

Concerning Mortal Sins, Pardonable Sins, and Sins of Omission

by St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite

St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite discusses the nature of sins, categorizing them into mortal, pardonable, and sins of omission, emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing these in spiritual guidance.

Scripture: Psalm 18:3, Proverbs 18:3, Proverbs 23:13, Matthew 25:27, Matthew 25:42, 1 Corinthians 3:14, James 3:2, 2 Peter 2:19, 1 John 1:8, 1 John 3:4

Topics: "Sin And Repentance", "Gods Mercy"

Description

St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite preaches about the importance of understanding the different categories of sins - mortal, pardonable, and sins of omission. Mortal sins corrupt the love for God or neighbor, making one an enemy of God, while pardonable sins do not have this effect. Sins of omission are neglecting to do good works or thoughts, which are also considered sins. St. Nikodemos emphasizes the need to guide sinners away from despair, as every sin can be forgiven through repentance and God's mercy.

Transcript

Concerning these you must know that, just as a physician is required to know what the illnesses of the body are in order to treat them, you who seek to be a Spiritual Father are obligated to know what the illnesses of the soul are, that is, sins, in order to treat them. Although the illnesses of the soul are many, they generally fall into the following three categories. Hence, you need to know which are mortal, which are pardonable and not mortal, and which are sins of omission or inaction.

1. Concerning Mortal Sins

According to Gennadios Scholarios, George Koressios, the Orthodox Confession, and Chrysanthos of Jerusalem, mortal sins are those voluntary sins which either corrupt the love for God alone, or the love for neighbor and for God, and which render again the one committing them an enemy of God and liable to the eternal death of hell. [11] Generally speaking, they are: pride, love of money, sexual immorality, envy, gluttony, anger, and despondency, or indifference. [12]

2. Concerning Pardonable Sins

Pardonable sins are those voluntary sins which do not corrupt the love for God or the love for neighbor, nor do they render the person an enemy of God and liable to eternal death, to which transgressions even

the Saints are susceptible, according to the words of the Brother of God: "For in many things we all sin" (Jas. 3:2), and of John: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (I Jn. 1:8), and according to Canons 125, 126, and 127 of Carthage. These sins, according to Koressios and Chrysanthos, are: idle talk, the initial inclination and agitation of anger, the initial inclination of lust, the initial inclination of hate, a white lie, passing envy, or that which is commonly called jealousy, which is slight grief over the good fortunes of one's neighbor, and the like. [13]

Know also, Spiritual Father, that the many sins which are generally called pardonable are not of one and the same degree, but they are of varying degrees, smaller and larger, lower and higher, and that pardonable sins and mortal sins are two extremes. For in between these extremes there are found varying degrees of sins, beginning from the pardonable ones and proceeding up to the mortal ones, which degrees were not given names by the Ancients, perhaps because they are many and varied according to the class and specific kind of sins, but could have named them if they so desired. Here we name some of them, for the benefit of clarity and for your knowledge, beginning from below: pardonable sins, those near the pardonable, those that are non-mortal, those near the non-mortal, those between the non-mortal and the mortal, those near the mortal, and finally, mortal sins. Here is an example of the sins of the incensive aspect of the soul: The initial movement of anger is pardonable; near to the pardonable is for someone to say harsh words and get hot-tempered. A non-mortal sin is to swear; near the non-mortal is for someone to strike with the hand. Between the non-mortal and the mortal is to strike with a small stick; near the mortal is to strike with a large stick, or with a knife, but not in the area of the head. A mortal sin is to murder. A similar pattern applies to the other sins. Wherefore, those sins nearer to the pardonable end are penanced lighter, while those nearer to the mortal end are more severely penanced. [14]

3. Concerning Sins of Omission

Those good works, or words, or thoughts, which are capable of being done or thought by someone, but through negligence were not done, or said, or thought, are called sins of omission, [15] and are brought forth from the mortal sin of despondency, as we have said. I know very well that these sins of omission are not considered by people as full sins, because those are few who consider it a sin if they did not perform such and such a charity when they were able to, or had the means to either give good advice to their neighbor, or to do a certain amount of prayer, or do another virtue, and did not.

