, I don’t have a *solo* relationship with Christ. That’s an Arminian concept. I am not the Bride of Christ; the *Church* is the Bride. In the family of God, we get all the in-laws and poor cousins as a package deal. We tolerate each other, love each other, and support each other, simply because we’re family. What Christians mean by “personal” is that we have a loving, knowing relationship with God, rather than an impersonal, regimented relationship with him. We don’t experience love in our human families by obeying a set of rules and regulations; and we don’t come to know the love of God in our spiritual family through the Law either. The Law is there to protect us, and we ought to be obedient to it; but the Law is *not* the foundation of our relationship with God, nor with each other. We know this intuitively as parents. We say to our children: “Don’t obey me because you *have* to – obey me because you *want* to – I love you no matter what. My rules are intended to protect and nurture you, to help you make right choices, and to grow

into a responsible adult. I would *never* hurt you or betray you. You are my dearly beloved child!" God says that very thing to us.

Therefore, **as God's chosen people**, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Col 3:12-14 NIV

Our relationship with our children, parents, or spouse, doesn't exist because we're good to one another; and it isn't destroyed because we're mean to one another. It exists because we love one another; and we love one another because we're family. The relationship pre-exists the behavior. The behavior is simply a reflection of the love that exists between us because of those family bonds. My relationship with Christ didn't begin when I chose him, but when he chose me (Jn. 15:16). I have always been a child of God – I cannot be disowned. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself." 2Tim 2:13 NKJV. That is why I am *secure* in Christ. God tells me, "I have loved you with an eternal love" – a love that has no beginning, and will have no end, Jer. 31:3. That love pre-exists my existence. It is displayed for God's eternal glory, and it is experienced for my eternal good. That love, complete and unrestrained, is discovered and dispensed in the family of God, a family into which I was adopted by God himself (Eph. 1:3-14).

Blessed be the Tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like that to that above.

Before our Father's throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one
Our comforts and our cares.

We share each other's woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.