

“...the Sin...”
John 1:29
Lent Midweek IV
March 13, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The text for our entire Lenten midweek meditation: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Tonight, our focus is on those two words, “the sin.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Truly, “the sin of the world” – but the whole phrase is so involved that we need to break it apart into two meditations. This week, let’s meditate on the first part: “the Sin.”

Perhaps at least once a year it is important for us to meditate upon the definition of Sin rightly, for in daily life we make it a habit to explain away sin so easily, to say that “everyone does it,” “no one’s perfect” and “it’s no big deal.”... thus, we convince ourselves, sin really isn’t all that dangerous. But a closer examination of those very excuses shows just how dangerous Sin is!

We *could* meditate upon this by pulling out theological terms like “concupiscence”, or by using teaching illustrations like “the Separation Syndrome.” But, sometimes, we do well to address the definition of Sin by refuting man’s own rationalism regarding the topic.

First, “nobody’s perfect.” Well, that most certainly is a true statement. But, what is used as an excuse, a trivializing of imperfection, a justification of falling short – in truth, it’s such a condemning statement. Truly, nobody’s perfect. Don’t the Scriptures themselves say that “No one is righteous; no not one. No one understands; no one seeks for God.” Isn’t that how the psalmist describes original sin, that sin and image of Adam that was yours and mine from the time our mother conceived us? In fact, when St Paul quotes that psalm “No one is righteous, no, not one”... when he quotes that in Romans 3 to begin his Scriptural defense that all men are under sin, he follows that quote with ten other Scriptural references to man’s innate nature that leads to his behavior. Paul assembles them all this way:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

And, after it all, Paul concludes, “Now, we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.”

But, the whole world denies its accountability. It is too brash to hold its tongue, but instead insists on its righteousness, even when defining itself according to the most abhorrent and twisted logic: “God made me this way.” There’s the second excuse! Yes, when “nobody’s perfect” no longer suits our purposes, we blame God: “God made me this way.” There’s perhaps no better way to wrap myself proudly in my sin than to claim God designed me to be a sinner.

And, if God designed me this way, and designed you that way, then when we see the daily-life activity that everybody does, it must be okay, because we all bear the fingerprint of God. So, suddenly, the excuse “Everybody does it,” hints at a ‘new’ created order! Yes, if God created us this way, then whatever the majority does must be good and right, and the one or two who do not engage in the conduct of the majority must be the outcasts. There must be something wrong with them, because I know I’m justified in what I’m doing it precisely because “everyone does it!” You’re surely not going to claim God made a mistake in making us such

sinner, are you? Or, at least, if God did not make us this way but gave us a reason and logic by which the vast majority come to a new consensus and common, rational conclusion what is good and right, that *must* have God's blessing, does it not? Yes, "everybody does it," and thus Sin is now a 'new creation' good order.

But someone forgot to tell that to the Lord's apostle, whose words powerfully condemn the Sin of the whole world: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And it's not just the most famous apostle who says this, but also the wisest of kings, as Solomon laments in Ecclesiastes, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." And how does God himself analyze the matter, but "God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth." And, finally, even the Christian does not escape (and certainly dare not deny) this horrible truth, but acknowledges, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

And if everybody is under sin, so that no one can claim himself above it, beyond it, untouched by it... and if the 'mob mentality' and 'majority rule' that "everyone does it" in no way can placate the conscience, then man has only one way left to ease his conscience and escape the sentence of condemnation

already weighing heavily upon his mind and shoulders... and that only way out is to convince himself otherwise: “It’s no big deal!”

Isn’t that perhaps the most commonly used excuse as we seek to justify our conscience. We *know* the first two excuses are just foolish –

- “God made me this way!” “If He did, you wouldn’t be opposed to hearing His Word on the matter.”
- “Everybody does it!” We hear that one so often, we even have our standard response: “If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you as well?”

Yes, we know the foolishness of the first two attempted justifications for sin, but it’s the third we wrestle with in our own lives: “It’s no big deal.”

Ironically, we only say that when it’s our sin against someone else, *never* when we’re on the receiving end. No, when we have someone else’s sin hanging about our neck, forgiveness is a foolish giveaway! – there’s payback, revenge to be had! “Can’t let them get away with this!” But, when we’re the transgressor, “it’s no big deal; they know I’m well-intended.” And, especially, if it’s not a sin against a family member or friend or another human! A sin against God? – “no big deal, He knows my heart. He’s a big boy; He can take it... He should understand,” we justify ourselves. And notice where we’ve gone: we’ve rationalized that, *if* God is

offended by our sin, it's *His* fault for not having enough thick skin, for having too rigid a holiness about himself, too unrealistic a standard. "He should know us better... know our heart," we say in our self-defense. And, "if he knows us better, he knows that it's not a big deal." In reality, just the opposite is true... because He knows us so well, He knows our heart and the depth of our sin... and how big a deal it is.

