



Pilgrimage:

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ZERO TOLERANCE FOR SIN

When it comes to thinking about our sins, we naturally tend to overlook the little ones. We readily pardon them, thinking, "They are not very big sins, anyway. I wouldn't do anything very bad, or that would hurt anyone else very much. After all, God can't really expect me to be perfect. To err is human and all that." So we go on trying to be Christians and at the same time accepting our continuing sinfulness as a fact of life. The problem is not that we do in fact sin from time to time, but that we are willing to accept this as the natural and acceptable state of the Christian. We tolerate our sin instead of repenting of it.

We must admit that Christians are sinners. We must recognize and admit our sinfulness if we are to be redeemed by the blood of Christ. But Christians are also to be transformed in the way they live -- to have nothing more to do with sin. We may fall in temptation from time to time: the crucial question is how we deal with the fact. When we notice such sins, do we repent and renew our commitment to Christ, or do we shrug our shoulders, regarding our sins as normal and nothing to worry about? Do we think that we need concern ourselves only with our big sins, that the little ones cannot matter much? The question is not whether we commit little sins but whether we condone them.

If (and most of us fall into this group) we tolerate our little sins, ignoring them or regarding them as inevitable, then we need to ask ourselves some questions about our Christian life and belief. First, where are we bound as Christians, and (second) how do we get there? We are destined by God's grace for heaven. Heaven is defined by the presence of God. As Christians, we are called to abide eternally in the intimate presence of God. God is a God of absolute and blazing holiness. Nothing that is not holy as He is holy can abide His presence. Thus we are to be perfect as He is perfect. (Mt. 5:48) Fortunately, we need not accomplish this by ourselves. He will do it for us, washing us in the Blood of the Lamb.

But the point is this: we cannot allow ourselves to be seduced by the idea that we need only to be good enough to get into heaven. It doesn't work like that: God does not grade on a curve, allowing the top 20% into heaven. Such an approach renders Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross nonsense. We must stop acting (even if we do it unconsciously) as if our goal was to be better than most other people, especially the ones that do not go to church. Such is irrelevant to what Christian life is actually about.

Our goal is to be perfect, not just "good enough," to attain the full stature of Christ. The means by which we attain this goal is grace: God's gift. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us -- not when we were worthy of it, but when we were unworthy. The means to perfection is His gift to us. We have only to accept it. Thus perfection is possible, though the Devil would have us think otherwise. If it were not, heaven would not be open to us.

So we must firmly put away the notion that Christian perfection is the exclusive province of monks and nuns and special saints totally unlike me. It is for all Christians. The means by which it is attained varies for each individual: some are made perfect in marriage, some in celibacy; some through monastic perfection, some in the world; some through full-time church work, others in secular employment. We must not sell ourselves short -- or, more accurately, we must not sell God short. He is more than capable of making each of us perfect: He has promised to do so, if we will let Him.

Our perfection is based on God's action and not our own. Often we give up our quest for perfection on the grounds that we are unable to attain to it. We are weak; temptation sneaks up on us; we fail to maintain our desired discipline of prayer. This is all true, but beside the point. While we were weak and unable to help ourselves, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6). We need not make ourselves strong and good. Rather, we need to know how weak and helpless and hopeless we really are, so that we can properly appreciate what God does for us. In short, the perfection which we are after is not based on our own works, but on grace. When our works fall short, we should not give up the ideal, but recommit ourselves to God's power as the means of attaining it. Of ourselves, we will ever fail. But by God's grace, perfection is possible.

This is an area of Christian life where doctrine goes hand in hand with practice. If we are trying to be perfect by our own efforts, this misunderstanding of the Gospel will keep us from making much progress. It will lay us open to the power of our adversary by making us depend on ourselves rather than on God's power. Our quest for perfection depends on our right understanding that the goal is ours by God's gift alone.

On the practical side, we must understand how our tolerance of small sins undermines the whole of our Christian life. Our tempta-

tion is to draw the line between large sins and small ones, abhorring the former but accepting the latter as inevitable. Instead, we ought to draw the line between sin and virtue, abhorring all of the former. If we do not, we make life terribly difficult for ourselves.

