

Lutheran Vespers, Sometime during 1947-1948
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Dear friends in Christ Jesus. Every sincere Christian wants to avoid falling into any grievous or shameful sins. He knows that he cannot keep himself from committing many lesser sins because of his human weakness. But the kind of sin that brings shame and disgrace upon himself and his Savior and the church, he honestly wants to avoid. If that is our wish and desire, the general warning which we must remember is best expressed in the words of the apostle, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he falls." The Christian who has the feeling that he could never become guilty of any grievous or shameful sin because of his faith and willpower is so strong, is in far more danger of falling than is the Christian who knows his weakness and in all humility trusts in God to give him the strength to avoid any discouraging sin. How dangerous pride and trust in one's own strength is can best be told by those individuals, or families, or congregations who have fallen because of it. Their shame and disgrace is so much greater because they could be expected to have known better. It is true, a Christian should be certain that he can overcome every temptation to sin. But his security should not be based upon his own power and ability. It should rest in the Lord, for only in his strength is it possible to overcome every temptation to sin.

In order that we may all know better when we are in danger of falling into shameful sin, let us today study the story of Cain, the first murderer in the history of mankind. As we study this story, may God the Holy Spirit lead us to see when sin lieth at the door, to use an expression used by God himself. First, we see that sin lies at the door whenever we are satisfied with a faithless worship. Both Cain and Abel brought a sacrifice or offering to the honor of God. Each brought something of what he had. Being a farmer Cain brought of the fruit of the ground, a portion of what he had raised. Being a shepherd, Abel brought one of the first spring lambs. These were intended as offerings to the Lord who had blessed their efforts. But there was a great difference in their sacrifices. Abel's sacrifice was accepted by God, while the sacrifice of Cain was rejected. The difference was not in what they brought, but in the spirit in which they brought them. Abel's heart was in his offering, while Cain's sacrifice was merely an outward performance of a sacred right. He just went through the outward act while his heart was upon something else. That is why his offering was rejected. When a person goes through his religious acts in such a formal way. He is in danger of committing greater sin.

The Lord said to Cain, "Why art thou wrought and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door." If a person says his daily prayers, goes to church and takes part in the service, merely because it is a custom with him or for the sake of appearance, there is grave danger that he will use temptation to a greater sin.

Just because the entire worship of Ananias and Sapphira was a matter of form and not of

the heart, it was easy for the devil to get them to lie about their contribution to the common treasury of the church. Let us never forget that the mere outward act of going to church, praying and worshipping is no defense against sin. The usual result is that the heart becomes callous to the question of right or wrong, and the conscience is lulled to sleep. In short, the person who does not care whether or not his religious acts are the expression of a sincere heart usually won't care either whether or not he falls into a shameful sin.

For such a person, sin lieth at the door. Sin also lies at the door whenever we disregard those lesser sins that lead to greater sin.

When Cain saw that his offering had been rejected by the Lord, he became very angry. That kind of a feeling cannot be kept hidden very long. That is why we are told that his countenance fell. His face showed that he was angry. But there was still a chance to stop the further progress of sin. And to encourage him the Lord told him, "and unto thee shall be his desire and thou shalt rule over him." The Lord told Cain that sin wanted to rule over him, that his anger would drive him to worse deeds, but that there was still a chance to check the course of sin. However, Cain let his anger get the best of him. The urge to do something about his sacrifice being rejected was not satisfied with his hidden anger, nor with his long face. Yes, even the envious and harsh words that he must have spoken to Abel when they met in the field did not satisfy that desire. It finally drove him to the sin of murder.

From this we should learn that so-called little sins are not to be disregarded unless that tendency is checked, it will result in greater sins. "Unto thee is his desire" is true of every sin. The person who suffers no scruples of conscience when he despises the Word of God is in danger of blaspheming the name of God and denouncing the church. The child which likes to take things that belong to other children is in danger of becoming a thief. The man who thinks nothing of cheating another person out of a penny may cheat another person out of a dollar if he has the opportunity. Or the man who becomes too familiar with the wives of other men or the woman who grants liberties to men who are not her husband is in danger of becoming guilty of adultery.

