

### **The Impact of Sin on Luther's Thought of Justification by Faith**

Perhaps the most identifiable phrase associated with Martin Luther is his claim of the centrality of 'justification by faith.' However, foundational to this is his concept of sin. For Luther, it is the proper appreciation for the gravity of sin which drives a person to Christ. This allows one to understand that, as great as is the need in the soul of man which is created by sin, the grace and mercy of Christ is greater still. In this paper, important components of Luther's concept of sin are enumerated and then connected to his thought on justification.

#### **The Devil**

Medieval catechetics traditionally combined the triad of sin, the world, and the devil, and Luther largely held to these associations.<sup>1</sup> To this end, it may be helpful to introduce Luther's thought on a more abstract concept, sin, by outlining his thoughts on a closely related topic which is somewhat less abstract – the devil. As a being, the devil represented the focal point of sin in this world and presented the platform for the most devastating element of sin. Without a being involved, sin has no real traction, for it is in relationship where the destruction of sin is seen. The relationship one has with God, with neighbor, and with self all suffer the grave consequences of sin. And it is the devil who advances this agenda of cosmic chaos.

In Luther's own experience, the devil had been taught to him as a basic element of reality since he was young. Spirits, the Devil, and witchcraft – superstition by modern standards

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Lohse. *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*. Trans. Roy A. Harrisville. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 253.

– were all part of the legacy of his parents’ home. Yet, far from moderating a belief in the devil as he grew older, Luther intensified it. Christ and the devil were engaged in a cosmic war over the Church and over the world. As a person, involvement in this conflict was unavoidable, even for the believer.<sup>2</sup>

For Luther, the devil was ultimately involved in everything opposed to God’s will. It was the devil’s work to bring misfortune, sickness, and death. It was he who misled Adam and Eve in the garden, and continued to deceive their descendents. He was at work even in the Church itself, promoting heresy and obfuscation of the true word, and ever grooming heretics themselves to lead the faithful astray. It was the devil who was ultimately behind Luther’s own struggle with the papacy and against the falsification of the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> To combat the devil’s evil work, pure doctrine, and in particular the doctrine of justification by faith, was to be protected at all costs against the devil’s instruments of the fanatics and the Roman church, and against the devil’s human agents most stereotyped by Luther – the pope, the Turks, and the Jews.<sup>4</sup>

But this conflict was even more intimate than to involve only the doctrine of the Church and unity of its members. At its most fundamental level, the conflict occurred within the conscience and soul of the individual believer. Certainly, this can be said to be true in the case

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<sup>2</sup> Heiko A. Oberman. *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 103-105.

<sup>3</sup> Article I of the Smalcald Articles, on Christ and Faith: “On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.” Martin Luther. Trans. by Theodore G. Tappert. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 292.

<sup>4</sup> Lohse, 253-255.

of Luther himself. Observers have come to a variety of conclusions. Some have gone so far as to postulate that Luther was insane. A number of reflections provide evidence for some degree of peculiarity in his personality. When he became terrified in a lightning storm, he swore to Saint Anne that he would become a monk, a vow which he subsequently fulfilled. During his ordination, he became paralyzed upon the prayer of consecration, when the moment of transubstantiation was believed to take place. Although known as an eloquent speaker, Luther suddenly became unable to speak. He trembled at the thought of what he was holding – the very body and blood of Christ. In his earlier days, he suffered from an extraordinarily troubled conscience, and was preoccupied with a morbid sense of guilt. He became obsessed with confession, doing so for hours on end, and became terrified as soon as he returned to his cell that he had thought of another sin which he had failed to confess.<sup>5</sup>

Luther would later conclude: “What is the whole human race without the Spirit but (as I have said) the kingdom of the devil, a confused chaos of darkness?”<sup>6</sup> The world had two Gods. Every thing and every heart therein was the domain of either one or the other. So, for Luther, making light of the devil was to distort faith, and the way to drive him away was to confess an identity in Christ.<sup>7</sup> Despite the reality of his kingdom alongside God’s kingdom here on earth, Luther always maintained the sovereignty of God. God was even so sovereign as to be able to

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<sup>5</sup> R.C. Sproul. “Grace Saved His Sanity, Too.” *Christianity Today*. Oct. 23, 1981: 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther. *Luther’s Works: American Edition*. Vol. 33. Ed. Helmut T. Lehmann. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 98. (Hereafter, LW.) Also, “The world and its god cannot and will not endure the Word of the true God, and the true God neither will nor can keep silence; so when these two Gods are at war with one another, what can there be but tumult in the whole world?” LW 33, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Oberman, 105.

