

# “Underestimating the Powers of Sin and Grace”

Matthew 18:1-20

September 7, 2014

**One of my favorite stories of the Old Testament is God’s calling Samuel to be a prophet. You may remember that Samuel was, for all practical purposes, prayed into his existence.**

You may remember how his mother **Hannah** was barren for many years. One day she was praying about this so boldly and fervently in the temple that she told the **LORD God that if he would bless her with a son, she’d give her son back to the LORD wholeheartedly.** She would give him and his whole life to become an assistant in the LORD’s temple, which indeed she did, entrusting him to a priest there by the name of Eli. (I Samuel 1)

**Some years later, while Samuel is still a young boy, he hears someone calling out to him in the MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT and quite naturally he assumes it is Eli.** He runs to Eli’s bed, which the Bible tells us **was stationed very closely to the Ark of the Covenant,** which probably signifies something about the standing that Eli had with the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

“**What do you want?**” the young Samuel specifically asks Eli.

“**I wasn’t calling you!**” Eli says. **Well this happens three times and on the third time, Eli finally gets things figured out.**

“**Samuel, it is probably the LORD your God who is calling out to you.** So the next time that you hear these voices in the middle of the night simply say, “**Speak Lord, for your servant is listening!**” Wow! I wonder if there could be any more beautiful combination of human words in any human language which the LORD God would ever want to hear from us more than these, especially when we mean them.

Interestingly enough also, the name “**Samuel,**” means in Hebrew “**one who listens to God!**”

I titled this message this morning, “**Underestimating the Powers of Sin and Grace,**” because the appointed Scripture lessons that were read in this worship service today remind us that we often do both of these things. **(1) Sometimes, we greatly underestimate the power of sin. (2) And sometimes we greatly underestimate the power of God’s grace to save us from our sins!**

Well, there really are a **WHOLE RANGE OF DIFFERENT SUBJECTS** that present themselves to us in the 20 verses of this Gospel lesson today! Here we encounter such important topics as: **What qualifies a person for life in the kingdom of heaven? How serious is sin? How serious are the consequences of sin? What is our responsibility really, as those who make up a particular Christian community of believers, towards those in our midst who sometimes go astray? And what is the proper PROTOCOL for handling some of OUR LEGITIMATE DIFFERENCES AND DISAGREEMENTS with one another, in a way that would build up and not tear down the body of Christ?** But if you were to ask me this morning, “**Pastor Sizemore what do you see as the number one thread sewing all these words of our Lord Jesus Christ together?**” Well, I’d have to answer your question with one word—and that one word is “**SIN;**” sin, which St. John defines for us so clearly in I John 3:4 as “*The transgression of God’s law.*”

**I. Like it or not, we often underestimate the power of sin.**

**PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE WENT TO CHURCH ONE SUNDAY MORNING** while his wife stayed at home, and when he returned to the White House, she asked him the question, “What was the sermon about today?” President Coolidge answered the first lady by saying: “The sermon was about the same thing that the sermon is always about! It was about sin!”

**BUT LISTEN TO HOW OFTEN THE WORD SIN IS USED IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON THIS MORNING!**

*“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes 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 depths of the sea! (v. 6)*

*“Woe to the world for its temptations to sin!” (v. 7)*

*“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away!”*

*“If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away!”*

*“If one sheep goes astray, it’s because it has sinned.*

*“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault...” (V. 15)*

*“Sins that are bound on earth are bound in heaven. Sins that are loosed on earth are loosed in heaven.”*

**YES, TODAY JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT SIN AND IF ONE THING IS CLEAR FROM ALL THIS, IT’S THAT SIN IS A BIG DEAL.** It is a big deal for Jesus, and if we are truly Jesus’ disciples and followers in this world, then sin should still be a big thing to us! **SIN IS A SERIOUS MATTER, BUT ONE OF THE THINGS THAT EACH OF SINNERS LOVES TO DO IS TO MINIMIZE THE SERIOUSNESS OF OUR SIN IN OUR OWN MIND.** It makes us feel better to think that our sins aren’t really so bad because after all, no one is perfect!

(1). **WE MINIMIZE OUR SIN BY COMPARING OURSELVES WITH OTHER PEOPLE, EVEN WITH FAMOUS PEOPLE; THOSE POLITICIANS IN PUBLIC LIFE, OR HOLLYWOOD CELEBRITIES AND ENTERTAINERS;** none of which I will choose to name out loud this morning lest I be guilty of throwing the **FIRST STONE AT ANOTHER PERSON,** thereby, according to Jesus, making myself out to be a person who has no sin. You know the kinds of people I am speaking about, who often become the **brunt of many jokes by hosts on late night television talk shows; celebrities who are horrified this past week because someone has hacked into their computers and now posted nude photos they had of themselves on their hard drives for all the world to see!** We minimize sin by comparing ourselves to other people. **If they can get away with it, why can’t we? If they are not so bad, then I’m okay too.** Or – I am not as bad as that person and my sins are not as bad as his or her sins.

