

April 22, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on the Second Sunday after Easter, 2012.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 43 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxviii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvii (CIPBC 1963).

³ Jeremiah 31:23-37 (KJV).

⁴ I Peter 2:11—3:7 (KJV).

⁵ I Peter 2:19-20 (RSV).

⁶ St. Matthew 15:18-20a (RSV); cf. James 4:1-3 & 17.

⁷ I John 3:10 (RSV).

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SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-third Verse of the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.³

“... Thus saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; As yet they shall use this speech in the land of Judah and in the cities thereof, when I shall bring again their captivity; The LORD bless thee, O habitation of justice, and mountain of holiness. And there shall dwell in Judah itself, and in all the cities thereof together, husbandmen, and they that go forth with flocks. For I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul. Upon this I awaked, and beheld; and my sleep was sweet unto me.

“Behold, the days come, saith [SETH] the LORD, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man, and with the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith [SETH] the LORD. In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children’s teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge.

“Behold, the days come, saith [SETH] the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith [SETH] the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith [SETH] the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they

shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith [SETH] the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

“Thus saith [SETH] the LORD, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; The LORD of hosts is his name: If those ordinances depart from before me, saith [SETH] the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith [SETH] the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the second Chapter of First Epistle General of St. Peter.⁴

“... Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. For this is thankworthy, if a man for

tiently when our own wrongdoing has brought that suffering down upon us.

It is this narrower subcategory category, that of “moral evils”, which most closely approaches equality with the concept of “sin”, although even then those two are not precisely the same. For “sin” means our willful misconduct that has one additional component, namely, that it tends to separate us from fellowship with God. As St. John tells us, “By this it may be seen who are the children of God; and who are the children of the devil: whosoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.”⁷

Usually, any wrongdoing towards others also means some form of disobedience toward God. Where God has enjoined us to live in love with our fellow humans, it is difficult to think of a *moral evil*, that is, a conscious human choice to do harm, that does not also possess that aspect of disobedience. Nevertheless, at least in theory, the two notions of “moral evil” and of “sin” are not precisely identical, however little distinction there may be between them in practice.

Conclusion:

So what St. Peter is telling us in today’s Epistle is that there is no cause for self-congratulations when we suffer patiently harms that are inflicted on us but which we deserve because they are the legitimate punishments for our own choices, that is, that we have properly brought upon ourselves. Rather, what is the Christian virtue is to suffer patiently the wrongs which other people have inflicted on us but which we do not ourselves deserve, precisely as our Lord suffered torture and death for crimes He had not committed.

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within evil and the way to determine in which of those sub-categories a particular form of harm belongs is to answer the question, “Was human volition, that is, voluntary human choice, was involved in causing that particular harm?”

For there are many types of harm that happen in this world without any human intentions, but rather as the inevitable results of living in a physical world that is populated by people who possess free will. Wildfires—at least the ones that are not the result of arson or recklessness—, storms, landslides, epidemics: all these are harmful, and very much to be prevented whenever possible, but they are not the consequences of anyone’s choices.

So they are what philosophers call *pre-moral* evils or, sometimes, *ontic* evils. Absent from them is any specific human actor whom we could call their *moral agent*. So the first great subcategory of the larger class “evil” is composed of those unfortunate events that occur without conscious human agency.

That means, of course, that the second great subcategory of “evil” is composed of those unfortunate events that *do* occur through human moral agency, that is, as the result of human choices. You will recall how our Lord taught that “[W]hat ... proceeds from the heart ... defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man....”⁶

It is these *moral evils*, these consequences of deliberate human action, to which St. Peter was referring in today’s Epistle. For we do not ascribe the qualities of “just” and “unjust” to actions or events over which people have no control. Clearly, Peter was telling us that we are to suffer patiently when we suffer through the unjust—that is, impliedly, chosen but improperly chosen—actions of others, for there can be no merit—which is a moral quality—in suffering pa-

conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

“Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement. Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Epistle: “For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it, you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God’s approval.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction:

St. Peter tells us to suffer unjust wrongs with patience. But this raises an interesting question: just what does he mean by “unjust wrongs”? To answer that really means we need to take a look at the whole idea of “wrongs” or “evils”.

Theme:

In that connection, there is a 1971 rock-and-roll song that was written by Don McLean as a tribute to Buddy Holly, the famous singer who was killed in a 1959 airplane crash. This work is named after the opening words of its refrain, “Bye, bye, Miss American Pie...”; I was in junior high school when Buddy Holly died and was several years out of college when that song about him became a hit, so I well remember both the news reports of the one and hearing the original release of the other.

And when “*American Pie*” was released, I was over 21 years of age, that is, old enough to drink whiskey, but not so old that drinking it was not still something of a novelty. So I was perhaps a bit focused on that subject, and as soon as I heard McLean’s chorus, I heard a significant logical fallacy that is contained in the lyrics. In fact, I myself call this particular error of thinking “the *American Pie* fallacy”. It appears in the lines of the chorus that say, “Drove a Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry. The good old men were drinking whiskey and rye....”

Development:

You will already be familiar with a related logical error which occurs when someone tries to aggregate unrelated qualities and which is summarized by the familiar phrase, “That’s mixing apples and oranges”. Using this familiar image, the *American Pie* fallacy can be summarized by saying, “That’s mixing apples and fruit”. For what Don McLean got wrong is that while all rye is whiskey, not all whiskey is rye; instead, “whiskey” is the more inclusive category and “rye” is a subcategory within “whiskey”.

In fact, not everything that passes as “rye” is rye, but that is a topic for another occasion. We are in church, not at a seminar on spirituous liquors. So we must note that, just as Don McLean’s search for appropriate rhymes led him to confuse the respective comprehensiveness of the different categories “rye” and “whiskey”, so, too, many people searching for spiritual guidance confuse the different categories “evil” and “sin”. There is much evil in this world and much of that evil is also sinful, but evil and sin are not equivalents.

Rather, as with apples and fruit or rye and whiskey, we must recognize that all sin is evil but not all evils are sinful. Like “fruit” and “whiskey”, “evil” is the more inclusive category; so, too, like “apples” and “rye”, “sin” is the more specialized subcategory within “evil”.

So, if you have been following my argument, by this time you are certainly asking yourselves, “If ‘evil’ and ‘sin’ are not the same, then what does he mean by ‘evil’, and what does he mean by ‘sin’?”

The differences between those two are simple but profound. First, let us look at the more comprehensive category, that of “evil”. Simply put, evil is anything that does us harm or damage. Now there are two great subcategories