

Three Kinds of Sinners

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: This morning, I'd like to talk to you about a topic with which you are all, no doubt, extremely familiar. Namely, I'd like to talk with you about *sinners*. We know all about sinners, don't we? They're everywhere. Raise your hand if you don't know at least one person who falls into the general category. Just as I suspected: we all know at least one sinner personally. And I'll bet we could take it a step further: raise your hand if you are acquainted with someone who *isn't* a sinner (and for argument's sake here we'll exclude the divine persons we've gathered here to worship today). Does anyone know someone *merely human* who *isn't* a sinner? Anyone? No, I didn't think so. Everyone you meet has earned the label one way or another. But as long as we're at it, let's bring it all the way home: is there anyone here who wouldn't apply the term *sinner* to themselves? No, of course not. The biggest reason we all know so much about sinners and their evil ways is that we are all sinners ourselves.

And yet ... and yet I'd be willing to bet that even though you'd say that everyone is equally a sinner, you'd also say that at (least in some sense) not all sinners are equally sinful. We tend to rank and categorize sinners – usually by what we perceive to be the relative evil of the sins they commit. Say it another way, we think of some people as being more sinful than others. Isn't that so? I mean, if I told you I was going to lock you up in a cell with a notorious sinner for a week, and I told you that you could pick between Paris Hilton, the infamous, air-headed, repeat traffic offender and Hannibal Lecter, the serial killer and cannibal, I can't imagine that anyone would choose the latter. We would all say that he is a worse sinner than she. (Then again, maybe that's not the best example. Hannibal Lecter would simply kill you, eat you, and be done with it. Whereas if you were confined for any length of time with Miss Hilton, my guess is that it wouldn't be long before you were praying for an end as merciful as that.)

In any case, I sure you get my point: just as the criminal justice system classifies lawbreakers by the sorts of crimes they commit – what with all the various classes of misdemeanors, and felonies, all the way up to capital crimes – in much the same way we tend to categorize sinners by the kind (and perhaps the quantity) of sins they commit. And there's certainly some value in making such distinctions. If nothing else, they are part of the criteria we use to choose friends, business partners, and babysitters. You wouldn't want someone you know to be prone to violence or who is an irresponsible, pathological liar taking care of your kids. So, to get by in this world, it's necessary to make some distinctions between sinners with regard to the kinds of sins they commit.

And yet we know at the same time that theologically speaking it's not the best way to do it. That's because in certain ways – and especially from a divine perspective – all sins are the same. Every sin involves a violation of the Law of God. No matter what it is, while engaging in sin the individual is exalting him or herself above the wisdom and authority of God and effectively saying, "I know better than the Lord what's best for me, and I will do what I want to do." At the same time, the person is placing him or herself in the center of their own little universe. Sin is always about *me*: my wants, my desires, my glory, my reputation, my immediate satisfaction, whatever – always over and above someone else's—and therefore every sin is the exact opposite of the kind of love that reflects God's image in which and for which we were created. And every sin is also the same in this sense: each one is *damnable*. Every violation of God's Law incurs his wrath and condemnation and makes the sinner worthy of an eternity in hell. So, from a divine perspective, sin is sin; and when a person commits one, he or she is a sinner – and there's really no point in attempting to classify sinners by the kind of violations they choose because, as St. James writes, "If anyone keeps the whole Law and yet offends at one little point, he is guilty of breaking them all". He becomes one of the wicked; and the Scriptures assure us that with the wicked the holy God cannot dwell.

All that having been said, maybe it would be better to find another system of classifying sinners – one that is more theologically accurate so that it can then be used in some spiritually helpful way. Does that make sense? Well, it just happens that such a system is suggested by today's Scripture readings. And let me explain it this way: we've already seen that everyone is a sinner, and sin is sin, and that's a big problem

because sinners ultimately end up in hell. So rather than classify sinners by *how they sin*, since in the end it doesn't matter, maybe it would be better to classify them by what they do with their sins – because that makes a huge difference in the end.

With that in mind, I'd like to suggest that when all is said and done, there are basically three kinds of sinners. The first is the one that's easiest to spot. It's represented by the sinful woman in the Gospel lesson for today. We might call this category *the notorious public sinner*. It's a person whose sins are obvious and known pretty much to all. They know that what they're doing is wrong, they know that everyone else knows, and they go on doing it anyway. In this particular case we have a woman with a soiled reputation. She is likely a prostitute, or perhaps, like the woman Jesus once met at a well in Samaria, someone who has looked for love in all the wrong places and in too many faces and who has, in the process, been too free in surrendering the sanctity of her body. Either way, before she met Jesus, she came to some kind of compromise with herself about it. Sinners who fall into this category always do. They tell themselves that somehow it's necessary – that they're only doing it to survive the best way they know how, or that one day when the conditions are right they'll get themselves out of it. Another approach is to downplay the seriousness of it. They tell themselves, "It's really not that bad", or "it's not as bad as something else", or "that it's not bad at all, it's just that narrow-minded people have made stupid rules that they try to impose on the rest of us". Sometimes they get really hard-skinned about it and even take a perverse pride in the fact that they are flaunting the Laws of God. But this is one category, and into it we would place people who are pretty much known for their vice (or vices) of choice. Their way of dealing with the sin problem is to not think of it as a problem. They overcome shame by being shameless.

A second category of sinner is represented by King David in this morning's Old Testament lesson. This category might be called *the self-conscious hypocrite*. These are people who are very aware of their sins and try to hide them. They know that what they're doing is wrong, but they don't want anyone else to know. They want to pretend not to be guilty of the very things of which they are guilty. In David's case, it was the sin of adultery. He found himself lusting after the wife of another man – a man who happened to be faithfully serving David as a soldier in his army. He betrayed this faithful soldier by committing adultery with his wife while he was out risking his life for his country. When the woman became pregnant, David first tried to conceal his sin by granting an extended leave to her husband so that he would be tricked into thinking the child was his own. When that didn't pan out as David had hoped, he ordered his commanding general to have the husband deliberately lost in combat. He was to be put at the front where the battle was the hottest. And then, on a prearranged signal, the fellows guarding his flanks were to step away thus leaving him surrounded by the enemy who could then dispatch him with ease. That's what happened. So, lust, then adultery, then deceit, and finally a conspiracy of murder to hide a whole chain of sins – and all the while David went right on acting as if he were the most godly and righteous man you might hope to meet. So, with this illustration I give you the second category: the self-conscious hypocrite or the secret sinner, if you prefer. And into this category we place those who would be ashamed if their sins were known; but who feel secure as long as their guilt is hidden from view. They deal with their sin problem through concealment – which is pretty effective in the short term for fooling people; but fails miserably in the long term when dealing with God.

The third category of sinner is the one represented by Simon the Pharisee, again in today's Gospel lesson. This is by far the division that is the biggest, the hardest to identify, and unfortunately, the one that's the toughest nut to crack. We could call this kind *the self-deceived righteous* or *the unconscious hypocrites*. The trouble with people in this category is that they don't know that they are sinners. They think of themselves as good people. They falsely suppose that they are faithfully obeying the commandments of God. Their sins are hidden mostly from themselves. Take Simon: no doubt he is pretty pleased with himself that the famous Jesus has agreed to dine at his table. This will make him look good to the entire community, for the radical teacher from the backwoods of Galilee is the talk of the whole country. Score a big one for Simon. At the same time, he and his Pharisee friends are hoping to have some fun in exposing what they believe to be an imposter. They see themselves as far more sophisticated, godly, and upright than this popular hayseed preacher, and they plan to use this supper to prove how uncouth and common Jesus is. They want to bring him down a few notches and make themselves look that much better in the process. So as far as they are concerned, the main course on the menu tonight will be roasted Rabbi. They watch with secret delight as Jesus fails to perform many of the elaborate cleansing rituals that the Pharisees observe because they are convinced it's the only correct way to eat. "What a hopeless clodhopper this Jesus is!" And when enters the

woman with the bad reputation, and she begins to wash his feet and kiss them—it's just too much. "How can anyone imagine that this guy is some sort of prophet with special insights from God? He doesn't even know what kind of filthy whore he's allowing to grovel at his feet." And so what we see in Simon is one who is all too willing to criticize others and point out their faults; but who is blind to his own. He can't see his own self-righteous, judgmental, and condemning heart. It never occurs to him that in withholding the normal courtesies of hospitality expected in his day to Jesus, his guest, that he is doing something wrong. Instead, because he is so focused on his mindless fascination with rules and the outward performance of certain traditions, he can't see how far he is from the biblical laws of love and service for others.

So, there they are, three kinds of sinners: those whose sins are obvious and who know it; but don't seem to care or worry about it; those whose sins are hidden, and they like to keep them that way; and finally those whose sins are hidden even from themselves. But all are equally sinners, and all are equally under the wrath and condemnation of God. But it does sort of beg the question, doesn't it: what kind of sinner are you? You all admitted to being sinners earlier; into which category would you place yourself?

I think, after some honest introspection, you'd have to admit that you belong in all three. Don't you? Aren't there certain areas in your life in which you continue to make compromises with God's Law? You know what he says about it, you know that you're not supposed to, and yet you go on doing it anyway – and most people know that you are. And maybe you've rationalized an excuse. "It's not that big a deal." "I'm especially weak in this area. God understands." "It was only wrong in Bible times; now that we're so much more developed and smart, we know it's okay." "Hey, it's the way things are now. Everyone's doing it." Maybe you've used all the excuses to take the shame out of it ... but is it any less a sin in the eyes of God?

And don't you have your pet sins that you prefer to keep hidden from view? Haven't you become a master at covering up secret things in which you indulge when you think no one is looking? Maybe they are sinful fantasies of lust, or greed, or conquest, or of extracting cruel revenge on those you believe have wronged you. Maybe it's that secret pleasure you have in seeing bad things happen to others whom you have determined to deserve it. And what of jealousy, envy, spite, holding grudges, withholding forgiveness – and all the while pretending that no, no, you're not doing these things.

And what of that third category? This one is a little harder to see because we are by nature blind to it; but ask yourself, do you not think of yourself as less a sinner than some others? I don't mean what you'd say, I mean what you actually feel in your heart when you see someone who is perhaps more obviously a notorious public sinner than yourself. And when you see someone like that to whom you feel morally superior, what do you do about it? Is your first response to criticize and condemn them, or to pray for them, to assist them, to do whatever lies within your power to try to help lead them up out of their sinful ways?

Listen: at this point in the cycle of the church year we are just beginning another long Pentecost season. It's a time when we, the people of God, focus on growing in Christian faith and life. The idea is that when we get to the end of it come this November, we should have made some significant improvements. My main goal this morning has been to show that each one of us have a lot of improvements to make. We are all sinners, sure. We are all three kinds of sinners; but our goal should be just one kind of sinner—a fourth kind: the kind that confesses with David in brokenhearted shame, "I have sinned". The kind that is thrilled to hear Jesus speak through his Word "the Lord has taken away your sin". The kind that then comes to the feet of Jesus with a heart now healed and restored, weeping tears of gratitude, and pouring out the response of love his blood bought forgiveness elicits.

In this life we will always be sinners; we can't escape it. But by allowing Jesus to reveal our sin and show us its magnitude, we can begin to appreciate just how great a debt we have been forgiven – and how great was the debt that Christ our Lord paid for us upon the cross. Then, though we cannot sin less, through faith in him we will learn to love more. May God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!