But this, however, I know for certain, that God will render an account on the day of judgment concerning these. Who verifies this for us? The example of that slothful servant who had the one talent and buried it in the ground, who was judged, not because he committed any sin or injustice with it (because he who gave the talent to him took it all back, as Basil the Great says in the Introduction of The Long Rules), [16] but because being able to increase it, was negligent and did not increase it: "Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury" (Mt. 25:27). It is also verified for us by the example of the five foolish virgins who were condemned for nothing other than an absence of oil. And concerning the sinners placed at the left hand, they will be condemned, not because they committed any sin, but because they were lacking and were not merciful to their brother: "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink" (Mt. 25:42). The reason that God gave to man natural strength was not in order to leave it idle and useless, without results and fruit, just as that slothful servant left the talent of the Lord idle, as we said above, but He gave it to man in order for man to put it into action, and into practice, and for it to increase, doing good with it and the commandments of the Lord, and so to be saved through this. On this account Basil the Great said: "We have already received from God the power to fulfill all the commandments given us by

Him, so that we may not take our obligation in bad part, as though something quite strange and unexpected were being asked of us, and that we may not become filled with conceit, as if we were paying back something more than had been given us." [17] And also in agreement with the above words, his brother, Gregory of Nyssa, says: "As each shall receive his wages, just as the Apostle says (1 Cor. 3:14), according to his labor, so also each shall receive punishment according to the extent of their negligence." [18]

Those things which are also called sins of omission are those which we were able to prevent, by word or act, but did not prevent. On this account those who commit these are likewise penanced according to Canon 25 of Ancyra, Canon 71 of Basil the Great, and Canon 25 of St. John the Faster. [19]

Furthermore, Spiritual Father, you must know that the degrees of sin from the beginning until the end are twelve. The first degree is when someone does good, but not in a proper manner, mixing the good with the bad. This occurs in seven ways, as Basil the Great says, "As regards the place, the time, the person, the matter involved, or in a manner intemperate, or disorderly, or with improper dispositions." [20] An example of a sin of the first degree is when someone performs an act of mercy, or fasts, or does some other good deed, so that he might be glorified by people. The second degree of sin is complete idleness in regard to the good. The third degree is an assault of evil. The fourth is coupling. The fifth is struggle. [21] The sixth is consent. [22] The seventh is the sin according to the intellect, according to St. Maximos, which is when a person, having consented, plans carefully to accomplish that sin which is in his intellect so as to do the deed. The eighth is the deed itself and the sinful act. The ninth is the habit of someone committing the sin often. The tenth is the addiction to sin, which with violence and force compels the person to sin voluntarily and involuntarily. The eleventh is despair, that is, hopelessness. The twelfth is suicide, namely, for a person to kill himself, while having a sound intellect, being conquered by despair. So then, Spiritual Father, you must try assiduously in every way to turn the sinner around to smaller degrees of sin and to prevent him from proceeding to the greater degrees ahead. And most of all, you must endeavor to sever him from despair, no matter in how great a degree of sin he is found. [23]

Endnotes

11. "Translator's note: St. Mark the Ascetic says: "Because God's righteousness is inescapable, it is hard to obtain forgiveness for sins committed with complete deliberation" (On the Spiritual Law 55); and again: 'There is a sin which is always 'unto death' (1 Jn. 5:16): the sin for which we do not repent. For this sin even a saint's prayers will not be heard" (No Righteousness by Works 41); (GrPhilokalia, pp. 93; 102; tr. The Philokalia, London, 1979, v. 1, pp. 114; 129). And Elder Sophrony (Sakharov) writes: "Sin cuts us off from the God of Love" (His Life Is Mine, Crestwood, 1977, p. 41).

12. Take note that according to the Orthodox Confession, Gabriel of Philadelphia, and Nicholas Boulgaris, the effects and offspring of pride are these: vainglory, boasting, conceit, self-esteem, disobedience, scorn, hypocrisy, stubbornness, and others. Those of love of money are: greed, mercilessness or lack of charity, hardness of heart, theft, robbery, deceit, injustice, treachery, perjury, simony, sacrilege, unbelief, and taking interest on money. Those of sexual immorality are: adultery, sodomy, fornication, bestiality, incest, child molestation, virgin molestation, colluctation (Translator's note: An explanation of this word, sygkylismos, can be found in the Interpretation to Canon 19 of St. John the Faster. It implies the idea of "rolling around," "caressing," or "heavy-petting."), masturbation, insolence, blindness of the intellect, and fearlessness of God. Those of anger are: conspiracy, malice, spite, argumentation, slander, fraud, betrayal, murder, ingratitude, and grief over the good things of the one envied. Those of gluttony are:

