

What's your favorite sin?

Now, before you start shouting out "Gluttony" or "sloth", allow me to explain exactly what I mean. I don't want to know what your favorite sin to do yourself is. What I want to know is, what's your favorite sin to condemn in OTHER PEOPLE?

We all have favorite sins like that-- sins that, when other people do them, just drive us crazy. Let me give you an example. I once knew a wonderful woman named Joyce. Now, Joyce had a lot of experience volunteering for Christian organizations. One day, she heard that a well known, national Bible study organization was interviewing potential leaders to start up local Bible study chapters in her area.

Joyce knew that this sort of thing was right up her alley, so she applied. Her application was met with enthusiasm, so the organization sent a woman to interview Joyce. The interview was going great, and the woman interviewing Joyce was about to wrap things up. She just had a few final questions as she filled out the paperwork.

"And of course," she said, "you've never been divorced."

"But I HAVE been divorced," Joyce cut in. "Is that important?"

The interviewer got a concerned look. "Well, it doesn't make a difference to ME," she said, looking very uncomfortable, "But I'll have to check with my superior..."

And so Joyce had to wait. In a couple of weeks, the interviewer called Joyce with the bad news.

"Joyce dear, I'm afraid that we just can't make an exception to the rule. You're a great candidate, but we simply don't allow divorced people to *lead* our Bible studies."

"Why not?" Joyce asked.

"Well... I suppose it's because someone might find out and think that divorce is okay."

"But I would tell them the truth about it—the heartbreak... how awful it is."

"I'm sorry, but we simply can't let you," the interviewer said.

"Hold on," said Joyce. "I've got a question. What if I had never been divorced, but I had been convicted of murder and was now out of prison. Could I be a Bible study leader then?"

"Well, yes," the interviewer said, "assuming that you had repented of your sin."

"So if I were a murderer, I could lead your Bible study. But I've been divorced, and I can't," said Joyce, astonished.

"I'm afraid those are the rules," said the interviewer.

And there you have it. The interviewer, her superior, and her organization, had a favorite sin to condemn: divorce. In a world FULL of sin, that's the one they focused on. The one that THEY had decided was unforgivable. I'm sure they had their own rationale for it— but no matter how you cut it, they had put themselves in God's place as judge and jury. The specifics of the case and the qualifications of the potential Bible study leader didn't even come into play. If someone had been divorced, they weren't fit to lead one of their Bible studies.

You know, our reading from James today makes it clear that, if you've committed one sin, you've committed them all. Not literally, but rather in the sense that committing any sin makes you a sinner and therefore no judge of other sinners.

But that's the thing about favorite sins. They provide someone who is them self a sinner with a soapbox from which to judge others. And everyone has a list of reasons a mile long why THEIR favorite sin is the most important one.

Back in my parish in Pittsburgh, I got to know Beth Platz, whose sister was a member of my congregation. Now, Beth was the first woman ordained in the Lutheran church in this country. I don't consider ordaining women to even *be* a sin, but back in the early 1970s, quite a few people did.

Well, during one conversation, Beth told me that she had received more than your run-of-the-mill, angry letters as her ordination approached. It turns out that she had actually received some DEATH THREATS in the mail.

Can you IMAGINE? Ordaining women was someone's favorite sin to such an extent that they felt justified in threatening to commit murder. I can't even imagine how they would rationalize that kind of awful behavior. I suppose that they would put together a list of Bible verses and conclude that ordaining women was going to destroy the Church by severing it from its biblical roots.

You and I know that NO list of Bible verses and NO rationalization could have justified those threats. But again, that's the nature of favorite sins— they justify ALL KINDS of terrible, sinful behavior in the minds of those who cling to them.

That's why the book of James has so much to say to us today. James, you see, is the book that says, "Faith isn't just what you BELIEVE—it's HOW YOU LIVE."