Norman Nagel, perhaps the greatest theologian of our St Louis Seminary in the last 50 years, used to say, "The one who receives absolution at the beginning of the service then doesn't understand why he would need the Supper at the end of the service has a rather shallow understanding of the fullness of the weight of Sin."

Or, another way to say it: Luther, in the Smalcald Articles teaches us to discern sin this way: "We are completely lost; there is nothing good in us from head to foot; we must become absolutely new and different people." And you misunderstand the severity of the situation if you hear that word "must" as something *achievable*; just because it's required doesn't mean the one stricken with sin can achieve it!

Yes, sin *is* a big deal. In fact, "The wages of sin is death," God's Word plainly declares. "The wages of sin is death." You only die for one reason: Sin. Is not the custom used by many on Ash

Wednesday – the applying of ashes to the forehead – isn’t that mean to point out the weight of Sin is death: “Dust you are and unto dust you shall return,” the Lord said in response to the Fall. Yes, God’s judgment came... and henceforth you die, only for one reason: Sin. Indeed, Christ only died for one reason: He took on **your** sin. Sin is death; not merely the physiological cessation of breath. Sin is the great death: condemnation. You can justify it all you want, with any excuse you want to pull out of our list of rationalizations, but Sin is death. “Your sin has separated you from your God,” the prophet says. Think about the eternal weight of that statement! You can’t get any more serious than that! You can describe all that sin *does* to you, as Isaiah says, “We all fade like a life, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away,” but that pales in comparison to the threat of being separated from God, at odds with God, enemies of God, children of wrath because “Your sin has separated you from your God.”

And thus, salvation is more than simply having sin paid for. Salvation means reconciling us back into a right relationship with God. It means more than simply having those we’ve harmed shake it off and feel our relationship is restored; it means having the God who judges and condemns being satisfied with the offering made to atone for sin.

Thus, “behold the Lamb of God who takes upon himself SIN.” Sometimes, we need to hear it without that overarching phrase “of the world.” Christ came into the world and took upon himself SIN. All of its excuses, all of its forms, all of it as it identified all of us. He didn’t just take on our mistakes and errors and shortcomings; nor did He only take on the ‘serious misdeeds’ that might mar our otherwise “good reputation.” No, He took on all that God justly hated about us. And the One who was identified by His divine righteousness, was willing to be identified by our sin: “He who **knew** no sin **became** sin for us,” the epistle says. Again, Paul writes to the Romans, “while we were yet **sinner**s” (not “good people or neutral people doing sin,” but “while we were yet those identified before God by our SIN”) Christ died for us.” Again, St Paul says that God “justifies the **ungodly**,” and that “while we were **enemies** we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10).

When we recognize that we were *identified* and *condemned* by our sin – children of wrath – we better recognize why the phrase “forgiveness of sins” is synonymous with redemption, salvation. The forgiveness of sins is not merely about correcting little errors here and there. The forgiveness of sins is about Christ’s reconciling work with God – us sinners no longer being separated from God by our sin – it’s that reconciliation

achieved on the cross now being applied to us and preserved for us all throughout life, that all our life may be one with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... our Sin, placed upon the head of the Lamb of God... that we may walk away from the altar of the cross atoned for... that we may walk away from the altar of the sanctuary having received in realtime the gifts of not just forgiven check-marked boxes of sin as on a clipboard... but the gifts of that entire-person redemption, and with that redemption, a restoration of our relationship with God our Creator.

How central is this to our relationship with God, that every Divine Service, God's divine action toward us is "the forgiveness of sins." Not judgment, not even 'giving us a shot to please Him,' but "the forgiveness of sins"... mercy... grace. How is faith strengthened any *more* (it *can* be strengthened through doctrine, teaching, knowledge, wisdom)... but how can it be strengthened any *more* than to have a clear conscience before God because He has paid for and removed from each of us "the iniquity of my sin." Indeed, every Sunday, He gathers us for the primary purpose of cleansing us from our sin. Baptism says, "You are now safe in a life in which God will constantly remove your sin." Absolution says, "You now wrestle in daily life with confidence that you can have a clean conscience before the One who speaks away your sin." The Lord's Supper says, "You may come and feast with a clear

conscience before and with the God of heaven, anticipating *future* glory, because the body and blood of Jesus Christ forgives you all sin and present shame.”

You see, it’s not just a historic declaration, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away SIN”... it’s also a present-tense gift and benefit and clear conscience and right relationship with God. It’s the present tense that lives *without* trite, faithless excuses (“nobody’s perfect, everybody does it, it’s no big deal”), but lives *with* faith’s clear conscience that Jesus Christ the righteous – God’s chosen Lamb to occupy the divine altar as the propitiation for our sins – that Christ has *accomplished* that purpose, taking your sin upon himself and away from you, that you now live reconciled unto God.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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