

Fall 2017 Luther Lecture 4
Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Luther on Sin & Evil

The easiest place to start with respect to any discussion on Luther's concept of sin is Matthew 12:33-37. In this passage, Jesus uses the metaphor of a tree and the fruit it bears to describe what he means by human corruption and what it leads to.

If a person has a tree that bears bad—or we might use the word “sick”—fruit, it would be futile to try and correct this by treating the fruit itself. The only way to correct the situation is to treat the sickness in the tree. Bad or sick trees bear bad or sick fruit. Good or healthy trees bear good or healthy fruit. (I am here using medical terminology in the same way Jesus did. What we usually refer to in moral terms such as “bad” versus “good” is also at times cast in medical terms such as “healthy” and “sick.” For example, Jesus said, “I did not come for the sake of the healthy but rather for the sick.” Also, one of the titles used to describe Jesus is that of “the Great Physician.”)

This metaphor clearly indicates that sin is not only the bad things people do. It also refers to the condition of the persons who commit sin. In this passage, Jesus points to the human heart as the place where the corruption comes from. “For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” Jesus then refers to what is in the heart as a person's “treasure.” A good heart brings forth a good treasure. A bad heart brings forth a bad treasure—the treasure being both words and actions. The important point here is that the origin of sinful words and behavior resides in the condition of a person's heart. It is therefore our very being that is sinful and corrupt. Sin should not be understood in purely moral terms, as if it referred only to words and behavior. Rather, the words and behavior are the out-growth of that which resides in our very being. This is a common error in the church, namely, that sin is immoral behavior. It goes much deeper than this, and there is no way we will ever understand the dire nature of sin, or the blessed news of redemption if we get this wrong.

Luther, like St Augustine before him, traced our sinful condition to the fall from grace of Adam and Eve. Because our first parents disobeyed God, and because they did so because they were tempted into believing they could become “like God,” they “fell” from God's grace. Their relationship with God was broken, and they no longer lived in harmony with God's will. Rather, they pursued their own will instead and thereby became separated from God.

This, then, is the “original sin” that resulted in their corruption—that they pursued their own will instead of God's will. Their disobedience was not simply that they ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. It was rather their desire to become their own god, to live according to their own choices, and thereby to disregard God's will. This Luther refers to as “unbelief” or lack of faith in God. Their will was now captive to that of the tempter rather than that of God. For Luther, we cannot talk about the human will without at the same time referring to what the will is bound to—what determines the choices we make. If

our will is no longer tied or bound to a harmonious relationship with God. It will be bound to the lies of the tempter, that is, the lie that we can be our own god.

The consequence of living by this lie results not only in the corruption of the human heart, but also in death. We need to take up the meaning of each of these individually. However, it is also important to understand that the one, the corruption of the human heart, leads to other, death.

Luther defined the corruption of the human heart as “being curved in on ourselves.” This means that the self which develops on the basis of self-will, the self that emerges out of the desire to be our own god, the self that is created on the basis of pride in its own works is entirely bound to its own desires. It is completely taken up with its own concerns, its own will, and its own passions. In Romans, Paul refers to this self as “the old Adam” because it has emerged out of the “original sin” of our first parents.

As an aside, it’s important to note that Luther believed in the literal truth of this story. There was an Adam and Eve. They were our first parents—the parents of the human race. And they did disobey God such that they fell from grace.

Most people today don’t take this story to be a literal description of the past. Rather, while it does a good job of describing what the human condition looks like, while we really are living lives that are broken in terms of our relationship with God, nevertheless, it is not historical or a description of actual events. It is rather a story that is meant to expose the human condition as radically alienated from God and therefore in bondage to sin and death.

Also important to Luther in this regard is a concept developed by St. Augustine, namely, that of “original sin.” The meaning of this term is that our sinful condition is something we are born into. In other words, we have inherited the sinful condition that resulted from the disobedience of our first parents. Because they fell from grace, all their progeny is born into the same condition. There is no choice in the matter of being a sinful person. We are born into sin and there is absolutely nothing we can do to get out of it. There is no “free will” with respect to sin. For this reason, we cannot not sin. Because it is a condition into which we are born, our wills are bound to sin.

Because Luther understood the world to be under the reign of the devil, at times, Luther refers to sin as the condition of being bound to the will of the devil. It all depends on the context of what he was writing about. If he was looking at sin purely from the point of view of the human condition on an individual basis, he referred to it as being curved in on ourselves. If he was looking at the larger picture of our relationships, he referred to the idea that our wills have been enslaved by Satan.

The devil was very real to Luther. He felt as if he was being tempted by the devil personally, especially at times when he felt as if his faith in Jesus Christ as his redeemer was being threatened. For Luther, as was the case of the serpent in the story of Adam and Eve, the devil was the one who continually tempted us to believe in the lies about ourselves and God. Luther’s concept of the devil would require a far larger discussion than this, but the main

thing to understand in this regard is that the devil is the powerful enemy of God. While it is true that Luther believed that the devil had the power he had only because God permitted it, nevertheless, our wills were not equal to that of the assaults of Satan. We could only prevail over the devil's lies and temptations through our faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ defeated the devil both in the story of his temptations and in his death and resurrection. Therefore, it was only through the power of Jesus, made present through faith, that we could prevail against his lies and temptations.

As the biblical story of the fall makes clear, the consequence of falling into sin is death. Death, for Luther, is not a natural phenomenon. It is the consequence of living in separation from God. Only God lives eternally. Therefore, when we and creation as a whole fall from God's presence and grace, we and the creation as a whole are subject to decay and death. This has consequences not only for our bodies but also for our spiritual well-being. Because we are subject to death, which is ultimate negation of life and therefore a manifestation of evil, we are also subject to being overcome by such things as fear, anxiety, and despair. Fear and anxiety arise in situations where we are threatened in some way with negative or evil forces. The fact of death is the very thing that results in the possibility of being threatened in some way, whether that be sickness, the evil behavior of others, or the negative behavior of ourselves. Harm and or the possibility of death is precisely what gives rise to living in fear or in anxiety over our well-being.

Luther does not inquire into the nature of evil as did St. Augustine. According to Augustine, evil is a privation, not a thing. Precisely because it is the threat of a privation, evil is a threat to our very existence. It is a negation. This is how Luther discusses evil. Evils are the behavior of sinners, the devil, or the fallen creation that results in some sort of negation. Both our sinful self and the devil, because they are opposed to the will of the God who gives life, do those things that lead to death. The sinful self, because it wishes to pursue its own agenda in alienation from God, actually ends up doing that which leads to death. So long as we remain alienated from the eternally living God, we remain subject to death.

The old Adam, the sinful self, because it pursues an agenda that includes some sort of idolatry (the love of the creation rather than the love of God), can do only that which results in death. That is, when we put the trust of our hearts in things other than God, we create idols, and idols can't give life. The devil will continually do his best to keep us from putting our faith in God's grace, and so he too only works death. Idolatry is like an addiction. It keeps us bound to things that have no future; no ability to give lasting meaning; no ability to give life. Because all of us are born into this sinful condition, Luther emphasizes how dire a situation it is that we are in. Apart from God's grace in Jesus Christ, there is no hope. There is only negation and eventually, nothingness.

Before we can ever discuss the solution to sin and death, we have to discuss how we come to the knowledge of our condition as sinful and why this leads to death. For Luther, it is God's law that gives us the knowledge of ourselves as sinners. As Jesus pointed out on many occasions, God's law requires an overhaul not only of our behavior, but also of our hearts. The ultimate requirement of the law is that we love God above all things, and our neighbor as ourselves. However, because we are born into sin, because we are bound to self-will, self-

justification, and self-glorification, our hearts cannot love God or our neighbor. Therefore, the law stands before us as our accuser—as that which diagnoses our condition as one where we are separated and alienated from God. We are quite helpless to change that problem on our own. As Jesus indicated in the text from Matthew, the only treasures we can pull out of a sinful heart are sinful words and behaviors. It is only people who are curved in on themselves who become jealous, envious, lustful, and hateful. A self that loves only itself and is bound to self will cannot love God or neighbor.

Having come to a knowledge of sin through the law exposes our helpless condition. However, the ultimate intent of the law is not only to expose our sin but also to drive us to the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. This means repentance, and a heartfelt reliance on God's mercy, forgiveness, and love. This is how the sin of unbelief, which keeps us bound to the consequence of death, is overcome. What gives us hope therefore is only the power of God's redemption in Jesus Christ.

Christ comes to us through God's word, and in the power of the Spirit. We can receive that only through faith.

This is what leads us to Luther's reformation insight and message. Like the apostle Paul before him, Luther emphasized that "I preach Christ and him crucified." We are redeemed from sin and death only by the power of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. By his death and resurrection, he overcame the power of sin and death. His victory becomes our victory only through his presence in our lives. The word in the power of the Spirit conveys his presence to us. And we can receive this only through faith.