gormandizing, drunkenness, debauchery, stupor, lewdness, despondency, and others. Those of anger are: blasphemy, hate, remembrance of wrongs, argumentation, perjury, malediction, invectiveness, war, contention, and murder. Those of despondency are: cowardice, effeminacy, grief and indignation over the good that they should be doing, excuses for sins, despair, unbelief, and, in short, apathy and indifference concerning the good which they ought to do. Note also that these mortal sins are considered as passions and habits rooted in the soul, from which are born the above-mentioned offspring. Some of these are worse than others, and some are caused by others, while some are causes of others, as you saw. From gluttony is born gormandizing and despondency, and from these are brought forth various offspring, while others give birth to these same ones, just as both envy and anger give birth to murder and argumentation. Theophylact of Bulgaria says that self-love is the beginning and cause of all evils, wherefore the Apostle placed self-love before the others (Explanation of the verse, For people shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, etc. 2 Tim. 3:2; PG 125, 1 16D- 1 17A).

13. It is difficult to distinguish the reason and exact difference between mortal sins and pardonable ones. Explaining the saying of John: 'There is a sin unto death; and there is a sin not unto death' (1 Jn. 5:16, 17), Metrophanes of Smyrna says a sin unto death is every sin which was penalized by death under the Old Law, as was blasphemy against God, voluntary murder, bestiality, and others. A sin not unto death is that one which was not penalized by death, such as involuntary murder, and others.

Anastasios of Sinai says that the sin unto death is that which is committed knowingly, and the sin not unto death is the one committed in ignorance; but blasphemy against God and a great sin committed knowingly, such as murder or adultery, is unto death (Quaestiones LIV, PG 89, 616C-617A). Canon 5 of the Seventh Ecumenical Council and Oikoumenios say that the sin unto death is the one which is not repented for and uncorrected. Similarly, George Koressios in his Theology (which seems to me the most accurate from the others because he noticed these differences), says that mortal sins may differ from pardonable sins according to their class, as for example a mortal deed differs from idle talk and from some vain thought, as there are three general classes of sin: the evil deed, the evil word, and the evil thought.

All the evil deeds are of one class, differing among themselves according to their specific kind, and this goes also for all of the evil words and all of the evil thoughts. They may also differ according to the incompleteness of the deed and act, just as the initial inclination of anger and hate differs from full-blown rage and remembrance of wrongs. Mortal sins may also differ from pardonable sins according only to the value of the content, for theft (which does not differ in itself from other theft, either in specific kind or content), if it involves a lot of money or capital, is mortal; if it involves a little, without resulting in much harm to the owner, is pardonable.

Chrysanthos also says these things in his Exomologetarion. In addition to these, they may also differ according to the specific kind, just as perjury, being mortal, differs according to the kind of sin from idle talk. Gennadios Scholarios (in the Exomologetarion of Chrysanthos), dividing the mortal sins and the pardonable sins into the general areas where they are enacted, that is, evil thoughts to the intellect, evil words to the tongue, evil deeds to the body, says that every sin belonging to the intellect and being mortal according to its kind, then becomes mortal when it is given form and carried out, not however merely through assault or consent or struggle with the bad thought (concerning these see Canons 2, 3, and 4 of the FASTER), but through consenting to its completion (as it is with pride, remembrance of wrongs, heresy, and others).

Likewise, every sin belonging to the tongue and being mortal according to its kind, then becomes mortal when it is carried out (like blasphemy, perjury, false witness, and the like). Similarly, every sin belonging to the body and being mortal according to its kind, then becomes mortal when it is carried out (as it is with fornication, adultery, murder, etc.). Mortal sins belonging to the body become pardonable when they only appear to the intellect and reason. For example, when the mortal sin of sexual immorality is conceived in desire and in the intellect, or if it is spoken through obscenity, it is pardonable.

Hence, the Brother of God said: "Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin," pardonable sin, that is; for it produces, "sin, when it is finished (through the body and the act), bringeth forth death" Gas. 1:15). Likewise, mortal sin belonging to the word, if it occurs only in the intellect, is pardonable. The mortal sin of blasphemy, for example, when it occurs involuntarily in the intellect alone, it is pardonable. Simply speaking, the mortal sins arising from the lower and grosser areas, when they occur in the higher and finer areas, are pardonable.

