

“At the Doorpost of Cain’s Abode”
 Sermon for 17 March 2019
 Text: Genesis 4:1-17

[Note: Two corrections; first, while I had thought the 5,000 were Passover pilgrims, a more careful reading suggests that they were Feast of Booths pilgrims—they are not the same and occur at different times in the cycle of feasts. Secondly, the temple was completed first, and after twenty years, at the time of Passover. Again, the temple was completed in March, 515 BC (Ezra 6:19-22). This event marked the end of the second exodus, that from Babylon! With the temple completed, the people turned to the rebuilding of the city walls under Nehemiah—the restoration stage—and that was completed in September, 444 BC at the time for the Feast of Booths (Neh. 8:13-18). Peter Leithart, in Blessed Are the Hungry (2000), was asserting that the Lord’s Supper is both our feast of Unleaven Bread and our Feast of Booths—tying the themes of the new temple and the new city together. Any conflation of these separate historical occurrences was my error, or misreading.]

What is the difference between a habitual sinner and an addict? *Not a single thing! Nothing.* Friends, if there is nothing more to be offered to the world than this: **Sin lieth at you door . . . rule over it, we have no gospel to preach.** Then the sinner shall never be victorious over sin and the addict will stay addicted always. The prospects for both is bleak and grim for there are only twelve steps of hopelessness and helplessness for either of them. The poor soul that is bruised and stained with sin and his addicted companion crawling for that next fix cannot, repeat cannot, “Get yourself up and make yourself clean and stay that way.” Self-salvation is impossible and only discouragement and defeat lie down the road for those who try. ***It simply cannot be done.***

It cannot be done because, to put it brutally, our sin is mightier than we are. We are as outclassed by our sin as the addict is overmastered by his substance of choice.¹ Worse than unequal, worse than unfair—the competition is over before the race begins. And everyone knows the outcome before the gun goes off. If a star athlete, even an all-state half back were to suit up and hit the field in the NFL in regulation play, it is very likely that his first run would be his last . . . he very well might never run again. “Get yourself up, clean yourself and stay that way” is just like that! “Rule over sin” . . . like “Kick the habit!” are insufficient to the need at hand. And yet, because God commands it, there must be some means to accomplish it.

And that “means” is the Lord Jesus Christ. Picture a jousting match. He came down from heaven, suited up and entered the list on our behalf—poor sinners outclassed by Sin. He came to fight with sin, with death, hell and the Devil—yes, the world and the flesh, temptations, too—as our champion! He unseated them all, they went down in defeat.

Hear this remarkable word from Psalm 65:2-3):

Though manifold iniquities are too strong for me,

¹It is worse than being mismatched by weight, much worse . . . it is worse than being thrown into an athletic contest as a young woman against a transgendered male. Let them compete amongst themselves—there’s no glory in an uneven match.

As for our transgressions, Thou wilt purge them away². Cambridge Bible

From this we may gather that by faith 1. Christ will cleanse your memory; 2. Christ will purge your conscience; and 3, ***trusting Christ, His power and His life within us, we may, we must, we will conquer our own evil.***

So, let us recall this warning which precedes the sin of the first-born, Cain, who murdered his younger brother:

6 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, [surely you will be accepted] will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

I think the critical word here is “accepted.” For it was the “acceptance of his younger brother’s sacrifice that filled him with envy and infuriated him. And it all hinges on **And if you do not do well!** If you do not do well, then, sin crouches at the door ready to pounce, or spring at you with lethal intent. Ralph Venning in The Sinfulness of Sin, 1669 (p. 44) “*Sin is against the very being of man. Sin aims not only that man should not be well, but that man should not be at all. How many it (sin) strangles in the womb! How many miscarriages and abortions it causes! How many it sends from cradle to the graves, who have run their race before they can go! Others die in their full strength, beside the havoc it makes by war, and some always eat their bread in darkness (Job 21:23,25) Man’s time is short and uncertain: he that is born today is not sure to live a day . . . sin is against all the good of man in this life . . .*”

