

Theme: “Dealing Drastically with Sin.”

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation today is the Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew the eighteenth chapter verses one through twenty.

Boys and girls, I pray that you are doing well today. Do you know what I have here? Yep, a lamb! In our text for today, Jesus shows how much He loves each and every lamb in His sheepfold. He takes sin seriously. When we wander away from the sheepfold, Jesus comes, finds us, and brings us back. How does He do that? How can we take sin as seriously as Jesus does? Ponder those questions as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you.

### **Lax Sins?**

How seriously do we take the matter of sin? Our own sin? The sin of others? That is the theme running through the teachings of Jesus today in the Holy Gospel from Matthew 18: the seriousness of sin and our need to treat it as such.

In our culture today people do not treat sin as a serious matter. We certainly do not deal drastically with it. We let it slide. We excuse it. We rationalize it. We explain it away. Even Christians get sucked into this mindset: “Well, if I sin, it’s not that big a deal. I know God will forgive me, so I’ll go ahead and do what I want, and I’ll feel sorry about it later. Well, at least a little.” Planned repentance, to give ourselves the go-ahead and the green light to do what we know God would not want us to do. I know I do this, and I’m guessing you do too. It’s a little mind-game we play, and we become good at it with practice.

It is a game as old as that tree in the middle of the garden. The man and his wife blocked out God’s voice, and they decided to follow their own desires instead. And we all take after Mom and Dad, doing the same old, same old.

This is not an easy message for us to hear today. We do not take sin nearly seriously enough as we should. We do not take drastic, radical action to deal with the sin in our lives. Our repentance is a light and surfacey thing. It doesn’t last. It doesn’t take. But in Jesus’ view, which is God’s view, sin is a very serious matter, and we need to deal drastically with it.

Our text begins: “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”

How do we take our sins seriously? First, we learn the lesson of humility. Humbling oneself means to not think more highly of yourself than you ought. Are you willing to become like a little child before God, to just be given to? Because that’s the only way you’re going to make it in God’s kingdom. The righteousness you need must come from outside yourself. It must come from God. You need to be given to, like a child.

Jesus continues: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Secondly, we take seriously our own impact upon others. Do we consider that how we live can either lead people toward God or away from him? That how we live can possibly be leading others into temptation? For instance, when we “take a Sunday off from church”—now I’m not talking about being sick or in the hospital or something like that—but when we take a Sunday off from church, when we could be there if we really made the effort, what are we doing? We are breaking the Third Commandment.- We are sinning against God. We think we don’t need what God has for us that day. We are despising his gifts and his Word. We are forgetting that we are part of the body of Christ here in this congregation and that we have a responsibility toward our brothers and sisters. Our absence has a demoralizing effect on our fellow parishioners. They see an empty space in the pews where they ought to see us. They hear one less voice in the liturgy and the creed and the hymns, and it’s a voice they miss.

That’s just one example of what could be a myriad more. How we live has an impact on others, either weakening or strengthening their faith. By my sliding into a lax self-behavior, I am influencing others negatively by my example. And Jesus says this is a serious thing. If I cause someone else to fall away from the faith, it would be better if I had a heavy millstone wrapped around my neck and be tossed into the sea.

Jesus here is giving some serious warnings. And we should take them seriously. He goes on: “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

Take seriously the reality of hell. There will be a day of reckoning. If you are causing others to fall to temptation and sin—if you are causing yourself to fall to temptation and sin—then you need to deal drastically with what you are doing, lest woe befall you. You’d be better off to be marred and maimed and still enter into eternal life than to be happy and healthy and be cast into hell. That’s how seriously Jesus is telling us to take the danger of unrepentant sin.

### **Serious Sin Dealt with!**

Look at how seriously Jesus takes the matter of sin. He goes to extreme measures to rescue us from the danger we are in. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who comes looking for us to find us and save us. “For the Son of Man came to save the lost.” And that’s us. Each one of us. Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. He did not choose the easy road but took instead the more difficult path, the way of sorrows, the way of the cross.

Jesus deals drastically and decisively with our sin. He dies for it. That should tell you how seriously God regards this matter of sin. It takes the death of God's own Son, innocent and holy and suffering unjustly, taking the wrath and the woe upon himself, to atone for our sin, all of it, the whole bad mess. Nothing less would do.

But this should also tell you how much and to what extent God loves you and cares for you and wants you to be free of your sin and its condemnation, that he would send his own beloved Son to do this for you! God has done everything to save you! Jesus sought you out! He puts you on his shoulder and carries you back home, back to God and in his good graces. Jesus carries you back home rejoicing. You've been brought back to the sheepfold, to the church, God's little flock under the care and protection of your Shepherd Jesus. That's a good place to be. In this little flock, following our Good Shepherd and hearing his voice, we are led into green pastures and we can go even through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. Jesus will lead us into life. There's life waiting for us on the other side, life better than you've ever experienced before.

And because God has taken our sin so seriously so as to forgive it for Christ's sake, now we are called to take our brother's sin seriously, if he is caught in it, and to take determined steps to lead him to repentance and forgiveness. This is the part of Matthew 18 that follows: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

God has designed his church to be a community of repentance and forgiveness. Repentance and forgiveness—this is the rhythm of the Christian life, daily baptismal dying and rising with Christ, for each one of us personally, and for all of us as a community. We care for our brother when he goes astray, wanders off the path. We care enough to call him back.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, sin is a serious matter, and it needs to be dealt with drastically. That's what Jesus has been telling us today throughout this text. And throughout our lives, we need to hear his Shepherd's voice, warning us against the dangers that would cause us harm or cause harm to others as well.

Jesus earnestly desires your salvation! He died and rose and lives now and will return to accomplish your salvation. God does not want even one of us to perish. He wants all of us to live, to live in his eternal kingdom of life and love forever. Jesus is here right now, speaking to you today, to reassure you of this. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen