



Winter

Sabbath Service
Saturday, January 6, 2007



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CALL TO WORSHIP

Come to the banquet God provides;
begin the new year aware of God's faithfulness.
Come to the springs of living water;
that your hunger and thirst may be satisfied.

**God has named our names
and entered into covenant with us.
God has called us as ministers and servants,
even though we are the least of all God's saints.**

INVITATION

Great God, our strength and our salvation, answer us when we call and guide our feet in your way. Grant wisdom in the midst of our toil and trouble, and grace when we are overwhelmed by life's problems. Confront us here with mystery far beyond our understanding, and expand our vision to include the new possibilities you set before us. Amen.

OPENING HYMN #231

"Come Thou, Almighty King"

*Author unknown
Felice de Giardini*

Come, Thou almighty King, Help us Thy Name to sing,
Help us to praise!
Father all glorious, over all victorious,
Come and reign over us, Ancient of Days!

Come, Thou incarnate Word, Gird on Thy mighty sword,
Our prayer attend!
Come, and Thy people bless, and give Thy Word success,
Spirit of holiness, Our prayer attend!

Come, Holy Advocate, A pure heart in us create
In this glad hour.
Thou who almighty art, Open our minds to see,
What Christ would have us be, Spirit of power!

OPENING PRAYER

Teach us, great Father God, to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labor and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

MOMENTS OF SILENCE

PERSONAL PRAYER

HYMN #32

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

Henry van Dyke, 1907

Ludwig van Beethoven, 1824

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee, op'ning to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.

All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
earth and heav'n reflect Thy rays;
Stars and angels sing around Thee, center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flow'ry meadow,
flashing sea.
Chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to rejoice in Thee.

Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest,
Wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our brother,
all who live in love are Thine;
Teach us how to love each other; lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals, join the happy chorus which the morning stars began;
Father-love is reigning o'er us; brother-love binds man to man.
Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife.
Joyful music leads us onward in the triumph song of life.

PRESENTATIONS BEFORE GOD

ANNOUNCEMENTS

COLLECT

Open our ears and our eyes, that we may discover much to ponder day by day. Adopt us into your own family, that we may know we belong to you and one another. Speak through ancient words to evoke contemporary praise. Pour out on us your peace and joy that we may learn what you have for us today. Amen.

THE LESSON

“Greater” or “Lesser” Sins?

New International Version (NIV) of the Bible used unless otherwise noted.

Are some sins “greater” or “lesser” than other sins? Let’s begin by looking at what Christ said about sin when some of his followers told him of a catastrophe that had occurred in Galilee.

Luke 13:1-3 — Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. (2) Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? (3) I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Then Jesus goes on to speak of another catastrophe that all had heard of as well.

Luke 13:4-5 — Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? (5) I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Some of those who heard Christ seemed to have regarded what happened to these people as a catastrophe sent by God because of their exceptional wickedness.

Apparently at least some of Christ’s own disciples thought in a similar vein, as we see in John 9.

John 9:1-3 — As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. (2) His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (3) “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

We see then Christ did not appear to subscribe to this human belief that the greater the wickedness — or, let us say, the bigger the sin — the greater the punishment from God. In fact, He did not even condemn the action of Pilate in our first example above, but simply called upon all to repent.

Yet these words seem to be in conflict with other scriptures. For instance look at the the words He said to Pontius Pilate in John 19:

John 19:11 — Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one [*speaking of Judas Iscariot and possibly even Caiaphas*] who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

Again, look at what he says regarding the commandments in Matthew 5:

Matthew 5:19 — Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Most of us would have no problem comprehending biblical accounts of the enormity of sin, such as David description of his sins in Psalm 25:

Psalms 25:11 — For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.

However, are there *degrees* of sinfulness or *lesser* and *greater* commandments? If indeed there is a “greater sin”, there presumably is also a “lesser sin”. So how are we to understand Christ’s words above?

THE PERVASIVENESS OF SIN

Let’s first briefly recall a little of what we are told in the Bible about sin. In Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the Temple, he included the following comment, one which is re-iterated many times in the Scriptures:

1 Kings 8:46 — “When they sin against you — for there is no one who does not sin — ...

So sin, then, is an unavoidable part of our human experience. It is all-pervasive. Indeed, the apostle Paul tells us that **all** of mankind is without excuse when it comes to sin. Let’s notice why:

Romans 1:20-21 — For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (21) For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

He is saying that man should instinctively know from creation of the reality of God and that it is inexcusable — in other words, a sin — for anyone to ignore this reality.