**BUT DO YOU AND I REALLY HEAR WHAT JESUS IS SAYING TO EACH OF US IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON THIS MORNING? JESUS SAYS THAT THE SINNER SHOULD BE FIRST AND FOREMOST CONCERNED ABOUT HIS OWN HAND, HIS OWN FOOT, AND HIS OWN EYE.** In his Sermon on the Mount he asks every one of us point blank: *“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s or your sister’s eye but cannot see the log that is in your own eye? First remove the log from your own eye and then you will be able to see far more clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s and sister’s eye?” (Matthew 7:3-5).*

**BESIDES, IF YOU AND I ARE CONCERNED IN ANYWAY ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, LET’S REMEMBER THAT GOD DOES NOT ASK US TO PRESENT OURSELVES AS ACCEPTABLE TO HIM BASED ON HOW WE MEASURE UP TO OTHER PEOPLE, BUT ON HOW WE MEASURE UP TO HIM.** Jesus also shocked his hearers one day when he said, *“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you can in no way enter into the kingdom of heaven!” (Matthew 5:48)* And God says to us through St. Peter, when Peter quotes the book of Leviticus: *“You must be holy! For I the LORD your God am holy!” (Leviticus 11:14, I Peter 1:16).*

**(2). ANOTHER PROBLEM THAT WE HAVE IS THAT OUR CULTURE HAS CHANGED AND CONTINUES TO CHANGE IN ITS VIEWS ABOUT SIN.** In fact, **THE WORD SIN** is hardly ever heard by anyone or used by anyone in public discourses anymore. Isn't this just another way of minimizing sin? We hear about peoples' "mistakes" and "imperfections" and "character flaws" and "foibles" and "peccadillos," **BUT DON'T YOU DARE SAY THE "S" WORD** or people will write you off immediately as nothing more than a Bible-thumping fanatic and nothing more!

**Someone tell Jesus about that! Jesus isn't afraid to call sin what it is and to warn us of its grave consequences. And I mean grave as in, it leads to the grave, and according to Jesus to something with even far more penetrating consequences beyond the grave!**

I know that we try to soften these words of Jesus some by saying that **Jesus was making use of a literary device that our English teachers taught us years ago, when we were in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, was called an "hyperbole;"** purposeful exaggeration to make a point. You know some good examples of hyperbole, don't you!?! I am so hungry, I could eat a horse! Or that suitcase weighs a ton! Or if I have told you once I have told you a million times, or your grandmother is as old as the hills! And some of that, of course, may be true here! But if it is true that we sometimes underestimate the power of sin...

**II. Like it or not, we sometimes greatly underestimate also the power of grace.** A close and honest look at what the Bible has to say about sin indicates that left to ourselves we are all in a serious heap of trouble! Who of us doesn't deserve the millstone treatment? Who of us shouldn't be plucking out an eye, or cutting off a hand or a foot? And the problem for us as human beings is that just like sheep, we are lost and we can't find our way back to the fold!

**But even if we did any or all of those things that Jesus is suggesting to us here, it wouldn't help us at all! But thanks be to God, he doesn't leave us to deal with the problem of sin by ourselves. Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, seeks out the lost sheep, and there are times when every one of us is that one sheep out of the 100 who goes astray! Jesus does not come down from the mountain to go looking for us, no he came down from heaven's high throne to seek and to save us!**

We underestimate the power of God's grace because we forget that Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; the one who like us was tempted in every such way as we are, though he never sinned, **entered this world to take our place when it comes to the millstone. Except, instead of carrying the millstone, he carried the cross all the way to Calvary for us instead! He was cast into the awful depths of the sea of God's wrath for our sin, only to rise from the deep darkness of death three days later on that first Easter morning!**

**JESUS CHRIST IS THE ONE WHO CUTS OFF NOT HAND OR PLUCK OUT EYE, BUT GIVES HIS WHOLE SELF---HIS BODY BROKEN UNTO DEATH ON THE CROSS FOR US AND HIS BLOOD SHED TO BE A SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS.** And he gives that same body and blood to sustain our faith so that we are never cut off from God's grace. Yes, sin is serious business for Jesus, and so much so that he goes to the cross, scorning its shame, as he bears the punishment for our sin and defeats death head on for us!

