

Falling Short of the Glory

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[Printed in Lutheran Woman Today, March, 1996, p. 25-27.]

The first thing to say about sin is that sin, by itself, is not our biggest problem. Sin, bad as it is, only becomes worse when we are criticized for it. And no one criticizes us—accuses us, as Lutherans say—so profoundly, so unnervingly as God does.

But, we might ask, doesn't God's accusing—Lutherans call it God's law—correct our sin? We might be tempted to think so, considering how we all seem to assume that criticizing sin is the most effective way to deal with it.

But deep down, we know better. Deep down, we know that criticism—especially God's criticism—confronts us with our sin. And that angers us, and the situation grows worse. In truth, because of the law, God's law, "the trespass multiplied...sin creased," as Romans puts it (see 3:20; 4:15; 5:20).

Lutheran theology reminds us that the ultimate conflict is not merely between God's grace and our sin. It is also between God's gospel or grace, and God's law—between God and God, the self-same God. As Scripture drove Luther to see, God's fiercest struggle is personal: divine "blessing" straining to overcome divine "cursing." No wonder God resorts to something so extreme as incarnation to reconcile that godly conflict!

The law is the Creator's tireless, relentless power inside us and around us. It pressures us with deadlines, with other people's demands, phone calls, and needs. It challenges us to "get a life" and to share it, and—above all—to be delighted with it.

The better the law makes us, the more it convinces us that we are not better enough, maybe not even better at all! Here we are in our lives toiling to be more punctual, less critical, slimmer, better humored, more prayerful, even more accepting of ourselves...only to realize that, for all our efforts, we have much farther to go than we had imagined, and then farther yet, and then still farther. Let's admit it, with all due respect, the law is a killer!

It is the good people who know most surely that they are not the good people. When others flatter them or life is going well, they make a point of not letting it go to their heads. They remind themselves that God sees them otherwise. Isn't that just being honest? Isn't that what God requires of us when the psalmist says, "You [God] desire truth in the inward being" (Psalm 51:6)?

Yes, it is, but notice how that stiff-lipped truthfulness—in which the law of God specializes—also saps the joy from life. With all due respect, the law is a killjoy!

So, **whatever else sin is, it is losing the joy out of life.** The same psalmist sees sin as the opposite of “joy and gladness” (51:8). The psalmist internalizes the blame for such joylessness: “My sins, . . . my iniquities” (v. 9). And the psalmist also implicates God: “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me” (v. 11). Why does the psalmist beg God to “hide your face from my sins” (v. 9)?

Why? Because God through the law does just the opposite. Through the law, God scrutinizes our sin. And the psalmist pleads, “Cover your eyes!”

Recently Thelda and I were strolling through a shopping mall and saw a heartwarming sight: a young father with his tiny daughter skipping alongside. He was cracking up with laughter, evidently because of something the little girl said. He was tickled pink with her. And so was she. Grinning with self-satisfaction, she couldn’t have been more pleased with how proud she was making her dad. That is what Luther meant by “the glory of God”—not just the glory that radiates from God’s self, but the glory—the “glow-ry”—with which we glow in knowing how pleasing we are to the creator. “The glory of God” is our reveling in how we endear ourselves to God by who we are and how we live.

But, alas, as we know all too well—thanks to the law—we and our lives are not endearing. The better we get, the better we sense that lack of “endearing-ness.” The more truthful, the less joyful. The more grown-up, the less child-like. So there goes all reason for “glow-rying.” And that, says Paul and Luther, is what sin is: falling short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

There is a cure for that falling short, a way of restoring the joy of your salvation, a way of being saved from God’s law: by the same God. And the cure is better and more truthful than merely having God look away. It is a way of being freed from God’s law that actually frees us to face that law head-on.

A student of mine, Susan Till, pictures Jesus the Christ as her dance partner. The two of them dance through life so gracefully that the law can never catch a glimpse of Susan without being distracted by the impressive company she keeps. That, like nothing else, silences the Law’s accusation. And that, as you can from Till’s sly grin, restores the glow-ry.

It isn’t always easy to be the follower. As we used to say of another dance pair, “Ginger Rogers does everything Fred Astaire does only backwards and in heels.” That isn’t easy. But in this case, Susan Till’s partner gives her full credit: How very well you dance! “Oh woman, great is your faith.” “Your faith has made you well.”

“Your faith has saved you.” God couldn’t be more pleased with her. And as they both know very well, what makes her faith so great, so saving—so dancing—is the one in whom she trusts to be pleased with her. She doesn’t even watch her feet. Good dancers never do. She watches Christ and believes Christ’s reassurances. What a cure for sin: the partner who saves us from falling . . . short of the glow-ry of God!

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