In fact, James has so MANY rules on how to live that it's easy to dismiss the book as being nothing more than a list of "do's and don'ts." But there's more to James than that. Twice in just two chapters James has said that there is something MORE IMPORTANT than keeping the rules. And THAT is to live by what James calls "the PERFECT LAW of LIBERTY."

The last time James used the phrase, he used it in such a way as to show that the LAW of LIBERTY is something you take seriously if you take your FAITH seriously. In Today's reading, James, the champion of keeping the rules, tells his readers that we will ALL be judged by the LAW of LIBERTY.

Does that mean liberty to do whatever we want? Heck no. It means that we *grant* liberty to our brothers and sisters to follow their own consciences, even when WE DON'T LIKE what they are DOING.

James emphasizes his point with one of the most profound little sentences you'll find in all of Scripture outside the First Chapter of John. He writes: "For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."

As I said before, James is no "anything goes" kind of guy. He believes that the Christian community should act a certain way, and he provides some pretty strict guidelines to follow. But the MOST important thing, James says, is to understand that, as sinners, we are not to JUDGE one another.

Sisters and brothers in Christ will have points on which they disagree. When that happens, we follow the LAW of LIBERTY and assume that God is directing the consciences of OTHERS JUST as HE IS DIRECTING OUR OWN.

James doesn't spell it out in our reading, but the REASON that the LAW of LIBERTY applies to us Christians is pretty CLEAR: In BAPTISM, we were promised the HOLY SPIRIT. But that SPIRIT doesn't lead us all in LOCK STEP to the SAME CONCLUSIONS. Sometimes, that same Spirit appears to lead us to OPPOSING CONCLUSIONS.

Think of Beth Platz— The Spirit led her to be ordained, and most people rejoiced in Beth's decision. But to others in the Church, Beth appeared to be committing a sin. The Perfect Law of Liberty suggests that there is ROOM in the church for this kind of disagreement. Not that "anything goes," but that we should acknowledge that FAITHFUL PEOPLE can DISAGREE.

Thankfully, the Law of Liberty prevailed in Beth's case. Very few people left the Lutheran church following her ordination. But I'll bet that the guy who sent her the DEATH THREATS left. Because, to him, the ordination of women was a Sin of Sins- his FAVORITE SIN to CONDEMN, in fact- and I'll bet he NEVER LET GO of his ANGER.

The funny thing is, we can ALL relate to that ANGRY GUY on SOME LEVEL. Even when we TRY not to be judgmental, there are STILL SOME THINGS that bother us MORE THAN OTHERS DO. So we ALL struggle with our FAVORITE SINS to CONDEMN.

I don't know WHY, for sure. Maybe we get a sense of security from feeling 100% certain or justified on at least ONE TOPIC. Or maybe it's just super-hard to remember that our brothers and sisters in Christ are just as saved as we are, and have the same Holy Spirit that we do.

If you struggle with having a FAVORITE SIN to condemn, you're NOT ALONE. I'm RIGHT THERE WITH YOU. Want to know what MY FAVORITE SIN is?

My favorite sin to condemn is JUDGMENTALISM. When I see someone being JUDGEMENTAL or SELF-RIGHTEOUS, I just want to STRING THEM UP so that EVERYONE can see what HYPOCRITES they are. Maybe beat them with a HOSE.

Isn't that a RIOT? MY SIN is that I pass JUDGMENT on people who are JUDGMENTAL! It's like I'm being a HYPOCRITE... SQUARED— A SUPER-HYPOCRITE.

Lucky for me, James, through the Spirit, has given me the invitation to TAKE OFF my JUDGES' ROBES. He invites me to PUT DOWN my GAVEL and ask, "What would JESUS DO?" Not the JESUS of the MEDIA or of POLITICS, but the REAL JESUS, the one described by John when he writes:

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

If JESUS didn't come to condemn, then I guess that that isn't MY JOB either. Or yours. And thank God for that. Amen.

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