include the devil within His plan to achieve His own purposes. Though we are humbled through the work of the devil, we are also able to escape God's wrath by fleeing to His mercy in suffering. Redemption through Christ frees us from enslavement under the devil's power.<sup>8</sup>

## **Sin**

*Relationship to God* If the concept of relationship is inherent in sin, three main facets of this should be discerned. First of all, sin represents a severing of a man's relationship with God, and Luther is unambiguous as to its root cause. "It is true that no human being ever sees his real sins, namely, unbelief, contempt of God's Word, the failure to fear, love, and trust God as he should, and similar sins of the heart, which are the chief transgressions."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he states, "We cannot perform a greater or finer deed, or a nobler service to God, than to offer thanks. . . . Such an offering pleases Him beyond all gifts. . . . By the same token. . . . ingratitude is the most shameful vice and the greatest contempt of God. . . ." <sup>10</sup> Having made all things Himself, God needs nothing from man. What He asks for is to be believed and praised. These things are the best that man can offer Him. On the other hand, egocentricity robs God, seeking its own good and neglecting to be thankful for what one could not do for oneself. A focus on oneself does not acknowledge gratitude for the gifts that God supplies, instead forgetting the divine

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<sup>8</sup> Lohse, 255-256.

<sup>9</sup> LW 14, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 51.

giver and acting as though one has providing the thing on his own power. Unbelief or ingratitude constitutes robbery of God.<sup>11</sup>

*Relationship to Neighbor* Such unbelief manifests itself in the works of a man, but also invades a man to a much deeper extent. “Sin, in the Scripture, means not only the outward works of the body but also all the activities that move men to do these works, namely, the inmost heart, with all its powers.”<sup>12</sup> Sin is ultimately seated not in works, but is a matter of the heart. Works can be deceptive, more often an indication of convenience than true loyalties.<sup>13</sup> Once any conflict arises between man’s self and God or neighbor, it becomes evident that man’s loyalties lie with himself.<sup>14</sup> Even when good actions are performed, they can often be so done with wrong motives.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, through the chief sins of pride and self-satisfaction, not only is man’s First Commandment obligation to God broken, but man’s obligation to his neighbor is also broken. Man secretly joys in the failure of his neighbor, that he may more favorably compare with him.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Althaus. *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Trans. Robert C. Schultz. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 145.

<sup>12</sup> LW 35, 369. Also, LW 32, 224-225: “In accordance with Scripture, we should speak fully and bluntly of sin – or guilt, or inward evil – as a universal corruption of nature in all its parts: an evil which inclines us to evil from our youth up. . .”

<sup>13</sup> LW 27, 374: “Just as the adherents of the flesh feign love in tranquil times, so it is with joy too. They praise God and the gifts of men, but only till they are offended. Then the works of the flesh come rushing forth. They disparage the gifts of God which they had formerly praised. They are saddened if their disparagement meets with no success and if the reputation of their neighbor is not diminished. For no one believes how deep the malice of the flesh is, so many does it send smugly to destruction until they are tried and approved.”

<sup>14</sup> LW 31, 50: “While a person is doing what is in him, he sins and seeks himself in everything.” And LW 12, 309: “We do not seek the glory of God but our own glory in God and in all creatures.”

<sup>15</sup> LW 12, 190. Speaking of ministers, Luther writes, “But it is innate in us and it clings to us that we want to have people like us, and when they stop liking us, that bothers us. This truly shows that the heart is impure.”

In this secret competition, a man has robbed his neighbor of the love that Christ commands be given him. Gifts that should be given to one's neighbor are withheld, and above this, consumed for oneself. Man should be concerned about his neighbor in his hearts, and yet, despite being typically hospitable, he is helpless to rid his heart of anger toward his enemy. Acts of kindness can be shown, but without being done from the heart, for while the conscious will consents, the involuntary will, the heart, abstains. To the extent that this is true, a man's morality is a façade of hypocrisy.<sup>16</sup>

*Relationship to Self* God created man in His image, giving him life, endowing him with gifts, and offering him a future eternal life. The identity of man is found in the love, worth, and provision given him by God. The appropriate response for man to have towards God in this is acceptance. Man is to believe God. By doing so, he acknowledges God's place of sovereignty, goodness, and provision, taking for himself a submissive position of praise and gratitude before God.

