

Sins Covered: For Even the Worst

Lent 3 PM Prayer

#1838

2 Chronicles 33:1-13 & Matthew 26:57-75 (Passion III)

18 March 2020

To prepare for the homily, read the Scripture readings above.

The great Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard once wrote that the devil has two trick mirrors. He uses “the minimizing mirror” when he tries to lure us into sin; to make us think that the sin is “not that big, not that bad.” Then, after he’s snared us into the sin, he whips out his “maximizing mirror.” With that mirror he makes the sin look magnified in order to make us despair of God ever being able or willing to forgive sinners as terrible and awful as we are.

No doubt the devil tried that on Manasseh. Manasseh’s father was the good king, Hezekiah. But as so many sadly discover: godly parents are no guarantee of godly children. As good and wise, as devout and kind as Hezekiah was, Manasseh was as stubborn and wicked – yes, downright evil. No doubt, it started little by little – toying around with idolatry, moving into the occult and practicing Satanic arts, finally fighting against the true faith and seeking to destroy everything his father had done to restore that faith in Judah. The writer of 2 Kings even says that Manasseh was so depraved that he ended up burning his own son as an offering to some demon parading as a “god.” Manasseh was responsible for filling Jerusalem with all kinds of blood shed. Get the picture of this guy? He was bad news. Surely, if ever there were a person that God would simply have given up on, washed his hands of, let go straight to hell, it was Manasseh.

But the Lord’s ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. As the Psalmist sang: “*The LORD is good to all, and His mercy is over all that He has made*” (Ps. 145:9). All? Yes, all. In mercy and unspeakable love, the Lord let Manasseh experience some unspeakably hard times. His enemy at the gates, he was captured and carried away with hooks and shackles into a foreign land, to Babylon.

As his own life had come crashing down all around him, a remarkable thing happened to the evil king. He remembered everything his father had taught him about Yahweh—how He is gracious and merciful, and how He delights in forgiveness and steadfast love. Did he dare to hope?

No doubt, Satan pulled out that maximizing mirror and pointed it directly at old Manasseh. “No way! There’s no way that someone as evil as you can have hope! You’ve murdered people left and right. You’ve been down on our face worshipping other gods. You’ve consulted necromancers and mediums and done every abomination that the Lord says he hates. You’ve even killed your very own child! You’re toast. You’re going to roast with me forever. Hang it up!”

But through a miracle of God’s grace, Manasseh did not believe Satan’s accusations. Oh, he knew he was sinful, bad to the bone, evil to the core. He knew he deserved absolutely nothing. But with hope against hope, he prayed to the Lord. His prayer is actually a book of the Apocrypha. Listen in to part of it:

“O Lord Almighty, God of our ancestors, of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and of their righteous offspring, . . . your glorious splendor cannot be borne, and the wrath of your threat to sinners is unendurable; yet immeasurable and unsearchable is your promised mercy, for you are the Lord Most High, of great compassion, long-suffering, and very merciful, and you relent at human suffering. O Lord, according to your great goodness you have promised repentance and forgiveness to those who have sinned against you, and in the multitude of your mercies you have appointed repentance for sinners, so that they may be saved. . . . You have appointed repentance for me, who am a sinner. For the sins I have committed are more in number than the sand of the sea; my transgressions are multiplied, O Lord, they are multiplied! I am not worthy to look up and see the height of heaven because of the multitude of my iniquities. I am weighted down with many an iron fetter, so that I am rejected because of my sins, and I have no relief; for I have provoked your wrath and have done what is evil in your sight, setting up abominations and multiplying

offenses. And now I bend the knee of my heart, imploring you for your kindness. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I acknowledge my transgressions. I earnestly implore you, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me! Do not destroy me with my transgressions! Do not be angry with me forever or store up evil for me; do not condemn me to the depths of the earth. For you, O Lord, are the God of those who repent, and in me you will manifest your goodness; for, unworthy as I am, you will save me according to your great mercy, and I will praise you continually all the days of my life. For all the host of heaven sings your praise, and yours is the glory forever. Amen.” (Prayer of Manasseh 1, 5-15)

Now isn't that an amazing prayer? We heard in our reading today that Manasseh in his distress humbled himself greatly before the Lord and prayed. We also heard that God was moved, heard his prayer, and restored him. *“Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.”*

He experienced first hand that the greatest filth of human wickedness is but a spark that is soon extinguished in the vast ocean of divine mercy and love. Then He knew that the Lord was God. Satan's mirrors are tricky, but when we lift our eyes from our sin to God's vast ocean of mercy, we soon see the truth.

I'm sure Peter had his experience with the mirrors too. No big deal, right? Just say: *“I don't know him.”* And then when the rooster crowed, Peter remembered. He remembered exactly what our Lord had said would happen. Suddenly Satan was holding up the magnifying mirror: *“You think he could possibly forgive a man who swore that he'd stand by Him even if he had to die with Him, and who then caved at the question of a little servant girl? Your sin is too big, Peter. Despair and die.”* Peter's bitter tears bear witness how the sight in the mirror terrified and saddened him—just like Manasseh. But also like Manasseh, Peter would find in the Man whom he denied a forgiveness deeper than all his sin, a love wider than all his denials.

You can find that too. *“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain*

mercy." Dear friends, the mercy that awaits you in your Lord is simply and unbelievably huge – far bigger than your sin, far mightier than your betrayals and denials of Him – immeasurably and unspeakably firm and steady and unshakable.

So when Satan would use his “maximizing mirror” on you, when he would suggest to you that YOUR sin is just way too big, too bad, too awful, too ugly, too hopeless, remember Manasseh, remember Peter. Most of all, though, remember Him who came into the world to save precisely such honest-to-God, real down-and-dirty sinners: Jesus Christ, whose blood has indeed blotted out the sin of the whole world. No sin is the match for His grace. No sinner is so far gone that His love cannot reclaim and restore. Confess to Him, and you will see! Amen.