

## THE TWO ROCKS

When God saves someone, it's a beautiful thing. He creates faith in his heart and sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in him. The man begins to attend church, to read and hear the gospel, and to pray. The Holy Spirit begins to sharpen his conscience, he becomes more aware of his sins, and a desire begins to stir within him to cast his sins away and live a pure life. Initially this struggle against sin is a pure joy to his awakened soul. He is like a man digging in his backyard to plant a garden; the spade digs in, the soil flies, stones are uncovered and one by one he throws them away into the woods behind his house. But then the man makes a startling discovery: as he digs deeper the stones get larger and more difficult to dislodge. He keeps discovering new sins that are more deeply entrenched in his inner life and more difficult to remove. A person might possibly break with profanity and ignoring the Sabbath in a single evening. But lust, pride, vanity, the compulsive need to find fault with others—sins like that are likely to remain after months or even years of penitential struggle. Still, the gardener of the soul perseveres, digging deeper and deeper into his personality, determined to root out and get rid of all his evil inclinations.

Then one day while he is digging, trying to clear the stones from the heart's field, sweating at the task yet hoping to finally get rid of the last ones so that the garden can grow, his spade strikes solid rock. He digs and scrapes on every side; he tries again and again to budge the rock. Then the terrible realization dawns: he has laid bare a ledge of granite against which his spade is helpless. This granite ledge is the basic corruption of our human nature that remains in us even if we manage to cast away most of our conscious sins. It's a stony foundation that forces us to a terrible conclusion: we are still sinners before God even after we have done the very best we can do in terms of obedience. It is this stony ledge that Jesus reveals to us in this evening's lesson: the stony ledge at the base of each one of our personalities that is called original sin. The bedrock in us that is not just what we do, but, down deep, what we are.

Jesus shows us this by examining two of the Ten Commandments. First, he examines the Fifth Commandment: "*Thou Shalt Not Kill*," God's forbidding of murder—the taking of another human life for personal motives. According to Moses, to break this Commandment is a capital crime and warrants capital punishment. "*Fair enough*," we say, "*we weren't planning on murdering anyone*." But wait, Jesus says: to even be angry with another person (the Greek word means to be inwardly mad at someone and nurse a grudge against him)—this also places one under condemnation. In fact, Jesus says, to even speak to someone in a derisive or contemptuous way condemns one to hell.

Well now, that's a different story, isn't it? Apparently sinful thoughts and words are just as offensive to God as sinful deeds are. As Jesus said, "*The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man unclean. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander*." To feel anger, to express anger, and to hurt another person because you are angry with them--these are not three separate sins in God's eyes, but three forms of the same basic sin, which is to nurse hatred in one's heart against a fellow human being.

The same rule applies to the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment: *“You shall not commit adultery.”* Not only is it a sin to have sexual relations with someone outside of marriage, it is a sin even to have and to dwell upon such a thought. To refrain from acting upon it constitutes outward compliance, it’s true, but God searches the heart, and when we cherish a sinful desire in our heart, it is a damnable sin in God’s eyes. In other words, Jesus is telling us that the Ten Commandments apply not only to what we say and do, but to what we think and feel and imagine doing. Once again, to what—down deep—we really are.

Once we know this, we can immediately see that it is impossible for us to obey the law simply by striving to exercise self-control. Even if we can control our outward behavior (and all too often we fail to do even that)—who can control the sinful thoughts of his heart? And even if we do refrain from doing sinful things which in our heart we would like to do, doesn’t that just make us hypocrites? If there were no commands against these things, wouldn’t we just as soon go ahead and do them?

The only logical conclusion to this is that down deep we resent God’s commands and feel that they hinder us from pursuing our heart’s desires. And how is it possible for God, who searches our hearts, to take pleasure in compliant behavior that conceals a rebellious heart—that is motivated by the fear of punishment or the hope for reward? Would you enjoy receiving a gift if you knew that the person giving it to you was just trying to butter you up so that you would do something nice for him in return?

