

For as long as I can remember, there has been a common assertion in Christian teaching and preaching: All sins are equal, all sins are the same. Raise your hand if you have heard that statement. There is a sense in which that is absolutely true. Any and every sin is damnable in the sight of God. Sin, as we heard on the First Sunday in Lent, is turning away from the God who gives life by His Word. Adam and Eve lived, not just physically, but in fellowship with God, by hearing and believing His Word. God's Word to them gave them every tree of the garden to eat, save the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In turning away from that word, heeding rather the word of the devil, they sinned, and fell into death.

Sin is turning away from God and His Word. Two Sundays ago we especially focused on how that is our fundamental condition from conception, from birth, the posture inherited from our first parents. We enter this world like father Adam the sinner, fixated on himself, bent in on his own desires and wants, in rebellion against God, exalting the self over the neighbor.

It is from that, boiling up like a geyser, working its way out through our thoughts, words, and actions, that we commit actual sins, the things we do and fail to do that are turned away from God and His Word. Any one of these is damnable. None escapes the perfect judgment of the holy God. In that sense all sins are equal.

What is too often missed, and what today's sermon is going to focus on, is the equal truth that in other respects not all sins are the same. To assert the sameness of all sins in every respect, is not only untrue, it is harmful.

Sins differ in their effects, their damage on ourselves and others, and thus their severity before God. Growing up, you learned as you grew in your understanding of God's Word; it's a sin to think bad things about your siblings. That's not good, not God-pleasing. But life is much easier, goes better for you if you don't act on it and punch or otherwise pick on your brother or sister. Our legal system of justice, following the example of the laws given in the Bible, makes distinctions between deliberate, planned and premeditated crimes, and crimes of passion, caught up in the moment, or inhibition, or of simple negligence.

Scripture teaches that some sins are more serious in the sight of God than others. Even while the Bible teaches that all creation groans, the cries of God's people are always heard by Him, it also speaks of particular sins that cry out to heaven for justice. God is especially attentive to the blood of the innocent that is unjustly shed, seen already with the murder of Abel by his brother. The gross contortion of human sexuality also cries out, as seen in Genesis 18. And again and again, the Lord attends to the wicked sins against widows and orphans, the poor and the oppressed.

Our Lord Himself teaches this. He says to Pilate, "**He who delivered Me over to you has the greater sin.**" He says that on the day of judgment Sodom and Gomorrah will have an easier time of it than those cities which reject the preaching of the Son of God incarnate. We hear today, Jesus says of the person who has been delivered from the devil, but falls under his dominion again, is in a worse state than before.

This is important for our ability to observe and witness sin and see and speak rightly against its horror and damage and not simply equivocate because we all sin and do bad things. The taking of the lives of unborn

children is not just sad, or bad. God's Word makes clear to us, it cries out for His vengeance. Jesus loves the little children. He is greatly displeased to those who would keep them away from Him. What do you think His judgment is of those who end their lives before they are even born? That we permit this to go on among us, that even we in our attitudes and speech despise the little ones, ought drive us to fervent prayer for God's forbearance and forgiveness.

But what I especially want to focus on is a biblical teaching that is far more neglected than these simple obvious proofs that not all sins are equal in every respect. Because even more important for the salvation of each and every Christian, is the awareness of and response to sin as it crops up within each of us. This is what our Lord is teaching on in the illustration He uses in today's Gospel of the demon cast out, wandering restlessly, and then returning to the man it was cast out of, finding the house swept and clean, but not filled, brings seven more demons.

Probably most of you have heard of the distinction between mortal and venial sin. If I say that, what word comes to mind? "Catholic." And as Lutherans are wont to do, we hear that word and our hackles are up, or, more common, we run away. Insofar as how Rome teaches this distinction, that some sins by their nature are mortal, that is, they cause one to lose salvation, and some sins by their nature don't, they only merit worldly consequences, that's to be rejected. As we have already heard, every sin accuses and condemns us when we stand alone before the judgment seat of God.

However, the Bible teaches distinctions between sins. They have different effects in relation to this body and life; some are more harmful to us and others. They differ even in their severity before God, some offend against His created order and justice more than others. But they also affect our spiritual life with God differently. Some are venial, or lesser. Some are mortal, and severe.

A few biblical examples of this. In Psalm 19, David distinguishes between "errors" that one does without full consideration and "presumptuous sins" done arrogantly out of pride. God, in instituting the sacrifices of Israel makes a distinction between sacrifices for unintentional sins, and then the one who sins, "with a high hand," presumptuously and pridefully, is "cut off from among his people." We heard on Ash Wednesday in the epistle from 1 John, the distinction between having sin, we are always to confess that we have sin, and committing sin.

So what makes the difference? It is not the particular act. It may be as severe in this life as murder. It may be as minor in the judgment of men as a persistent grudge against someone or a gossipy tongue. What makes one mortal or venial is not their severity before men, but the result, the response of the person who has done them.

As long as the Christian lives in this life, there is a war in his members. There is who I now am in Christ, and there remains the sinful old Adam who is always popping up with wicked thoughts and desires. That is the daily baptismal battle, in which we confess ourselves on our own as sinners, in need of forgiveness, and thus we pray every day, "forgive us our trespasses," "I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong."

The Christian also recognizes those particular sins we commit, what pops out of your mouth in frustration or pain, the anger that bursts forth because your plans are ruined, the gaze of the eye that lingers where it oughtn't. And day after day, moment after moment, often soon after we sin in this way, you are filled with

regret; your conscience is pricked. Because you are a Christian. You recognize the evil thought or word or deed and it is abhorrent to the Christian mind and soul.

