

Grace and peace are yours dear friends from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's text is the jackpot of human questions; the severity of sin. In the context of our society today, this text alone makes more sense, has more meaning, and application in our everyday life than we might realize. The speed limit is strategically posted on highways for people to see, understand, and obey. And yet, for many people 55 miles an hour means driving 60 miles an hour is acceptable. Most law enforcement authorities will not ticket a driver for speeds that are 2-3 miles in excessive of the posted limit; unless of course, you are in a school zone.

I remember growing up the concept of a 'little white lie'; an infraction of minimal magnitude and something to even be overlooked. Seriously, some laws can be broken without consequence, and for that matter there are laws on the books of society that are not even enforced. So how do we reconcile the shades or degrees of sin?

Our society today loves to 'interpret' the law and the degrees of severity to which it is broken. Successful interpretation can result in fair recourse, punishment, and/or sentencing. The same is true with the sin we see one another commit. In other words my friends, we have become very comfortable living 'under the law' and we take great care to justify our actions in the context of the law...the way we see it. In the season of Lent, repentance and reflection are the focus and we are called to recognize that the Law has been fulfilled and we are [now] called to life by faith through grace.

There is a lot going on in the Gospel text today; enough for a month of sermons. The background of Pilate mixing human blood with the ritual sacrifices offered in the temple is an abomination beyond belief. The priests that are entrusted with the purity of the offerings have become corrupted for the sake of generating Temple revenue. However, when priests alone are trusted to follow the law, who is going to take action against them when they break the law?

Jesus is presented with this very situation, to which he simply states, "Unless you repent, you will perish just as they did." Wow, that HAD to be frustrating. It is important to know that Jesus is speaking to the crowds here; He is not teaching His disciples. The reply Jesus provides to the crowd is not explained in the same manner when He is alone with the disciples. The people (the crowds) have not received the faith to accept Jesus as the Son of God, therefore; the true identity of Jesus remains hidden to many.

Jesus's answer did not satisfy the crowds, so they find another headline, news article, and talking point and speculate about the shades or degree of sin the people must had committed to die when a tower fell. They are clearly testing Jesus to reveal the truth behind why people die and to what degree their sin plays a role. Now there is a defense for the crowds because they are after all, the very people who live under the law that was given to them by God through Moses.

The people in the text know the things that Jesus has done and are seeking the proof, the interpretation, and the wisdom of the law to the point where they are missing the meaning of what Jesus is telling them. Jesus responds with the same words as the first time, "unless you repent, you will perish just as they did." And the parable of the fig tree follows.

You have [again] heard this parable and know it very well. And still, there is more to add to this text to reveal the meaning, message, and hope for us today. There is more to understanding for the sake of removing the frustration and finding the peace and promise.

There are no coincidences; there is no speculation with Holy Scripture...and there are no contradictions either. You see the tree needs fertilizer for life, yes; manure. Living on a farm when I was

young, I can tell you that manure is a very effective fertilizer to put on the fields...and it is clearly visible 'exactly' where it was applied when the crops planted are growing.

Likewise, we need Christ for life! Paul tells the Corinthians that Christ was the rock that provided the Living Water for Israel while in the wilderness...and it is indeed Christ who came to provide life for the Gentiles and all people. Eternal life is our inheritance through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ because His blood was the price paid for our sins, just as the blood of the sacrifices offered by the priest were atonement for the sins of Israel.

Pilate may have contaminated the blood of the sacrifices that were offered at the Temple, but NOTHING will come between us and the love of God through Jesus Christ: the pure, holy, and complete sacrifice and offering of His body and blood. It is this pure, plain, and simple truth my friends that we remember and celebrate. This is not complicated or foreign; this is the Good News and Gospel we share with the world.

So now for the rest of the story; we have questions because there are still the 'shades of sin' that Jesus did not discuss or engage with. This is a relevant topic and a highly debatable issue. Which sins are worse than others and what is the price?

My dear friends in Christ, the gospel text is not about sin, it is about repentance because with repentance comes change. The Hebrew word for repentance is בתשובה (Naw-kham) and is used over 108 times in the Old Testament. The first time it is used by God in Genesis where God says He is sorry that He created humankind because they have become so evil. The change that follows is a flood and a promise to never again destroy all life with a flood.

In as much as בתשובה means to be sorry, contrite, and regretful of your actions it also means to find comfort and peace. With repentance comes change that God alone will grant us. We are provided the faith and understanding that Jesus Christ is our Lord who is the very source of our life and the means by which we produce the fruits of the Spirit that provides and sustains the Kingdom of God.

When we repent, our sin is not discussed, evaluated, or judged on a scale of severity; when we repent our sin is blotted out and remembered no more. When the crowds ask Jesus whose sin was worse, Jesus is asking them to re-sepnt and stop looking at the sin of the world and look at the fruit we produce in the love, compassion, care, and tending fo each other.

Love is the fruits of the Spirit my friends. The first fruits revealed are the love of God through Jesus Christ from which the love of God is then revealed in our lives for one another. Where there is no love there is no life. Repentance brings the changes that lead to love and the freedom to live forever, rather that perish without ever have knowing the love of God.

The faith we have been granted means we will not perish; the Christ in our lives means we will produce the fruits of the Spirit of God; the reality that nothing will separate us from the love of God; meaning we can share, celebrate, and live in the peace that passes all understanding with everyone to keep our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.