Through sin, this position is corrupted, and this has multidimensional relational consequences. Relationship with God is destroyed through man's refusal to act in belief toward God. Because of the destruction of his relationship with God, man's relationship with his fellow

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<sup>16</sup> Althaus, 150-152. LW 31, 60-61: "From the verse of the Apostle in Rom. 7 [:19]: 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do,' and below: 'I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self; but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind' [Rom. 7:22-23]. See how he delights in and at the same time is displeased with the law of God; at one and the same time he wishes good according to the spirit and yet does not do it, but does the contrary. Consequently this contrary is a certain 'not-willing,' which is always present when the will is present. Through this he does well and through that evil. The 'not-willing' is of the flesh and the willing is of the spirit. Therefore there is as much sin present as there is unwillingness, difficulty, constraint, resistance; and there is as much merit present as there is will, inclination, freedom, cheerfulness; for these two are found together in our entire life and work. . . . Therefore we constantly sin while doing good, sometimes less and sometimes more. That is the reason why there is no righteous person on earth who does good and does not sin."

man is likewise destroyed because he is unable to fulfill God's command to love them. In this, it appears that the beneficiary may be the self. Yet this remains untrue, for the love given to the self is misplaced. The inflated love which a man directs toward self in sin is, in fact, stolen love, for it has been taken from its rightful object – God.

Luther uses a variety of terms and concepts to describe sin and its effects. Failing to hit the mark, perversion, rebellion, and deception are all concepts which are supported by the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup> Also frequently appearing in his language of sin is the concept of *incurvatus in se* (curved in on themselves). Luther did not originate this language, it was a well known concept in the Augustinian tradition, but he did develop it uniquely.<sup>18</sup> It involves the notion of man freely willing himself to turn away from God and turning exclusively to himself. In contrast to the nature which God intended for him, a nature of being outward-looking through faith in God and love for his fellow creatures, the sinner retracts, curving back in upon himself. He cuts ties with life, and his receiving from and giving to others disappears. The self becomes an isolated absolute. His existence becomes completely absorbed with his own existence and nothing beyond himself. Sin is an interruption or even breakdown of communication between man and God and others.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Oswald Bayer. *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*. Trans. Thomas H. Trapp. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 181-182.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy George. "Martin Luther." *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*. Eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 114-115.

<sup>19</sup> Bayer, 182-183.

Sin is idolatry. It places the self-will (*Ichwill*) in place of God's will<sup>20</sup>, seeking its own purposes even through 'godliness.' When this occurs, godliness becomes simply a means to an end. Even real ethical progress which produces authentic growth can become a source of pride or self-love, the root of all sin, because pride can nourish itself on humility and repentance.<sup>21</sup> Pride corrupts all human activity, but especially good works, for they give the hypocrite a false confidence.<sup>22</sup> It has the most dangerous of practical implications, allowing one to ingest the blasphemy of trusting in one's self in place of God. The result of this must be explicitly recognized: God's statement that he must be trusted is treated as untrue – we treat God as untrustworthy, as a liar, as evil. And this constitutes a violation of the first and greatest commandment.<sup>23</sup>

It is the work of Christ which opens man to being cured from his dreadful condition. The world that had been curved in upon itself and closed is saved through the opening of Christ's work, once again allowed to receive, praise, and give to others.<sup>24</sup> It is a 'happy exchange,' in which "this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness" [cf. Hos. 1-3].<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lohse, 250.

<sup>21</sup> LW 21, 315: "True humility, therefore, never knows that it is humble. . . for if it knew this, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue."

<sup>22</sup> LW 27, 223: "Man is not justified because of [works of the Law] – except in his own sight and before men, and as a reward in this life."

<sup>23</sup> Althaus, 146-149.

<sup>24</sup> Bayer, 184.

<sup>25</sup> LW 31, 352.

## Original Sin

Sin is not in essence a flaw in man's works, but a flaw in his nature. And this flaw is not developed by each man individually. It is born within a man, innate and inherited, passed through the generations from Adam.<sup>26</sup> In the beginning, Adam was created holy, but this original righteousness was ruined forever by the eating from the tree. Thereafter, evil desires began to grow in them, and they were inclined toward evil.<sup>27</sup>

For Luther, the reason for Adam's fall must remain a mystery. It is not only something which we cannot know. It is a question which should not be asked, because it second guesses God's sovereignty, which for Luther was absolute and unquestionable.<sup>28</sup>

So, for Luther, what was God's relationship to sin? On one hand, God certainly did not create sin. His righteousness and holiness preclude this. Sin is of the devil and of men. Yet, on the other hand, God's sovereignty brings Him as close to sin as possible without actually attributing its cause to Him.<sup>29</sup> God did not create sin, but He did allow it.<sup>30</sup> God remains

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<sup>26</sup> Psalm 51:5 (NIV): "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."