The hard, basic truth is that we sin in thought, word and deed not because we fail to make good choices, but because we are compelled by our very nature to sin. We don’t become sinners by sinning; we sin because we ARE sinners to begin with. We sin because we are children of our Father Adam. By nature we are bad trees that bear bad fruit.

And so what Jesus is trying to teach us is that sin is not just what we say and do, but what we are at the very deepest level of our being. He wants us to confront the depth of our sinfulness so that we can understand how great our need is for forgiveness. The cross which Jesus summons every Christian to take up and bear is the painful knowledge of his own sinful nature—that rocky ledge of depravity that underlies his entire personality. The Christian writhes upon the cross of this knowledge all his earthly life. The longer we live in this world, the more intimately we know and are known by the Holy Spirit of God. And the more we know the Spirit, the more He shows us how sinful we are because that is the first thing God sent Him to do. In His strange and incomprehensible mercy, God sanctifies us by showing us how corrupt we really are and how much we need His forgiveness. Shortly before he died, Martin Luther wrote that as he reflected back on his life, his growth as a Christian consisted not so much of his having become a better person, but of his having become increasingly aware of just how sinful person he really was, and how much he needed a Savior. The last words he uttered before he died were: *“We are all beggars; that’s for sure.”* We take up our cross when our spade scrapes bedrock, when we become fully aware of our depravity and repent—not only of what we have said and thought and done, but of what we really are.

But repentance is not enough; we must now turn to another rock to be saved—a rocky, naked hill as ugly and hard as a dead man’s skull that lies outside of Old Jerusalem.

Long ago, men bored a socket in that rocky hill and planted a cross there, and on that cross they hung the only One of our race who was truly righteous and innocent. And upon that righteous and innocent man, God allowed all the curse and penalty of sin to fall and cling. The hill was called Golgotha—the place of the skull—and it is the place God chose to make a Rock of Atonement, the place where death swallowed up death. When men realize that they are hopelessly lost in sin, and repent of their sin, they can flee to the foot of the cross on the Rock of Atonement, and hang all their hopes on the one who hung there. Then and only then is the granite ledge of their sinful nature lifted up and allowed to rest on the Rock of Atonement, and they are allowed to go free.

When we finally come to base our hopes and our confidence on the Rock of Atonement rather than upon the sins we've managed to put aside or the good deeds we've managed to do—in other words upon God's grace rather than our own strength or will or some imaginary good that lies within us—then and only then will the fruits of faith begin to blossom in our garden. A fertile soil will begin to cover the rock base, the soil of faith. Gradually things begin to grow there and produce fruit which would never have grown before.

The stone foundation of original sin and the Rock of Atonement on Golgotha are the two rocks upon which a man's destiny is determined. If a man remains on the stone foundation of his natural fallen state, he is lost. And there is only one way that leads from the granite ledge of original sin to the Rock of Atonement: a firm stone bridge which is called the Word of God. God has provided His divine Word as the means through which the Holy Spirit can work to convict man of sin and lay bare his soul to its rocky base. And then, when man realizes the hopelessness of his condition, this same Holy Spirit, working through the same divine Word, will point him towards the rock of Atonement where his Redeemer was hung on a cross to pay the penalty for his sins and his sinfulness. And when we begin to believe down deep in our hearts that our Redeemer is all that we need in order for our sins and our sinfulness to be forgiven, then we can finally learn to forgive the sins of others, and that is the truth that makes us free.

So the knowledge of our sinfulness is both cross and comfort, enslavement and freedom. It shows us our slavery to sin and frees us from that slavery in the selfsame moment by showing us that we are completely dependent upon Christ. If we let the cross of the knowledge of our sinfulness drive us to the cross of Jesus Christ where all that sinfulness is washed away, then we are free indeed. Then, when we cry out in despair, along with Paul, *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"*—we receive the same answer that God gave Paul: *"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*

Amen.