Worthy of attention and fear is that which the sacred Augustine says (On the First Epistle of John and On the Saints, Homily 41, taken from Koressios) which is in accord with many others: that many small sins create a large one. This is understood, according to Koressios, when a person dismisses small sins as small, because the one continuously stealing small things sins mortally. Wherefore also Basil the Great, knowing that according to the Holy Gospel there exists a difference between a gnat and a camel, straw and wood, but saying it more clearly, small and large sins, yet at the same time he says that in the New Testament there is no such distinction between large and small sins. First, because a small sin and a large one are equally transgressions of the Law, for according to John: "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 Jn. 3:4) and defiance of the Son, as is said: "He that disobeyeth the Son shall not see life" Jn. 3:36) (Regulae Brevius 293, PG 31, 1288C- 1289A). Second, because a small sin becomes a large one when it is master of the one committing the sin: "For of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage" (2 Pet. 2:19). The divine Chrysostom gives a third reason (On I Cor., Homily 16, and To Demetrios on Compunction), saying that wood and straw, that is, the large sin and the small one, because they do not receive the same punishment, differ; but in so much as those committing sins (small or large) are put out of the kingdom of heaven, they do not differ. Wherefore the Apostle also says that both idol-worshippers, and sodomists, and revilers, equally will not inherit the kingdom of heaven (1 Cor. 6:9-10), that is, those who commit large and small sins. That which the aforementioned Koressios says is also worthy of note and awe, namely that desire becomes a mortal sin in two ways: either when it moves toward some severe sin (like murder, or another like it), or when it consents to do a sin, even if it is not carried out, because the movement of desire is threefold: involuntary, incompletely voluntary, and completely voluntary. The first movement is not called sin; the second is called a pardonable sin; the third is mortal. Accordingly, in Instructions for Penitents (p. 239), it is written that every hedonistic pleasure, when it is completely voluntary, is a mortal sin.

14. Translator's note: St. Ambrose says: "Paul teaches us that we must not abandon those who have committed a sin unto death, but that we must rather coerce them with the bread of tears and tears to drink, yet so that their sorrow itself be moderated. For this is the meaning of the passage: 'Thou hast given them to drink in large measure' (cf. Ps. 79:6), that their sorrow itself should have its measure, lest perchance he who is doing penance should be consumed by overmuch sorrow, as was said to the Corinthians: 'What will ye? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of meekness?' (1 Cor. 4:21). But even the rod is not severe, since he had read: 'Thou shalt beat him indeed with the rod, but shalt deliver his soul from death' (Pr. 23:13)" (On Repentance, Book I, ch. 13, NPNF (V2-10), p. 339).

15. Translator's note: St. Mark the Ascetic says: "Failure to do the good that is within your power is hard to forgive" (On the Spiritual Law 64, GrPhilokalia, p. 94; tr. The Philokalia, v. I, p.114).

16. Regulae Fusius, PG 31, 893A.

17. Regulae Fusius 2, PG 31, 909A; tr. Saint Basil: Ascetical Works, pp. 233-234.

18. Contra Eunomium 12, PG 45, 912C.

19. A certain teacher compares sins of omission with the venom and bite of the asp, because, just as it kills without causing pain to the person (wherefore the Alexandrians killed those committing small crimes this way, as Galenos says), so also those transgressions kill the soul, without the sinners hurting or feeling anything.

20. De Baptismo II, Question 8, PG 31, 1600C; tr. Saint Basil: Ascetical Works, p. 408.

21. Struggle is considered common to all of the degrees of sin, because one struggles and wrestles in order to do good in a proper manner, and not to delay in doing good and so forth in all things.

22. Concerning these four (assault, coupling, struggle, consent) see the Canons of St. John the Faster. OCIC Ed.: See also Chapter 2 from The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit in Ancient Russia, by I.M. Kontzevich (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1988).

23. The arguments with which you will be able to free the sinner from despair are these, Spiritual Father. 1) That despair is the greatest and worst of all evils, because it is opposite to and extremely opposed to God. And even though every sin is opposed to God in some way and partially, despair is entirely opposed to God and in every way, because it negates God, and by taking Him out of the picture it makes evil as another God, as well as the cause of evil, the devil. It would make evil stronger than the goodness of God, more infinite than His infinity, and for despair to even be in the place of wherever God is.