**And yet sin is still with us. Yes, the decisive battle has been one on Calvary, but there is still some mopping up action to do. I remember learning that the decisive battle in the Revolutionary War was the battle of Saratoga, but even after that there was some mopping up that had to be done. I remember studying that the D-Day Invasion was the decisive battle that won the Allied Victory in Europe, but still there was some mopping up action to do.**

I believe that Jesus Christ is here today to offer to us all the benefits of the sacrifice that he made for us because of our sins. He gives to us, the Bible says, his very body and blood to sustain our faith so that we are never cut off from God's grace!

**Friends, you may have heard about those two dear brothers who inherited a large farm from their parents estate who decided to divide this huge acreage into two smaller farms so that they would each hopefully have something to pass on to their own children one day.** They worked together for 25 years beautifully, when unfortunately upon the 26<sup>th</sup> year of their arrangement they fell into a horrible dispute with one another. It was their first serious rift of farming side by side, sharing machinery and trading labor and goods as necessary. They had never had a quarrel until now. It began with a small misunderstanding that unfortunately mushroomed into a major difference and finally exploded in a war of words, followed by silence and separation. One morning there was a knock at the backdoor of the older brother's house. The older brother opened the door and found a man standing outside. He was slumped over to the right side by the weight of the toolbox he was carrying in his right hand.

"I'm looking for a few days' work!" said the itinerate carpenter. "Perhaps you have a job I can do for you!"

"Well, I believe I do," said the older brother. "Look across that creek that separates my farm from my brother's property, who, lives over that way. Two weeks ago there was a beautiful meadow between our farms, but then he ran a bulldozer through the river levee and now there is this really large creek between us. I suspect he did that to spite me, but I will do him one better. You see that big pile of lumber. I want you to build a fence, an eight-foot high fence, between us so that I never have to look at him and his place, or never be reminded of him ever again! Can you handle such a job?"

The man replied, "I think I understand the situation. Please show me your tool shed and I will do a job that pleases you!"

The brother was going to town, so he got the carpenter all set up and then left for the day. The carpenter toiled all day, measuring, cutting and pounding nails. At sunset, the brother returned from town just as the carpenter was finishing. The brother was aghast! There was no fence, but rather a bridge across the creek. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship that even included handrails.

But no sooner was the older brother about to step out of his truck to read the riot-act to the carpenter, when his younger brother came running across his property towards the older brother, thinking that the older brother had built that bridge! "You certainly are a wonderful brother and excellent craftsman too," the younger brother exclaimed to the older thinking the older brother had built the bridge himself—when nothing could be further from the truth. **The older brother had to give credit where credit was due! But still, whether you believe it or not—those two brothers warmly embraced each other at the center of the bridge that day, and their relationship began anew!**

**As they turned around they saw the carpenter leaving! "No, wait!" they said. We probably have some more jobs for you to do!" "No thanks," the carpenter said, "I must be moving along! I have other bridges that need to be built for other people elsewhere too!"**

**We all know what it means to be hurt by someone else, but we often forget that our real enemy is not that other person, but the sin that caused the other person to do what they did and the sin on our part that perhaps caused us to react the way that we did.** The Bible says that we all have sinned and caused ourselves and one another deep pain because these are the serious consequences of our sin. ***"But the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son cleanses us from all sins!" (I John 1:7)***

**So when your brother or sister sins against you, what should you do? Stop talking to them?**

**Perhaps, we have all done this for a while, and maybe this is necessary so that we don't go on to say something else that we would only deeply regret later too.** But the Bible says that there should come a time when we go and speak to that other person, maybe with just as much of a willingness to acknowledge our part in what went wrong, as we go with a willingness to point out to that other person their faults and sins. But we should always go to that other person with the primary intention of being restored to a right relationship to him or her; go with the intention of genuinely winning back our brother or our sister, rather than just winning an argument.

**HOW MANY TIMES IN OUR LIVES DO WE DISCOVER THAT WE MIGHT WIN THE ARGUMENT, BUT STILL END UP LOSING OUR FRIEND?**

Do you hear St. Paul in our epistle lesson this morning! He says, **“OWE NO ONE ANYTHING EXCEPT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER!”** Paul says there is one debt that should always be outstanding, and here we can understand the word **“OUTSTANDING”** in two different ways: meaning, the debt is never fully paid, and it is a good debt to have—the debt to love one another as God in Christ has first loved every one of us! (Romans 13:8-10)

May God grant this to each one of us for Jesus' sake! Amen