

Dear members and friends of St. John,

You may have heard the terms **venial** and **mortal**, when someone was talking about **sin**. You may have never heard these terms used in the Lutheran church, and had concluded (incorrectly) that Lutherans never make distinctions about sins that are committed by baptized believers in Jesus Christ.

Let's begin by looking at the definition of each of these terms, as described by the first synodical president of the LC-MS, Dr. C. F. W. Walther:

"Venial sins... are sins that Christians commit without losing the Holy Spirit. They are sins of weakness or rashness and are sometimes called the 'daily sins' of Christians. Sins that expel the Holy Spirit and bring on spiritual death are called **mortal sins.**" ⁽¹⁾

The next point that **must** be understood is that **any sin** may potentially become a **mortal sin**. By that, I'm saying that you must **not** think about your "pet sins" (like cursing, or having lustful thoughts, telling "little white" lies, etc., etc.) as being **harmless to your spiritual life**. In fact, it's **when** you think of these sins as "no big deal," that God "certainly would not condemn me for such a trivial offense," it's then, in fact, that **you have lost faith in Christ, and are headed straight for hell**. In short, **all sin should terrify the Christian**.

Let's examine Jesus' own words that He spoke during His Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-19, ESV).

First, we understand that **Jesus has fulfilled** all of God's Law and the predictions of the prophets, by living a perfect life, dying on the cross, and rising again on Easter. Jesus has satisfied the requirements of the God's Law as the perfect substitute for mankind. In effect, Jesus is the Second Adam that came to accomplish what the first Adam failed to do: keep the Law perfectly. The Second Adam's death was accepted as an atonement for the first Adam's failure (and all of his offspring's failures). All of mankind was reconciled to the Father in this redemptive act.

Now, all who believe in Jesus' atoning work on the cross (those who have faith in Christ), are **removed from the condemnation** that would have come upon death, because of their sinfulness. This is precisely where the **false Christian** finds comfort. He or she says, "Yes! Now, I can live in sin and not worry about ending up in hell when I die!" Wrong! (see 1 Corinthians 10:12, Luke 8:13, 1 Timothy 4:1).

The next two verses of our text show the **fallacy** of believing that **sin is "no big deal."** In verse 18, Jesus makes it perfectly clear that His fulfillment of the Law does **not** mean that **sin no longer matters to our Father in heaven**. Not even a little relaxation of the Commandments will be tolerated by God. Verse 19 continues with the understanding that the Christian who relaxes the Commandments to accommodate his or her sinful lifestyle, and then leads others to do the same, will be *"called least in the kingdom of heaven."* Walther states that *"least* means the most

condemned...That will be the sentence passed on them."⁽¹⁾ In other words, they are condemned to **eternal suffering in hell.**

The last part of verse 19, Jesus states that "*whoever does them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*" We, of course, cannot **do** the Commandments perfectly. But Jesus' perfection is imputed to us, because of faith in Him. In essence, we have been declared righteous by God – as if **we** had accomplished perfection.

Walther continues: "**A Christian grieves even over the smallest sins, but unbelievers imagine that they can 'escape from their crimes.'**"⁽¹⁾ Unfortunately for the unbeliever, Jesus says in Matthew 12: "*I tell you, on the day of Judgment people will give an account for every careless word they speak*" (v. 36). However, for the believer, each violation of **even a small** (or "pet") **sin makes our conscience shudder.** God leads us to "grieve" our wretched condition, sinfulness that hurts our Lord with even the smallest of infractions.

This leads us to understand that there is **no such thing as a sin that is venial by nature.** For *every* sin has the potential to lead us to reject God's call to repentance, reject His loving counsel, and instead choose a life of eternal separation from God (allowing our natural, sinful condition to rule and reign in our hearts). **Then, what makes a sin venial?** Our faith in Christ that has **separated that sin from us**, as far as the East is from the West (see Psalm 103:11-12). We live in a state of grace, blanketed by God's forgiveness! In truth, we are forgiven of that sin even before we have a chance to ask God for forgiveness. Forgiveness is instantaneous!

What makes a sin mortal? It's *the* sin (big or small) that leads to acts of continual, willful sin (a state of unrepentance). The Holy Spirit has fled the body after this mortal sin, and that person is lost in sin.

For those of you who have "come to terms" with your "small" sins, St. Paul states: "*work out your own salvation with **fear and trembling**,¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*" (Phil. 2:12-13). There is **no sin** that, once committed, should leave you with **no worries, no regrets.**

And when you feel condemned, that not even Jesus could forgive you of your lifetime of sins, understand this: "*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation*" (Romans 5:6-11, ESV).

May God continue to work repentance in you, that you may know His peace and joy, and are able to wait with anticipation for His glorious return. Amen.

Pastor Travis

⁽¹⁾ C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel, How to Read and Apply the Bible, A Reader's Edition*, CPH: St. Louis, c. 2010, Thirty-first Evening Lecture: June 12, 1885.