If, for example, we are habitually prone to impatience and the anger which results, we might try to cut off the great occasions but tolerate the little ones: to catch ourselves when we are about to start yelling at someone or cursing the traffic jam. But if we try to cut off the big outbursts while ignoring the little ones, we doom our efforts. If we allow the habit of little angers and impatiences to grow, how will we eliminate the very same habit in its larger occasions? It is the very same habit. It will be just as deeply rooted from many small occasions as from a few big ones. Moreover, the small occasions and the large are all of one habit, with no qualitative difference between the two. Thus if we indulge the habit at all, we cut off the means to resist it.

So we must watch out for our petty sins, ones which are so familiar that we generally pay no attention to them. We get angry with another driver who cuts in front of us: we think ill of him, perhaps speak a word under our breath, and then forget about it. We get impatient choosing the wrong line in the bank and seeing someone else get to the window a couple of minutes before we do. We get testy with someone in the family at home who doesn't clean up the kitchen as he is supposed to. We need to be sensitive to all our occasions of sin, and to deal with them within the context of our prayer.

In the dynamic of the Christian life, there are several reasons for us to pay attention to such instances of sin, and to repent and try to correct them. First, by giving in to such small (even trivial) temptations, we make it harder for ourselves to resist the more severe temptations of the same sort. When we permit the little sins but not the big ones, how are we to draw the line? We will already be in the habit of the little sins: it will be doubly hard for us to resist a big occasion of something we already do all the time in a small way. When we indulge impatience in little things, the habit gets established, and it is that much harder to cut it off in greater things. If we regularly get mildly impatient at modest provocation (one driver cutting in), then we will react with greater impatience at a greater provocation (massive traffic jam).

If you have ever tried to resist a besetting temptation you know how this works. If you indulge the thought of the temptation, thinking that you will think about it but not do it, you make it doubly hard to resist the deed. The thought becomes a preoccupation, and often the desire becomes irresistible. In short, indulging any occasion of sin, even in thought, undermines our resistance to sin.

Second, such indulgence of sin also lowers our resistance to other kinds of sin. The Fathers were clear about this: if you let in

one kind of sin others are sure to follow. If we indulge even a little pride (trusting in our virtue and abilities), other temptations will likely follow: anger and judgmentalism, sloth, even lust. If we indulge little episodes of anger, we may be tempted later to depression. If we indulge self-righteous and judgmental thoughts, we may be beset with greed and covetousness. If we once give Satan an entrance, however small it may seem, we give him a foothold in our souls and we may be sure that he will do what he can to exploit it.

The third and most important consequence of our tolerance of sin is the fundamental disruption which it causes to our communion with God. In adopting us as His children, God reconciles us to Himself and establishes a certain union with us through His Son. We are to live out that union day by day. Whenever we sin we disrupt it. We build a wall between ourselves and God. We reject His love for us, and push Him away. Our petty sins do not do this intentionally, and so are not as serious as the sins we commit willfully, knowing that what we are doing is wrong. But they still separate us from God.

We experience this in various ways. In our prayer, we find that we cannot seem to get through when we are carrying around unrepented sins. (This is for our benefit: it forces us to deal with them, and so be reconciled to God.) As we become more habitual in our prayer, we will also become more sensitive to the sins which interfere with it. On a day when we have been testy and demanding at home, we will find that it is hard for us to settle into our usual quiet. We are to learn from this that we cannot indulge the impatience and expect to be able to pray as we would wish. We must learn the relationship between the two. As we come to value above all else the relationship we have with God, we will want to put away even our small sins because of the damage they do to it.

It is part of the dynamic of Christian life that our sins interfere with our prayer and our communion with God. Since we have grown to love prayer and the God we know in it, we have an incentive to put away the sin. At the same time, it is this communion with God which will enable us to put away even the small sins. Our own effort is not enough: whatever vigilance we muster, it seems that we are sometimes taken by surprise and fall. God alone is powerful enough to save us in all our temptations. Our effort is the effort of giving ourselves into His hands. When we are tempted we must flee to Him, depending on Him the more in times of trial. This is the natural expression of our love for Him. The more we love Him the more we will depend upon Him. The more we depend upon Him the more we will resist sin, even small sins. For the sake of His love, we will wish to have zero tolerance for sin in our lives, recognizing that this can be accomplished only by His power, and only as we give ourselves entirely to the workings of His grace.