

Many members. One body united in Christ

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-19

18 February, Anno Domini 2026

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We might ask “Why talk about the seven deadly sins when there are the Ten Commandments?” And by all means, the seven deadly sins are not put before us as a substitute for the commandments. That would be heresy and blasphemy. Rather, our forefathers in the faith, meditating on the Word of God, have put forth these seven as a helpful framework to help us think further about sin and where it is lurking in our hearts.

It is really better if we return to the original designation of these sins as capital sins. In other words from these, as from a fountain head, flow various other sins all of which bring death and separation from God. These seven aren't the only ones worthy of eternal judgment. They are merely a helpful tool as we examine our lives in preparation for confession and absolution.

And that is the point of our mid-week meditations this year. We want to think very specifically and concretely about our sins against God and one another so that we can recognize them, confess them, mark them, and fight to avoid them. If we are unwilling to consider our specific sins, then we can quickly begin to believe, as the Pharisee in today's Gospel reading, that we aren't one of those sinners who needs to be forgiven all that much.

None of us generically sin. Sin is specific. We are poor, miserable sinners who think, speak, and act lovelessly in very specific ways. And those who are aware of how their own sinful nature seeks to express itself are acutely aware of their need for God's mercy and are eager to take advantage of it wherever Christ tells them it is available. Like the poor, sinful woman, those who consider their sins specifically, are not interested in keeping up appearances in front of others. They will get to Jesus. They know they are sinners. They know they are unclean. And they know

that Jesus, only Jesus, can make them clean.

Today, we hear our Lord call to us “Yet even now, return to Me with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” And note that all of God’s people are called to the fast - elders, children, and nursing infants, bridegrooms and brides. Everyone. And it is public. There are trumpets. The priests are crying out on behalf of the people. But by no means is it just a show. It is God’s people doing what God’s people do - returning to God with sackcloth and ashes, with fasting and weeping, because we have sinned in thought, word, and deed and because our God IS “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.”

Only those who have turned away from the Lord need to return. Only those whose eyes look somewhere other than to the Lord their God for every or even any good need to return. Only those whose hearts have lusted and coveted the things of this world and have been willing to set aside the commandments of God and things of His righteousness need to return. All of us need to return. We all like sheep have gone astray seeking our own way rather than the way of the cross of Jesus Christ which is filled with self-denial, sacrifice, and daily crucifying the Old Adam to bring the flesh into submission to the Word of God.

During this Lenten season we will be taking the opportunity to view sin from the lens of the seven capital or deadly sins. Gregory I, during the 6th century, was the first to assemble the list as a help for self-examination in preparation for confession. These are not alternatives to the commandments. They simply help us think more broadly about our sins and what they are. They also give us the opportunity to consider their corresponding virtues for which we should ask the Lord to help us strive after. The seven together with their virtues are as follows: lust and chastity; gluttony and temperance; greed and generosity; sloth and diligence; wrath and patience; envy and kindness; pride and humility.

Listen carefully in the coming weeks and consider where in your life these sins or vices are directing your thinking, speaking, and acting. Don’t try to soften the blow or protect your sin where the Law points it out. You are a sinner. You know that. The Lord knows that. And He already knows your sins better than you do. He knows those sins that you aren’t even aware of. The Holy Spirit reveals your sin

for your benefit. He loves you and desires that these sins not quietly lead you away from Christ and eternal life. They can. And they will if you don't take them seriously, if you think your debt of sin is smaller than others and that you don't need as much mercy, or that you can continue in your sins because they aren't as bad as the sins of others.

You don't need to fear knowing and acknowledging your sin because you know that God has already provided the cure and loves to give it to all who repent. We don't examine ourselves simply to know our sins. We identify our sins so that we can confess them, so that we can bring them into the light of Christ, so that we can drive the devil into a rage as we say with all boldness and confidence that our pastor's forgiveness IS Christ's forgiveness because Christ said so, and, most importantly, so that we can hear the voice of Christ as our pastor says to us "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you ALL your sins in the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit." And what more joy can we have than to give our full-throated "Amen" to Christ's absolution, knowing that it is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord were standing in front of us Himself? Truly, there is no greater joy because this joy is the joy of having the entire weight of hell and eternal judgment swept away by the command and promise of God. There is no reason to doubt this absolution because it has been accomplished and sealed by the Blood of God who died and rose and stood in the midst of His disciples to breath upon them this Easter peace.

Faith never takes a minimalist approach to the means of God's grace and forgiveness. Quite the opposite. Faith is a maximalist when it comes to God's forgiveness. Wherever He promises to put it, faith will be there because it simply can't get enough of it. The means aren't in competition with one another nor is one of the means a substitute for the other. Thus, we are to take full advantage of both corporate and individual confession. One is not better or more important or more valid than another. Both are good. If Christ gives it, it is good and you need it. And as we examine our lives and become more aware of our specific sins, individual confession affords us the opportunity to specifically name them and rip them away from the devil as a weapon against us to harass us and further tempt us. Our flesh loves to hide behind generalities because generalities can be much more easily minimized and ignored. When we repent of not praying, the fruit of repentance is prayer. When we repent of yelling at our children, the fruit of repentance is to stop

yelling at them and gently lead and teach them. If we only repent of being a sinner, what is the fruit of repentance? You can't stop being a sinner. John the Baptist says clearly to repentant sinners "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." The fruit doesn't save you. Rather, it is the manifestation of true repentance and the joy that God has pardoned your iniquity. The one who is forgiven aches to make right what he put wrong. Returning what was stolen, gathering your family for devotions, blocking pornographic websites, choosing what is right and good over what is comfortable and popular, speaking so as to build up rather than tear down your neighbor - we do these because we have been forgiven not in order to be. The woman who wiped Jesus' feet with her tears and hair and anointed him with ointment did these things because she believed that Jesus was the forgiveness of her sins. She knew that nothing she did could earn God's forgiveness. But she did believe God's promises. She was saved because her hope and trust were in what God was doing for her in Christ.

The joy of confession is the absolution because we believe Jesus when He tells the apostles and those who now fill their office "If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." This is precisely why we did not abolish private confession at the time of the Reformation. It was reformed so that it would be used in accordance with the Word of God. Works of satisfaction were removed because they are contrary to the Gospel. The Word of Christ is the strength and power of the gift. And our forefathers urged its faithful use because they knew how great and precious a treasure it was. Luther wrote "Whoever is a Christian or would like to be one is here faithfully advised to go and get the precious treasure...we strongly urge you by all means to make confession of your need, not with the intention of doing a worthy work by confessing, but in order to hear what God has arranged for you to be told. What I am saying is that you are to concentrate on the Word, on the Absolution, to regard it as a great and precious and magnificently splendid treasure, and to accept it with all praise and thanksgiving to God."

Children of God, I pray that God would grant His Holy Spirit to us all this Lenten season so that we may rightly understand and be horrified by our sins and so run to the medicine which He has prepared by the death and resurrection of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, which we prepare to celebrate at the end of this 40-day journey.

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Let us together make time daily to be in prayer and in the Scriptures, to avail ourselves of the gift of private absolution, and to receive Holy Communion frequently that we may be strengthened by it. God grant these things to the glory of His saving Name.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.