When I consider the *sinfulness of sin*, my blood runs cold. That is the crouching tiger at the door, loosed **if thou dost not well . . . Its desire is for you.** (v. 7) Why these are the very words spoken to Eve, regarding her marriage, in God’s statement of her punishment for sin. **Thy desire shall be for thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.** (Gen. 3:16d) A sure and bitter consequence: sin is never without consequence! It becomes a parody of wedded union, this relationship between the sinner and sin! The purest longing of the womanly heart to the husband of her love, and the authority of the husband over said loving wife—the source of the deepest joy and purity of conjugal love—is conveyed to Cain’s marriage to murder, his sin. *Now this is surely a disquieting revelation—so I hasten to add two things immediately: sin’s desire may be for you but 1. you have recourse to Jesus and 2. what’s more, Jesus’ desire for you is far greater than sin’s desire.* Trust in Jesus is your best insurance policy, but you do have to call in the claims! Sin, crouching at the sinner’s door, a wild beast with lethal intent, is made hideous here because it is hideous. A tigerish, murderous desire comes after the sinner—which the sinner is left to subdue and control! This is the torment of a flea in your garments! You may be sure it will bite you all over. Sin enacts a wedding of a very different sort.

²

2 O You who hear prayer,

To You all [all flesh] men come.

3 [Words of iniquities— details of crimes, or instances of wickedness] Iniquities prevail against me (singular, the psalmist?);

As for our transgressions, You [cover over, atone for] forgive them. (NASB)

Think of sin as a voracious wild beast of prey tethered to your doorpost. Our wrong-doing is the tether. We are the ones to tie it up there. Right out front, there is responsibility, guilt and consequences—ineffaceable things. I mean, ineffaceable apart from their being blotted out, or covered by Christ. We vainly imagine that the past is the past, yet every human deed is immortal—yes, the transitory evil thought, or word, or act like images stored in the cloud . . . they all have the dread of permanence enshrouding them, an indelibility of stain. And **if we do not well** this horrible something nestles down near us. Our sin, the momentary act of it, sits there at the doorpost waiting for us . . . it demands to be taken for walks with us whether we will or no. It hunts us and we are its choice prey. It consumes us bite by painful bites as if saving some for later hunger. Consequence is just such a beast.

We say that responsibility is laid at our feet. Or we warn each other we answer for every idle word, as well as every deed. The guilt of it is on our own heads. We drink what we have brewed so to speak—we make our bed and if we cannot shunt the responsibility off onto someone else, some agency, some social service, we sleep in it. Although we like to pretend it is so, there is no escape from consequences. Either we deal with our sin directly, or it will deal with us. Always. That deed of the moment, that tiny indiscretion, settles down on your welcome mat and growls to greet you every time you enter or leave the house. If we were to take sin to be a literal wild beast, we would never pretend it wasn't there whether a black bear or a monitor lizard! No, we would call the game warden, the animal control officer, or the police—we would ask them to remove it from the premises. In just such a way, we should call upon Jesus whenever sin shows up—either the threat of it, the guilt of it, the hindrance of it, or any of it. Jesus can do what we are powerless to do.

This deliverance may resemble a “casting out of evil spirits” such as recorded in scripture (Mark 9:14-29; Mark 1:23-27; or Mark 5:9-13)—which is an exorcism proper!—to dislodge ensconced, habitual habits of sin. There's more than a patrol car involved—even one with flashing lights! I picture robed and hooded sins processing in and out of the cloister of crime that our sinning heart has become: a veritable habitat and haunt for demons and dragons. Don't be deceived by their parody of holy orders as they enter in to utter their vice in inner vows, cemented by lust and greed. Their apparent passivity is a cover; they are our soul's tormentors—I would say, pure and simple except there simply nothing pure about them!

So, with Jesus' help, clear that crowded entry way! All your deeds from childhood on up, all the follies, vices, evil thought, impulses, evil impulses—each and every minor and major sin, by the law of consequence, is there as surely as the stars are in their courses and the earth is on its foundations. **Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.** We cringe. “There is no seed that does not sprout in the harvest of the moral life. Every deed germinates according to its kind.” (Maclaren, p. 26) **Everyone shall carry his own burden. If we do not well**, some quasi-permanent, visible form of it is added to the tether.

