

THE BITTER CONSEQUENCES OF SIN (26th-OT, Yr.B)

Jesus in today's Gospel warns his disciples of the absolute self-destructive nature and deadliness of sin, in rather scathing and dramatic ways. To emphasize the severity of sin, He uses the device of hyperbole or exaggeration to make his point. Jesus suggests that we should avoid sin at all costs, even to the extent of cutting off one's hand or feet, or plucking out one's eyes, if necessary, to avoid the terrible prospect of being cast into hell.

You see, all sin and wrongdoing springs from humanity's basic inclination toward self-love and self-preference, which most often leads to sin. This issue of narcissism and its effects was addressed by Mother Teresa of Calcutta during a visit to the US. Speaking before a group of undergraduates at Harvard she said, "It is a very great poverty indeed, to decide that a child must die so that you can live as you wish!" But how do we avoid or escape from sin's lethal consequences? With many of the more worldly minded, it is simply a matter of denial, by saying "There's no such thing as sin," or by being totally desensitized to its harmful effects. With others it's a matter of subjectivity, seeking to re-define what is good or evil to suit themselves.

But as a practical matter, the best way to avoid serious occasions of sin, and avoid its terrible consequences is to practice the opposite virtue. For example, if you are inclined to gluttony, then fast, if your sin takes the form of false pride, then practice humility or mortification, and if your sin springs from a sense of self-love, then try loving others! But the best way to avoid sin and all of its deadly consequences is by performing works of charity.

Recall, when Jesus was asked by a young man, "Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself!" And what followed was his parable of the good Samaritan.

Now, we are called to practice an even greater form of love, far beyond merely loving others as we wished to be loved! You see, throughout the Gospels, Jesus continuously reminds us that we are given a very special capacity to love God and others, far above the natural, earthly plain. We are gifted by grace to love one another on a more supernatural and self-sacrificial level, without any qualifications or pre-conditions, and without any expectations of favors in return.

Therefore, is it any wonder that toward the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus uped the bar by commanding his disciples to practice an even greater form of love. "You shall love one another," not merely as you wish to be loved, "you shall love one another, even as I have loved you!" Behold, another one of his hyperboles or exaggerations. Jesus emphasized this more perfect form of unconditional love by suggesting that they should be prepared to sacrifice even their very lives for the sake of others, even as He sacrificed his life for them! This total self-giving, this more perfect expression of love was meant for their imitation, and for ours - enabling them and us, to love one another with that same degree of divine intensity!

Finally, as Jesus communicated his limitless love to us, by the perfect sacrifice of his humanity, so too, we are now called to be that same visible sign of his love to others, binding all of us together, as members of his one Body, and bound to one another as a community. Bound to one another by this tender and lasting bond of divine love! And there is true wisdom in all of this! For when we freely give of ourselves to others, even at some cost to ourselves, we find true happiness. We enhance our relationships with our family and friends, and may even convert some of our enemies! We also find true fulfillment, living more purposeful and meaningful lives, enriched and blessed by God's love, beyond all measure! Furthermore, by participating in this highest form of divine love, we ultimately gain the everlasting joy of eternal life, thereby avoiding the terrible consequences of sin and eternal death.