

I remember being very distressed by splinters when I was a kid. Splinters are not terribly serious. You won't die from having a splinter. They do cause a bit of discomfort, but what's far worse, is that the splinter has to come out. To get the splinter out, the finger must be turned over to an adult. What might the adult do? Armed with a needle or tweezers, the adult must dig around in there until the splinter comes out. I remember asking, "Can't we just leave the splinter in there?" I didn't like how the splinter ached, but I more disliked the much sharper pain involved with getting it out.

I think this is helpful for what can happen to us spiritually. Just as it is by no means unusual that a kid gets a splinter while playing, it is very common to fall into sin. Just as a kid regrets doing what he was doing whereby he got the splinter, so also a person can regret having sinned. The advantage or the pleasure of the sin soon passes, and we are left with a dull ache. We've disappointed ourselves. We thought that we were better than that. Maybe we'd promised ourselves, "Never again!" and now look at what we've done. What a shame.

But besides that dull ache of disappointment, the splinter of sin doesn't hurt too badly. It's nothing compared to the much sharper pain of being caught. That is very embarrassing. So our natural reaction is to try to manage sin on our own. We'll cover it up. We'll lie about it if we have to. Eventually, with the passage of enough time, we'll forget about it—and that's a relief. If we manage to pass through this experience without too much pain, we might draw the conclusion that our sins didn't harm us. We got a splinter, but—like we so hoped for when we were children—it didn't need to come out. It seemed to have gone away on its own.

With splinters we can easily see the childishness of believing that it will just go away on its own. The splinter will cause infection. The poison of infection will spread. The more time passes, the worse it will get. The splinter must come out.

We are not as good at seeing how childish it is to believe that sins won't harm us. Just as a splinter inevitably has an effect on the health of a finger, so also sins have an effect on the soul. Think back to the sins that you committed even when you were a little kid—3, 4, 5 years old. Sins darken the mind. They create a habit of lying. Already at a young age we can easily draw the conclusion that sins will not harm us so long as we do not get caught.

But sins are nasty and ugly, full of puss and consequences. Unlike splinters, which only affect the person who has them, sins affect others. One person's nastiness draws out the nastiness of another. The bible shows that sin affects the whole community. The entire people of Israel needed to be cleansed when only a portion had sinned. Therefore we should not be so nonchalant to think that sins cannot affect a congregation, a classroom, a workplace, a family, or a couple. Sins are no child's play.

However, a very powerful spiritual force fights against this understanding of sin. It is far worse enemy of Christianity than evolution or wokeism or whatever other boogymen Christians might fear. This spiritual force does everything within its power to lull people to sleep with gentle phrases about the harmlessness of sin. It says, for example, "All this fuss and bother about sin is counterproductive. If we want the church to grow we must focus on other things! What's the use of sticking with old fashioned

morals when even the old fashioned couldn't keep them? Or Jesus's commands: aren't they unreasonable? Show me one person who forgives, who gives, who is without anger or lust."

And maybe I haven't quite caught the tune that would make you shut your eyes to the seriousness of sins, but I know that tune is out there, because we human beings all have the same basic hope. Somewhere in all of us is the hope that our sins won't matter. Our sins aren't deadly. We can manage them without any great change. There is no need to go through the sharp pain of repenting them. Just leave them be and hope for the best.

When people believe that sins do not matter, that they do not cause much harm, then the devil has won. This is exactly how the devil wants us to deal with our sins. He wants us to believe that sins are fine or natural or funny or unimportant. Everybody does them, so what's the harm? He'll blabber on and on until he finds something that sticks. And he'll find it too, because, as I've said, there is a part of all of us that wants to believe the splinter does not need to be taken out.

The devil starts to lose his grip on people when they move from not caring to caring. This happens when people start to hate the splinter, start to hate sin. So long as people believe that they can peacefully coexist with sin, they remain in the devil's grip. But sometimes people get sick of the muck and guck and puss and stench of sin. People hate the lovelessness, the chaos, the shame, the hatred, the broken relationships. They get sick of that splinter that has caused them so much grief. They want the splinter out!

This is when tax collectors, prostitutes, drug addicts, liars, porn addicts, alcoholics, scrooges—losers of all kinds—might turn to Christ. They hate their life which has been ruined by sin. They want something else. They long for healing, and they are willing to humble themselves in order to get it.

The fundamental posture of all disciples is always the same. It's the posture we see in people in the Gospels. People came to Jesus who were blind, deaf, lame, mute, demon-possessed—absolutely wretched. They said, "Jesus, help me!" It is the same posture of those who hate their lives, hate themselves, hate their sins, hate the splinters with all their puss and filth. "Jesus, heal me!"

When such people come to believe that Jesus forgives them, that Jesus died for them, that Jesus will make them better, they then hate all the more the devil with his practically infinite lies, all of which minimize the importance of sin. On the other hand, they begin to like what God has commanded and taught—stuff that they formerly might have rejected and fought against. They've been converted. They renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways, and they have embraced a new Lord and God from whom they want help. They no longer want to be on the side of sin and lies and false hope. They want to be on the side that fights sin, that's true, that embraces the light, even though it means that they have fallen into the strong and terrifying hands of God. If suffer they must, then suffer they will! Suffering is by no means the worst thing. Health, life, truth—that is to say, God's kingdom—this is what they want.

What I've spoken about today—a kind of insanely long introduction—is an attempt to get at something that otherwise might be difficult to understand about our Gospel reading. Our Gospel reading talks about how John the Baptist's preaching was successful, particularly among those whom you'd think

would be the most resistant. John was successful among the unwashed masses. Why did John the Baptist come to be loved by the tax collectors and sinners? Was it because John the Baptist told them that they were fine just as they were? That their sins didn't matter? No. Just the opposite.

John hated sin. He wasn't scared of it either. He didn't believe that it was inevitable or invincible or any other garbage that the devil likes to say about sin. John himself couldn't really do anything about sin, but he was an ambassador for Jesus, who was coming after him, whose sandal strap he was unworthy to untie. The Christ is the only one who forgives sins. He promises to wash away all the stains and puss and filth for the life to come.

So, to use the analogy we've been working with today, John was someone who would speak the truth. He would say, "That's a splinter. That needs to come out. You'll be sorry if it doesn't." Since we all know the pain of getting a splinter out, we can understand why some people hated John. They preferred their false belief to the truth of God's Word that—even though painful—would have helped them.

But some people loved the possibilities that opened up by the Word of God that John spoke. They were so full of splinters, they were so sick of the consequences of their sins, that they embraced John's baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. They didn't want to go on with the misery of loneliness, helplessness, and hopelessness. They wanted health, life, and light. They wanted Jesus to be their king instead of the devil. Disciples of Jesus show up in the most unexpected of places.

All of us, including me, have our splinters. They are not cute. They are not harmless. Even if we manage to forget them, they don't stop silently pumping out their poison. They have to come out. How? We can't do it ourselves. We can't get deep enough. We have to turn ourselves over to the adult, so to speak. We have to turn ourselves over to Jesus. That requires courage. What will he do? Is that a needle or a tweezers I see?

But don't be too afraid. Jesus is good at what he does. He is the good physician who has come to heal those who are sick, who have need of him as a physician.