With Christ, the Berlin Wall between good and evil, the sin that separates us from God, that stymies and stupifies us(!), can be breached and dismantled³—until grace, forgiveness and

³ At a very critical point in my life, Ann R. a Christian woman, really let me down. She advised me to just say “no” to temptations in my life. But she did not introduce me to the One who give me both the motive and the power to do so. As a result I tried self-salvation and failed. We all do. We can learn from the mistakes others make. We do not have to repeat them.

peace can enter into the formerly occupied territory! **He had opened for us a new and living way.** (Hebrews 10:19-25)

Some of us actually pride ourselves on our forgetfulness. But part of us never forgets, never deflects. We call that part our conscience; its memory card is perfect. They are all there—which is why they show up uninvited and vividly from time to time. Despite confession and true repentance, they can and do show up. Unwanted. The fear of exposure rises suddenly, we duck in involuntary shame—it is a moral reflex we cannot help it. Again, we wince and cringe inwardly if not outwardly. The past is the past, removing the statuary does not help because conscience is quite independent of objects, furniture and the like. Its artifacts and imprints in the mind. Even if you imagine them recorded in invisible ink and secured in a locked diary—all the pages need is exposure to some heat, or catalyst and there the details are. The fleshly tables of our hearts, our secret volumes will one day be opened for all to see—unless some atonement enacted by some great redeemer has wiped them all away.

And that is all from our side. For sin not only haunts us, it hunts us. It has this horrible craving to consume the sinner: **Unto thee shall be its desire.** Not only can it kill you; it wants to do so! *We are the endangered species*, sin is our predator. It is like being married to a cannibal, a spouse-devouring monster, except it is never human! It is not the husband, not the wife—it's the front porch creature that has broken free and stolen into the house. Sin is presumptuous and what it presumes upon is our attraction to it! I read recently of a man mauled to death by his pet lion which he housed in his backyard. Sin is a dangerous, untamable beast and what we need is someone slay it for us. Someone to nail it to a cross and crucify it.

Beware *the siren* song of sin, the Lorelei. The first drop intensifies our desire for a second and so on—at shortened intervals. It is like a serial killer who madly beckons detection by frequency and autographs. Sin is not secret about its desire for your death—it aims to take your life. Your life is the bullseye it aims at. If there is a near miss, run for cover—don't stay exposed. Sin breaks in through little sins at the window and these little ones open the door for full-grown house-breakers—one smoothing the way for the other. Every sin is armed and dangerous, even if the weapons are concealed. Sin is like acid, it corrodes the character—a little frost, then an etch, then one is eaten away entirely. "It is a great deal easier to find a man who has never done a wrong thing than to find a man who has only done it once." (Maclaren, p. 28)

Thou shalt rule over it. This is not a suggestion of the divine voice. It is a command. As we were given dominion over wild animals, the beast of prey—like coy dogs, wolves, mountain lions and rampaging bear—and just as we are to harness domestic animals to work with and for us—we need to master the front porch critter, the wild thing that our sin has created! It is our own—bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh even. It is us—unpleasant as it may be, unmastered sin is us. It is not your evil but my own! If it is not to tyrannize me, I must master it. However, it is like that murderous pet lion, it cannot be humanly done. It is true that some have, through immense effort, reigned in sin, or held their worsen impulses in check, but if we persist in taking ourselves for our own lawmakers, and self to be our center instead of God, the dyke will inevitably break and a whole flood of sin will wash in and take us out. It is just that severe, its life or our own. Or, its life for our own.

Our sin is mightier than we are, either on our own or in our support group of fellow believers. But it is also true as the Psalmist said, **As for my transgressions, Thou wilt purge them away!** That would be a great screen saver for those of us who use our computers regularly! Here's an Easter message for you:

- Christ will strengthen us to conquer sin.
- Christ has come to remove our guilt and shame.
- Christ has already borne your burdens and paid for your sins.
- Christ will cleanse your memory—erase the hard drive of sin!
- Christ will purge your conscience and refresh its functions.
- Christ will disable condemnation, defeat discouragement and deliver us entirely.

By trusting in Him, by relying on his power and his life within, we will conquer our evil; we will master our sin and subdue our flesh. Because Christ has come, our sins are forgiven and the power of sin is broken—then, starting with, this spiritual triumph spreads to others, and, as they are gathered in, the world. The best of all is that Christ has made us winners, and as winners, we do win!

So we are come full circle: And the means of that execution is the Lord Jesus Christ. Who came down from heaven, suited up and entered the list on our behalf—poor sinners outclassed by Sin. That match is the passion narrative of the Lord Jesus—the how, the where and when. Jesus, the Son of God, came to fight with sin, with death, hell and the Devil—yes, the world and the flesh, temptations, too—as our champion! He threw them all, they all went down in defeat.

Amen