So it is with other types of evil. If the normal progress of sin is not checked, little sins lead to greater sin. So let us never think lightly of the little sins. Let us rather check them in their beginnings, lest we fall into more grievous transgression. Let us watch especially our own individual weaknesses or as the apostle speaks of them, the sin that so easily besets us. Let us not in this way let sin lie at the door. But sin may also lie at the door whenever we think our sinning is no one else's business.

After Cain had murdered his brother and the Lord said unto him, "Where is Abel thy brother?" At this question, Cain was angry. He was impatient for being called to account for his the deed. The deed was done, he thought. Why should anyone interfere. So he answered the Lord's questions with the words, "I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?" His attitude seems to be, Lord you go your way and I'll go mine. And when the Lord told him that he would be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth, he complained that someone might want to avenge the murder of Abel and kill him. This he looked upon as another

interference in his affairs. Cain felt that he had been wronged. He had now taken his revenge. And so it was no one else's right to interfere. This was his affair. Had he remembered that he was responsible to God and man for what he did, he might never have risen against Abel.

Similar circumstances often arise today. When a person has done something wrong, he likes to take the attitude that his deeds are his own affairs and no one else's. So many people have that feeling, but it is a dangerous one. When children have done something wrong and are spoken to by their parents, they like to act as though the parents have no business to talk to them about their deeds. When some church member has done something wrong or fallen into sin, he often thinks that he is all right with God as long as the pastor doesn't find out about his sins. And if he does find out and speaks to him, he will politely tell him that he should mind his own business while the member takes care of his. And even if a fellow member speaks to a fellow Christian about his sinful life, he is frequently told to go his own way and tend to his own affairs. Many a brotherly admonition has thus been refused or made impossible. Such an attitude is a dangerous one. It opens the door to still greater evils. Also for those people who think that they're sinning is only their personal concern, sin lieth at the door.

The story of Cain and Abel suggests one more condition under which there is danger of falling into more grievous sin. It is whenever we fear only the punishment for sin and not the sin itself. Cain's attempts to dodge responsibility for his crime was not successful. He heard the shattering sentence, "And now art thou cursed from the earth which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hands. When thou tilleth the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength. A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." At once Cain sees how far-reaching the punishment is. His present home is gone. He will have to flee from him. There will be no rest for him. And worst of all, someone may suddenly kill him without warning. These results he is afraid of.

But there is not a word of sorrow for the sin, nor a word of regret for the injustice done to Abel, nor is there any such expression as "Father, I have sinned against Thee," addressed to God. He is like the prisoner whose only regret is that he was caught, or like the boy whose only sorrow is that he did not get by with his evil plan.

Such an attitude also lets sin lie at the door. Fear of the punishment does not drive out the love of sin. With such an attitude, the sinner sins but hopes that he will escape this usual punishment. Some people don't do certain things that are wrong for only one reason, they might lose their good reputation if their deed was found out. That is a mighty weak defense against sin. The word of pain, "my punishment is greater than I can bear," is not a word of repentance. It is a word of rebellion and despair. So let us check our attitudes. Why do we abstain from certain wrongs in which we would like to indulge? Is it only because we might get caught or if our deeds became known we might lose our good reputation? If that kind of fear is the only thing that keeps us from sinning, we are in danger of falling shamefully and grievously. For us, sin lies at the door.

Friends, to be satisfied with a faithless worship, to disregard those lesser sins that these are dangerous conditions. With such attitudes, sin lies at the door for us. But when sin lies at the door for us, we Christians have a real and effective defense. We have a safe refuge to which we can fly. We have the powerful and open arms of our Savior in which we can find safety. Not only will He forgive our past sins for the sake of His atonement, but He will also give us strength to overcome our evil inclinations by the power of His Word.

So if we have today learned to see where we are in danger of yielding to greater sins, let us turn to Jesus our Savior for forgiveness and for strength to check the course of sin and to get rid of the dangers. Our Lord and Savior will help us overcome in our battle with the devil, the world, and our flesh. And finally may he take us from this battlefield in this world to eternal safety with Him in heaven. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.