<sup>27</sup> Lohse, 251-252. That hereditary sin was a ruination of hereditary righteousness was a stance Luther shared with the scholastics.

<sup>28</sup> Cameron A. MacKenzie. "The Origins and Consequences of Original Sin in Luther's *Bondage of the Will*." *Concordia Journal*. Oct. 2005. 393. Martin Luther. *The Bondage of the Will*. Trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston. (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), 209: "What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because He so will it."

<sup>29</sup> Althaus, 158.

<sup>30</sup> MacKenzie, 395: "Luther's language locates the ultimate responsibility for the Fall in the omnipotent God who did not supply what was necessary to prevent it."

sovereign and benevolent despite working through unclean and free-thinking tools.<sup>31</sup> So, how is the existence reconciled to God's goodness? Luther is convinced that it is, but does not find it possible to know how.

Why would God let Adam fall? This, likewise, is a difficult question, but Luther finds the answer in the cross. He guesses that the answer to such a question will be: "in order that my goodness toward the human race might be understood when I gave my Son for man's salvation," to which the redeemed would respond, "Let the whole human race fall again in order that thy glory may become known! Because thou hast accomplished so much through Adam's fall we do not understand thy ways."<sup>32</sup> Adam's fall should destroy our own moralistic pride, and likewise sharpen our awareness that the grace of the Holy Spirit is absolutely indispensable. We could not understand the fullness of God's mercy aside from the fall.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Bound Will**

That the fall of Adam had predisposed man's nature to evil for the rest of history was a position that Luther held strongly, but this was not universally held. Desiderius Erasmus, in *De libero arbitrio*, wrote that "it is within the power of our freedom to turn our will toward grace or to turn away from it – just as we are free to open our eyes to see the light that shines upon

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<sup>31</sup> BOW, 206: "God works evil in us (that is, by means of us) not through God's own fault, but by reason of our own defect. We being evil by nature, and God being good, when He impels us to act by His own acting upon us according to the nature of His omnipotence, good though He is in Himself, He cannot but do evil by our evil instrumentality; although, according to His wisdom, He makes good use of this evil for His own glory and for our salvation."

<sup>32</sup> LW, 54, 385-386.

<sup>33</sup> Althaus, 160.

us or to do the opposite, to close our eyes to it.” Likewise, he claimed that “As regards *liberum arbitrium*, we understand the power of the human will as that with which the human being can turn himself toward what leads to eternal salvation or can turn away from it.”<sup>34</sup> In this, Erasmus followed in the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, who believed that moral progress was a product of effort and discipline. This was a tradition which Luther strongly opposed.

To Luther, man is unable to escape or overcome his own moral incapacity. Since his will is bound, he suffers from the inescapable necessity to sin as an essential element of his being. Yet man’s responsibility and guilt remain, and he sins voluntarily. He has not been forced into sin but rather does so from his own inner will. His broken will remains his own, and he repeatedly and voluntarily acts according to it. As a result, man no longer has the capacity to initiate relationship with the divine. This was forfeited at the fall. However, the passive ability for relationship with God endures through grace and the Holy Spirit. Rebirth through faith in Christ is the way to incorporate true love, chastity, and humility into one’s life.<sup>35</sup>

Luther relied heavily on Romans in his articulation of the bound will, arguing that man had an incapacity for achieving salvation on his own. Further, he argued, any other rendering of Paul would yield Christ’s redemption as superfluous. If humans had the ability to accept God’s grace out of the freedom of their will, this would amount to a work of man, and God’s assurance of salvation was not dependent on any work of man. For Luther, God’s role in

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<sup>34</sup> Bayer, 188.

<sup>35</sup> Althaus, 156-157

salvation was sovereign and complete. He felt this was the chief point of contention between himself and Rome.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Awareness of Sin**

Attacking the scholastic tradition, Luther wrote in the *Smalcald Articles*: “This hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it. It must be believed because of the revelation in the Scriptures. What the scholastic theologians taught concerning [sin] is therefore nothing but error and stupidity.”<sup>37</sup> Sin is not something to be proven through reason. It is something to be believed from Scripture. But man’s knowledge of sin is also incomplete or partial<sup>38</sup>, for the Psalmist (139:23-24a) prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any way in me.” Luther finds sin to be a key concept in Romans:

The whole purpose and intention of the apostle in this epistle is to break down all righteousness and wisdom of our own, to point out again those sins and foolish practices which did not exist (that is, those whose existence we did not recognize on account of that kind of righteousness), to blow them up and to magnify them (that is, to cause them to be recognized as still in existence and as numerous and serious), and thus to show that for breaking them down Christ and His righteousness are needed for us.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lohse, 256.