He further explains how the conscience of man also instinctively knows the laws of God, and how there is therefore an accountability:

Romans 2:14-15 — (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, (15) since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

However, Paul goes on to explain how mankind as a whole has chosen to ignore the reality of God as well as the testimony of their consciences and “professing to be wise, they became fools” (**Romans 1:22**) — and **Proverbs 24:9** tells us that folly is a **sin**, perhaps we might even be tempted to say a “little” sin. Yet such a “little” sin as foolish thinking can, if not recognized and repented of, also become a besetting sin to which one can become hardened. This is the deceitful nature of sin (**Hebrews 3:13**).

Paul arrives at this conclusion, which also begins to provide us with an answer to our question:

Romans 3:9 — What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.

Whether Jew or Gentile (and by extension all of mankind is being referred to), in God’s eyes we are all equally guilty of sin, whether great — like the sins of Jeroboam whom God denounced as having committed more evil than any king of Israel before him (**1 Kings 14:9**) — or “small” — perhaps the sin of folly mentioned before. So all mankind is under condemnation. It is important that we keep in mind this perspective that God has in regard to sin.

Unfortunately, sin is also insidiously pervasive — that is, it is far more extensive and intensive than we sometimes appreciate. Let’s consider what the following verses tell us about sin:

1 John 3:4 — Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.

1 John 5:17 — All wrongdoing is sin

Romans 14:23 — ... everything that does not come from faith is sin.

James 2:9 — But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

Christ further tells us that a *failure to believe* is sin:

John 15:22 — If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin.

John 16:8-9 — When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: (9) in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me;

“LITTLE” SINS OF OMISSION

James adds another definition of sin to our already growing list, one we might perhaps also be tempted to describe as a “lesser” sin:

James 4:17 (NRSV) — Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

As we know, we can be guilty of sin by omission. The prophet Samuel understood this, as evidenced by his words to King Saul, even after the latter had disobeyed God:

1 Samuel 12:23 — As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.

Indifference, then, is a sin if it prevents you from doing good. It is in this light that the apostle Paul gives the example in **1 Corinthians 8:9-13** of one weak in the faith brought to stumble by the callous behavior of a fellow brother.

The Old Testament gave instructions about these “little” sins of omission or of “unawareness”:

Leviticus 5:2-4 — “ ‘Or if a person touches anything ceremonially unclean — whether the carcasses of unclean wild animals or of unclean livestock or of unclean creatures that move along the ground — even though he is unaware of it, he has become unclean and is guilty. (3) “ ‘Or if he touches human uncleanness — anything that would make him unclean — even though he is unaware of it, when he learns of it he will be guilty. (4) “ ‘Or if a person thoughtlessly takes an oath to do anything, whether good or evil — in any matter one might carelessly swear about — even though he is unaware of it, in any case when he learns of it he will be guilty.

And sacrifices — which, of course, foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ for all sins — were specified for these sins, as they were for all transgressions:

Leviticus 5:5-6 — “ ‘When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned (6) and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the LORD a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

For such “little” sins of omission or negligence, as the proceeding verses verify, a blood sacrifice was still necessary, as the remainder of the chapter goes on to show, for we are

told in **Romans 6:23** that “the wages of sin” — all sin, all unrighteousness, “great” or “small” — is death, and requires Christ’s atoning blood. Sin defiles, even a sin of omission, which if unattended to can sear the conscience as readily as any other sin. It is interesting to note in this light the parable Christ gave in **Luke 12:48** where we see that the servant who does wrong is *still* beaten with a few blows although he hasn’t even known his master’s will for him.

A *willful* sin, which we may be tempted to label as a “greater” sin, however, was indeed a more serious matter:

Numbers 15:30-31 — “But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people. (31) Because he has despised the Lord’s word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him’.”

And the punishment could be much more severe, as verses **32-36** illustrate.

Presumptuous sins of defiance can, to be sure, take us further away from God. David understood this distinction between willful and hidden sin:

Psalms 19:12-13 — Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. (13) Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

GOD AND UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

So God’s perspective is that all unrighteousness, defined as sin in His Word, is deserving of death. True, the apostle Paul tells us that before our conversion, God “overlooked” (**Acts 17:30**) our times of ignorance, but only in terms of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, for the penalty for sin is not automatically waived.

