

Today I would like to talk about how we can become insensitive to sin. Being insensitive to sin means that it doesn't affect us, it doesn't provoke a reaction. If a millstone were tied around our neck and we were about to be thrown into the sea, this would provoke a reaction: panic, terror. Jesus says that this would be better for us than to cause one of his little ones to sin. Are we afraid to cause another to sin? I suspect that we would be more afraid of drowning than causing another to sin.

There are many ways to cause another to sin. All of them are bad. They all fall under Jesus's curse of woe. I will focus our thoughts, however, on only one area. It doesn't get talked about too much, and yet we have all experienced it: the misuse of authority. Those in authority can misuse their authority, causing great harm to those they are supposed to serve.

For a very simple, common example, let's say that something gets broken in the home. We know how this goes. Kids lie because they don't want to get in trouble, but let's say the kid isn't lying. The father, however, doesn't believe him and punishes him accordingly. However understandable this is, the net result is that the innocent gets punished. This is unjust. If you have ever been on the receiving end of injustice, then you know how it burns within you.

One time I had a job working for a building supplies distributor. They supplied many and various parts for all kinds of industries. I worked in the warehouse as well as making deliveries. My boss never liked me, even though I did my job well. He might have been offended because I stuck his picture of a naked lady that was hanging in the delivery truck into the glove box. I didn't want to look at that while I was driving.

A couple months after I started, I found a much better job so I gave my two weeks' notice. Later that day he asked me to write out a note with my plans. I forget what his excuse for this was. I wrote down how and when I was going to start working for this other company. He asked me to sign and date it. I thought nothing of it. Later, when I came back from a delivery, he fired me. Supposedly the note was so that I wouldn't be able to collect unemployment. I don't know how that stuff works, but I can tell you that I burned with anger.

Injustice is injustice. It doesn't matter if it is done by someone in authority. However, when sins are committed by those in authority we immediately confront the problem of fear. Authority is power. Authorities can punish. Those in authority are supposed to use their position to serve others, but instead they can use their position to serve themselves. This is when those in authority do much more damage.

In the first example I gave, the father's actions were understandable even if they were regrettable. He could have been mistaken about whether his son was lying. However, it is entirely different when a parent belittles a child, calls a child evil names, or beats a child. Paul says to fathers: **"Do not embitter your children so as to break their spirit."** Terrorizing a child might make the child easier to manage because the child becomes too afraid to do anything, but it is not good parenting, nor is it godly. It is not what Paul also says elsewhere, **"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but raise them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."** The position of authority is meant to serve those under authority, not to make everything easier for the one in authority.

The sins of parents against their children always have devastating and long-lasting effects. Such homes are unhappy, fear-filled places. Children learn that they must manage the emotions of their parents, being careful not to trigger them or punishment will soon follow. Children can internalize a message that they are worthless. The reason why the parents are so critical of them is because there is something irredeemably wrong with them. This is a terrible way to live.

Unfortunately, when these kids grow up and become parents themselves, they are highly likely to repeat the same patterns of behavior that they learned in their childhood homes. Even though they hated it when they were kids, it is like sin has a mysterious power of compulsion. It is not uncommon for the victims of sin or abuse to become abusers themselves. Therefore, we can see how this pattern can be carried on from one generation to another.

The patterns of behavior I've described about the home can be duplicated in other areas of life as well. The workplace can have these problems, which create unhappy working conditions and hamper the performance of the employees. Those in government can do likewise, and their punishments can be severe. The government can and should punish those who are guilty of crimes, but history is full of examples of innocent people being punished.

Our Lord Jesus was punished—put to death by unjust religious and political authorities. Why? Because Jesus did something wrong? No, because Jesus was doing something right. The authorities viewed him as a threat to their own power and dealt with him accordingly. They wrongly used their authority to punish in order to put him and his disciples in their place by brute force. They were hoping that they could instill fear. Then they could go on ruling like they had before.

Among all of the powers that oppress us and rule over us, fear might be the worst. When it comes to responding to or criticizing those who are in authority, fear is completely justifiable, because those in authority have the ability to punish. None of us want to suffer, so we develop ways to avoid pain, to cope. Some of these strategies might have been learned in our childhood homes. These are usually ineffective because they do not address the real problems, but by using them perhaps one can avoid the more severe punishments.

One might think that this is just how things go. This is just how the world works. But they'd be wrong. There is a way to conquer fear, but it requires faith. We can believe in God instead of trying to manage everything by ourselves. We can internalize what God teaches about the way things are supposed to be. How are things supposed to be? God teaches us to be open, honest, loving, courageous, and helpful. We should be patient and kind. We should not be irritable or selfish. We should love justice and fair-dealing. We should hate lies and injustice.

Already with these few statements, you can see how good these things are. Anybody with such qualities would be lovely to have as a friend. Why don't we have these qualities? Because our faith is weak. Jesus says, "If our faith were the size of a mustard seed, we could uproot a mulberry tree." Perhaps we could say that if we had faith the size of a mustard seed, we would not be ruled by fear. We would not be afraid of being punished. We would place all our trust in the God who has redeemed us by the blood of his Son and called us to a holy calling.

Paul speaks to the stance we should have as Christians in our Epistle reading: “God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control. Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.” Perhaps you remember how the apostles first reacted to Jesus’s crucifixion. They locked themselves up in the upper room. They were afraid of the authorities. That changed after Pentecost. When the apostles were commanded by the same authorities to quit preaching in Jesus’s name, they said: “With all due respect, we will obey God rather than men.”

You can see where their allegiance lies. They are completely devoted to God, because they believe that the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ has completely changed the world. They were not ashamed of Jesus, they were not ashamed of what was right and wrong, even though their testimony put them in grave danger. Their faith conquered their fears, which is the only way a person can be free.

We must do away with the unspoken but commonly believed notion that those in authority can do no wrong. This is not what the Bible teaches. Quite the contrary. The Bible teaches that no one is good except God alone. That is why it is a privilege to be called into his kingdom. God’s kingdom is doing the good work of setting things right.

It is good to learn to be more sensitive about causing sin than to having a millstone tied around your neck and being cast into the sea. The person who is concerned about sin is concerned about what God thinks instead of being ruled by self interest and fear.

Fear, love, and trust in God above all things, because this is what sets you free. Being free is good for your soul.