

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday in Lent

Lessons: ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel. ⁱⁱ

“The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying, What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

“....

“Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal? When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done shall he die. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive. Because he considereth, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die. Yet saith the house of Israel, The way of the Lord is not equal. O house of Israel, are not my ways equal? are not your ways unequal? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.

“Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-seventh Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew. ⁱⁱⁱ

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend

thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

“Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction and Theme:

Today’s Gospel passage represents one portion of a very typical teaching of Our Lord’s regarding the moral law under His New Covenant. This is the change in emphasis from the observation of *outward behavior* as the measure of moral conduct to the analysis of the *inward dispositions* that motivate that behavior. For the first time, the Jews – and, by extension, their cousins-german, the first Christians – were directed to consider subjective *motives and intentions* as part of the moral calculus for assessing objective *actions*.

Development:

This focus on motives and intentions, by itself, was a revolutionary change in perspective. Under the Old Covenant, the Hebrew nation’s compliance with that Covenant was judged solely by the observable actions of its various individual

members. No one was particularly concerned about *why* any one of those individuals did or did not obey the Covenant's requirements; all that was important was that each person's behavior did, in fact, adhere to the Covenant's rules.

Therefore sin, which is what separates us from God, that is, violates our Covenant with Him, consisted solely in actions that broke His laws. Thus an ancient Jew who was angry and full of hate, who held grudges, and who loved no one but himself, could still stand forth as a fully moral member of the Covenant community, provided only that his actions complied with all of the rules applicable to him.

Our Lord changed that forever. As is set forth in today's Gospel, since His incarnate revelation to us, we can separate ourselves from God, that is, we can sin, even when our outward actions appear to obey all the rules known to us and to our neighbors. One way we can do this is when we act out of motives or intentions that are actually contrary to God's prescriptions for us, even when the results of those actions do not appear to third parties to be objectively wrong.

There is a second way we can commit these "mental sins" or "sins of intention", and this more subtle way is the actual lesson of today's reading. It is brought to us in the form of a disquisition upon adultery, which in our common understanding is a breach of the marital vow of sexual fidelity.

That was not quite how the ancient Hebrews saw it, however. For one thing, prior to Our Lord's expansion of this law, adultery was a one-way street. It could only be committed by a married woman and her lover, not by a married man who indulged himself with an unmarried woman. Thus in the Old Testament account of Tamar, the widow who seduced her father-in-law, Judah, because he failed to perform his duty of marrying her to another one of his sons. Note that no criticism was ever leveled at Judah for companying with a woman who was not his wife; instead, all the risk of execution was borne by Tamar.^v When she turned up pregnant, she was initially deemed to have been unfaithful to her deceased husbands who, by that time, had both been dead for some considerable time!

The reason for this seeming anomaly is that, under the Old Covenant, the wife was viewed as being the property of the husband. Thus if she took a lover, not only was she risking the production of cuckoos in the patriarchal nest – that is, of bearing false heirs to her husband's goods and property – which would have remained true even during the period when Tamar was waiting for Judah to marry

her to another “levirate” husband because the children of that “levirate” marriage would be considered the heirs of her deceased first husband.

In addition, the straying wife and her lover were stealing her husband’s property rights in her body, which was a “trespass” so potentially disruptive to the peace of the community that their punishment was stoning to death.^{vi} Neither of these social values was endangered if her husband took a lover, however, so his *amours* were not considered to *adulterate*, that is, to pollute the purity of, their marriage.

Under this legal regime, obviously a man could look upon any woman, even his neighbor’s wife, and entertain about her any lascivious thoughts he might, and still not risk disrupting the outward peace and order of society. At least, he would not do so unless he, like King David with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite,^{vii} actually reached out his hand to use that woman sexually. Thus, under the old dispensation, no one considered someone’s sexual fantasies to be a potential source of sin.

This, however, was a somewhat short-sighted position. Even if all we were concerned about were the maintenance of socially-conformity, we would still have to recognize that each human action, whether sinful or not, has its origin in some thought or mental image. Thus sinful actions are generated by sinful thoughts and, from this vantage point, Our Lord’s direction of attention onto such thoughts was a significant moral advance. To the extent that Christianity can motivate its adherents to suppress, or at least disavow, such thoughts, it is helping to ameliorate their deviant conduct as well.

Too, we are not just creatures with bodies but, instead, integrated beings of body, mind, and spirit. Thus it does not adequately address God’s call to us to seek perfection^{viii} if we merely conform our bodies’ outward actions to His demands. In order to make our entire beings more perfect, we must struggle to perfect our minds and spirits, and it is precisely this need that Our Lord’s new and more stringent moral code addresses.

There is a third point, which is very important although we address it last. In the context of adultery, this harks back to the Old Testament concept of the wife as the husband’s property, but the same principle applies to any of the other sins as well. But for the moment let us stick with our example of marriage and its potential infringements.

Our Lord taught that in marriage, the husband and the wife are joined together into one flesh, in a mysterious but very real – that is, a sacramental – manner. Thus it is no more than a matter of definition to see that each partner to the marriage is of equal value to the other, neither any more nor, certainly, any less. This new recognition, however, completely undercuts any notion that one partner may be the other's property.

This fundamental equality between the marriage partners is a direct consequence of the fact that each of them is a child of God, equally loved by Him. Thus each of them is inherently possessed of the same essential value, a value imparted by God through His act of loving that one.

However, for a man to look on a woman lustfully, or for a woman to look upon a man in the same way, as a mere object and not as a fully-empowered partner, is for the onlooker in his or her mind to reduce the one so regarded to the status of a mere object, a thing made available solely for the onlooker's pleasure. In the 1960s and '70s there was a catch-phrase for this, "treating someone as a sex object".

This act of reduction not only denies God's concession of essential value to that object, which is an act of defiance toward God that certainly tends to separate the defiant one from God, but it is also an act of pride, of self-exaltation on the part of the onlooker. The Church has always recognized this sort of pride as a serious sin.

Conclusion:

Some of us here are old enough to remember when then-President James Earl Carter became the butt of the jokes of the news media and the chattering classes because he admitted publicly that he "had lusted after women in his heart". As today's Second Lesson teaches us, however, Jimmy Carter's appreciation of the sinfulness of covetousness – for at bottom, that is what lust really is – was a sound Christian position.

Those who made fun of him simply did not understand the essential New Testament message that we will be judged for the inward sins of our hearts just as much as we will be judged for the outward sins of our bodies.

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Matthew 5: 27-37 (KJV).*

^{iv} *I Kings 8: 38-39a (KJV).*

^v *Genesis 38: 6-24.*

^{vi} *Leviticus 20: 10.*

^{vii} *II Samuel 11: 2-5.*

^{viii} *We are to seek perfection even though we will never attain it this side of heaven. Why God wishes us to do so is one of those matters that He has not seen fit to explain to us, but He has made clear to us that he does so wish.*

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