However, whether sins of omission or sins of commission, His law, which is an expression of His mind, character and will, is an essential whole, and to violate any one part of it — “great” or “small” — is to violate the will of God:

James 2:10 — For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

If this is then the case, can there really be a “greater” or a “lesser” commandment? What was Christ attempting to convey to the crowds when He spoke to them in these terms in **Matthew 5:19**?

God is incorruptible and, unlike man, cannot be tempted by evil or sin:

James 1:13-15 — When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; (14) but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is

dragged away and enticed. (15) Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

To us, some sins may indeed be more grievous and besetting, and harder to disentangle ourselves from than others, but God cannot be tempted by evil as we can because, by His definition, all evil, great or small, is sin. He hates *all* evil, not just the seven abominations listed in **Proverbs 6:16-19**, and He demands that all sin, “great” or “small”, be repented of.

Psalms 5:4-5 — You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. (5) The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. [*Verse 5 should give us some food for thought!*]

Let us then notice how God defines “greater” and “lesser” sins. Christ’s words give us the answer:

Matthew 11:20-24 — Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. (21) “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago [“lesser” sin] in sackcloth and ashes. (22) But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. (23) And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. (24) But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you [“greater” sin].”

The cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, in which Christ did mighty works were, by implication, guilty of “greater” sin than the cities of Tyre and Sidon, for these three cities defiantly hardened their hearts and denied the reality of what Christ’s miracles testified to. Their “greater”, or “presumptuous” sin will be harder for them to come to terms with in the judgment than the “lesser” sins of the two ancient cities, who had never been witness to the miracles of the Son of God, and who will find repentance easier when they come face to face with His power.

In this light we can see how Judas’ sin was certainly “greater” than the sin of Pilate. Judas had so seared his conscience that he was in fact unable to come to repentance, and killed himself in a fit of remorse (**Matthew 27:5**). It is these type of sins that are being referred to in passages like **1 Timothy 4:2** and **2 Peter 2:14** where we read of consciences being seared and of individuals unable to cease sinning.

CONCLUSION

On the societal level, we can very readily recognize a sin that is indeed heinous, damaging to human relationships, and in blatant violation of one of God’s commandments. There is also the human tendency among us in God’s Church to

compare ourselves to one another in terms of righteousness and to often acquit or soothe our consciences by classifying our sin as a “lesser” one, as opposed to someone’s “greater” sin. Yet this mode of thinking and of delineating sin is not God’s mind for He is pure, without sin (**I John 3:3-4**), righteous (**v 7**) and He abhors all unrighteousness — **because** it is unrighteousness! It is therefore foolishness for us to attempt to compare ourselves to one another in terms of sinfulness or of righteousness:

2 Corinthians 10:12 — We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

Instead, let us realize that God alone is our standard of perfection, and so, looking only to Him, strive to become as He is, without spot, blemish or even “lesser” sins:

Matthew 5:48 (NRSV) — Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

CLOSING HYMN #40

“He Leadeth Me”

*Joseph H. Gilmore, 1862
William B. Bradbury, 1864*

He leadeth me! O blessed thought! O words with
heav’nly comfort fraught!
Whate’er I do, where’er I be. Still ’tis God’s hand that leadeth me.
He leadeth me. He leadeth me. By His own hand He leadeth me;
His faithful foll’wer I would be, for by His hand He leadeth me.

Sometimes ‘mid scenes of deepest gloom, sometimes where
Eden’s bowers bloom,
By waters still, o’er troubled sea, Still ’tis His hand that leadeth me.
He leadeth me. He leadeth me. By His own hand He leadeth me;
His faithful foll’wer I would be, for by His hand He leadeth me.

Lord, I would clasp Thy hand in mine, nor ever murmur nor repine,
Content, whatever lot I see. Since ’tis my God that leadeth me.
He leadeth me. He leadeth me. By His own hand He leadeth me;
His faithful foll’wer I would be, for by His hand He leadeth me.

And when my task on earth is done, When, by Thy grace,
the vict’ry’s won,
E’en death’s cold wave I will not flee. Since God through Jordan
leadeth me.
He leadeth me. He leadeth me. By His own hand He leadeth me;
His faithful foll’wer I would be, for by His hand He leadeth me.

CLOSING WORDS

Go and tell what the Lord has revealed
and all that your own eyes have seen.
Go out to prepare a way for God's people.
Build up the highways and clear them of stones.
God reigns; let the earth rejoice;
let people of every land be glad!