That horror, that conviction, drives the Christian to repentance, which is not just sorrow over the wrong, but also faith in Christ, the One who died for our sins, who marched into hell itself to disarm Satan and free you from his clutches, who welcomes all who are terrified by their sins to flee to Him as the friend of sinners, the One who forgives and sets free, hiding us from all judgment and wrath in the shadow of His wings. The Christian cries out for help, for deliverance from this wickedness that lingers on within us.

The Christian does not relax, but tightens the reins against the sin which has befallen him, not to hold onto it, but to resist. To take pains, and sometimes that can be literal, pain and inconvenience in life, for the sake of avoiding that sin. To take up the Word of God and prayer as the means of resisting the devil and his temptations when they come again. All this is the regular experience and life of the Christian. This is how the daily sins of weakness are venial. They are not held against the Christian, because he lives under Christ's grace and forgiveness.

Danger comes, however, when the sin we recognize in us no longer drives us to Christ for forgiveness and the desire to do better, to fight and resist, but rather, to plan, persist, and even delight in sin. This takes Christ's plenteous redemption for sin as an excuse to sin. This is what St. Paul speaks of in Romans 6, where sin reigns and makes you obey its desires (v. 12), where rather than recognize and fight, at times fall, and by contrition and faith get up again, instead, the lust, the desire arises, and it rules, and so you plan to sin, how you will do it, how you will try to cover your sin, willingly, persistently, not tormented by a guilty conscience at all, not seeking Christ's aid, but refusing to resist and repent. That is when faith and the Holy Spirit depart. That is when the sin, whatever it is, however great or small in the judgment of the world, is mortal, it kills faith.

This is the teaching of the Bible. And it is given to us not only so that we might know it is true, but put this truth to profitable and salutary, literally saving use for our souls. This teaching is useful to the Christian in five ways and they build on one another.

First, recognize the real danger. The Bible gives this warning that the danger lingers within us. The homeowner in Jesus' illustration today's Gospel thought it was so great and wonderful to have the demon cast out, his house free. But he did not take the care to fortify against the intruder again, did not think that he who stands can fall. Sin, any sin, is dangerous. Avoid it. St. Peter writes, Resist the devil. St. Paul says, Flee such things as you recognize are ungodly. Because to stay near them, to allow them to remain, soon becomes sin against conscience, the poison and even death of the soul.

Second, examine your life for this danger. Are you toying with, planning to sin? Do you make it a practice, your habit? Do you see something in your life, your conduct, your speech, and you know that you would not do or say it in front of your mother, your pastor, or Jesus, but you do it anyways? You shouldn't be doing it! And to continue in it will kill you eternally! God's judgment of your sin is blameless and it will stand. This also is a powerful lesson in rejecting all confidence in ourselves, in our own goodness and righteousness.

Third, don't just say, "You're right, that's bad. I shouldn't do it." Don't just weep and feel bad. Confess it before God. Acknowledge your transgressions unto the Lord. Pray as your own the words of the Offertory today. And turn from your sin. This is what "repent" means. Not "feel bad," "be sorry." It means "change

mind,” “turn direction.” David says in Psalm 51, “I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You,” that is, turn away from their sins, and towards God.

Fourth, is to remember God’s instruction about fighting against sin. This is the daily battle. Do not get comfortable with your sin. Temptation and desire will always be there in one form or another. David says “my sin is always before me.” God warns Cain, “sin is crouching at your door,” waiting to master you. Be safe in Christ, not secure in your sin. Stay on guard. *The old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.*

Fifth, finally, and most important for the Christian soul that it not despair, is to seek the forgiveness of all our sins in Christ. Again, as we heard on Ash Wednesday, His “blood cleanses us from all sin.” Not just the sins that crop up and we soon repent of, not just the sins of our past that continue to trouble us. But also the sin that has made a home in your life that you now, by God’s grace, recognize has got to go! Also the sin that you have been battling, and some days the battle fares well, and others you fall. Christ sweeps the house of your soul, puts it in order, and gives His Word, His Spirit, His Body and His Blood to occupy the space in which sin once reigned, to forgive, cleanse, and fortify.

This is no child’s play. The Christian life is no game. And just as seriously as you take the health of your body, take even more the health of your soul. I am no lover of going to the doctor. But from time to time I recognize the malady is greater than I can manage with rest and over the counter medicine. When it is severe, I am driven to the counsel of my physician, who can diagnose and provide the remedy for my good. Even more so for the Christian, far too many a believer thinks he can go his whole life self-medicating, rather than be driven to the preacher, the physician of the soul, whom God has given him.

Let the house of your soul and body be filled with the Word of God, and so God be praised you are here today! His Word has entered your ears and by the working of the Spirit through that Word, His Law has convicted you, His Gospel has swept you clean, given you a renewed heart, godly desires, His Law instructs and guides you in the way you want to go. He comforts and encourages in His Holy Sacrament. God be praised if that is sufficient to you this day, and you go home rejoicing in the sweet goodness of the Lord, confident in His pardon and desiring to please Him in your life.

But where this preaching of God’s Word has especially pricked your conscience, where you recognize your sin and are fearful, doubt that Christ’s forgiveness is for you. If you need counsel for how to concretely resist, or simply long to hear from Christ that yes, even that sin has been borne by Him, you know where to find the preacher given you by God to listen to whatever grieves you, to speak not according to His own wisdom but God’s Word, to encourage and offer godly counsel, and to pray with and for you.

O Christ, our Lord, cover what has been done, and govern what will be done!