<sup>37</sup> Luther, *The Book of Concord*, 302.

<sup>38</sup> LW 32, 240: “. . . no man can ever discover or comprehend his wickedness, since it is infinite and eternal.”

<sup>39</sup> LW 25, 3.

Inherent in a lack of knowledge about sin is a lack of appreciation for sin,<sup>40</sup> and Luther sees this as devastating because it leads to a devaluation of God's grace. However, it is through recognizing the magnitude of the need, created by sin, that man is able to recognize and appreciate the even bigger magnitude of the gift of grace.

### **Justification by Faith**

"If the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost."<sup>41</sup> For Luther, justification by faith was both a revelation and a battle cry. The key to the doctrine for him was the centrality of Christ. Just as man played no part in his own physical creation, nor did he play any role in either the initial justification or sanctification of his soul:

Before man is created and is a man, he neither does nor attempts to do anything toward remaining a creature, but both of these things are done by the sole will of the omnipotent power of goodness of God, who creates and preserves us without our help. . . In just the same way, before man is changed into a new creature of the Kingdom of the Spirit, he does nothing and attempts nothing to prepare himself for this renewal and this Kingdom, and when he has been recreated he does nothing and attempts nothing toward remaining in this Kingdom, but the Spirit alone does both of these things in us, recreating us without us and preserving us without our help in our recreated state.<sup>42</sup>

Like Augustine before him, who battled with the Pelagians, Luther argued for God's complete control over salvation, and man's complete inability to participate. Justification is not effected by man's action, but by faith, and this not by faith itself but because of the object of faith, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>40</sup> Althaus, 142, cites Luther: "If anyone would feel the greatness of sin he would not be able to go on living another moment; so great is the power of sin."

<sup>41</sup> LW 26, 9.

<sup>42</sup> LW 33, 242-243.

There is only one cause for justification, namely, the merit of Christ, or the gracious mercy which hearts that are ignited by the Holy Spirit grasp by faith. If someone wants to, he may list the acknowledgment of sin as a second cause. . . . It is the sort of cause that the whole thing still depends on the mercy of God or on the promise, that God has promised He will have mercy on those who acknowledge their sins and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5.6). . . . When [the conscious sinner] escape punishment and wrath, it is all by the mercy of God. . . . There is nothing that could in any way be cited as merit [of man]. . . .<sup>43</sup>

Justification is effected by the merit of Christ, not man's own. Man's access to Christ's mercy is through faith, and this is a work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Sin and Justification**

Christ's merit is the one cause for justification, although, if someone needed a second, he could list the acknowledgment of sin. As Luther saw the point of Romans to be highlighting the gravity of sin, he sought to emphasize this in his own work, as well. For, as long as the devastation and ugliness of sin is masked or minimized, the magnitude of the desperate need which it creates goes unrecognized. It is through some appreciation of sin that the human heart sees its great need and is driven to Christ.

Those who deny this sin make men rest apathetically and carelessly in the gift they have received. In this way they cheapen Christ's grace and minimize God's mercy, from which necessarily follow coldness in love, slackness in praise, and lukewarmness in gratitude. They know absolutely nothing of Christ. Therefore beware of these most pestilent people, and learn that the works of God are great, wonderful, and glorious. Then you shall know that you cannot make this sin great enough, for absolutely no man can ever discover or comprehend his wickedness, since it is infinite and eternal. On the other hand, you will then discover that the work of God accomplished for you in Christ is boundless, in that he has foreordained such powerful grace for you in Christ. Even though you merit such great evil, it will not permit all this evil to destroy you. . . . The

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<sup>43</sup> LW 12, 332.

glory of grace must be magnified even though it cannot be sufficiently praised, so that Paul exclaims, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift” [2 Cor. 9:15].<sup>44</sup>

This is what makes sin to Luther so foundational for his teaching on justification. Sin must be understood first. If it is not, the human heart risks not fully appreciating the salvation it receives because it is not as convinced as it should be that this gift is completely unattainable on its own merit.

Salvation is an experience that can only be marked by the most extreme gratitude to Christ because of what it is – eternal deliverance. Yet to appreciate it must mean to appreciate that need which we have for it. And this appreciation comes from a sincere desire to see ourselves the way God sees us – full of sin and need. Through this great need, we are able to see dimly the extent of His love and accept our justification through the object of our faith – Jesus Christ.

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<sup>44</sup> LW 32, 240.

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