What can be found that is more impious or more mindless? To believe that powerless sin is more powerful than Power Himself? That the finite is more infinite than the Infinite Himself? And for non-being to be above the Eternal Being? For this reason the Orthodox Confession writes that despair is opposed to the Holy Spirit. Therefore say to the sinner, Spiritual Father, that which Basil the Great says, that is, if it is possible to measure the fullness and the magnitude of the compassion of God, let the sinner then despair, comparing and measuring the amount and magnitude of his sin: "If it is possible to number the multitude of God's mercies and the greatness of Gods compassion in comparison with the number and greatness of sins, then let us despair" (Regulae Brevius 13, PG 31, 1 089C).

Even if one's transgressions are measured and counted, the mercy and compassion of God being immeasurable, why should one despair and not know the mercy of God and blame his transgressions: "But if, as is obvious, the latter are subject to measure and can be numbered, but it is impossible to measure the mercy or number the compassions of God, there is no time for despairing, but only for recognizing mercy and condemning sins; the remission of which is set forth in the blood of Christ' (ibid.). 2) Despair is opposed to common sense, because it does not have a proper place among people.

For a sinner to live, even though he sins, is a sign that God accepts him and does not reject him, Who did not put him to death when he sinned as he deserved, but allowed him to live, for no other reason other than that he may repent. The great Gregory of Thessaloniki verifies this for us in this way: "This is why no

one should give way to despair... because the time of this life is time for repentance, the very fact that a sinner still lives is a pledge that God will accept whoever desires to return to Him" (To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia, GrPhilokalia, p. 933; tr.

The Philokalia, v. 4, London, 1995, p. 299). 3) Despair is a child of the devil, according to St. Ephraim. Before someone sins, the devil says to that person how the sin is nothing, and then when he does sin, he says to that person how his sin is terrible and unforgivable (Evergetinos, Venice, 1783, p. 11; also see the English language translation, The Evergetinos: A Complete Text, Etna, 1988, vol. I, book 1, p. 41). If we search more exactly, we find that despair sprouts both from pride and self-esteem.

The prideful who speaks of himself as great in regards to virtue and holiness, when he falls into some mortal sin, he straightway despairs, thinking that that fall is unworthy of his virtue, according to John of the Ladder (Step 26, PG 88, 1032D-1033A; The Ladder, p. 175). It also sprouts from the inexperience which one has in the noetic warfare of the enemy. Just as Judas was inexperienced in this warfare and despaired, as one Father says, thus despairing he hung himself. Peter being experienced, even though he denied, did not despair, but repented, again becoming Peter (the rock). (Translator's note: The 'Father' St.

Nikodemos is referring to is St. John of Karpathos. See Texts for the Monks in India 85, GrPhilokalia, p. 255; The Philokalia, v. 1, p. 318). It also sprouts from the many sins one commits, just as Solomon says: "When an ungodly man comes into a depth of evils, he despises himself" (Pr. 18:3). It sprouts from other causes also, like the negligence and idleness in doing good works and not bearing fruits of repentance. Therefore, whoever desires not to fall into the webs of despair, let them remember its causes and correct them, learning the machination of the devil with which he tries to create despair, throwing away one's pride, becoming experienced in noetic warfare, abstaining from sins, and striving for their salvation with all of their strength. 4) Lastly, despair is opposed to the Old and New Scripture which in a thousand places portrays the immeasurable mercy of God with which He receives all sinners equally.

It is opposed to so many examples of sinners, who were great transgressors, who were saved from the beginning of the world until the end without despairing:: Lamech, Manasseh, Nebuchadnezzar, David, prostitutes, adulterers, tax collectors, prodigals, thieves, Peter, Paul. It is opposed to all of the words of the divine Fathers who taught sinners to hope in the mercy of God and to cast away despair, showing that there is not one sin which can conquer the philanthropy of God. See also the Evergetinos, vol. I, book 1, Hypothesis I.

These things having been said, we complete this footnote with the following. Just as despair is opposed to the Holy Spirit, as we said, likewise is exaggerated hope and boldness in the compassion of God opposed to the same Holy Spirit when one is so bold as to sin without fear, as the Orthodox Confession says (p. 221). Concerning this the word of the polymath George Koressios is very wise, saying that the life of Christians must stand between these two, between hope and despair: on the part of God they must hope in His goodness; but on their part they must despair on account of the multitude of their sins (from his Theology). (Translator's note: Concerning this last statement by George Koressios, these are the words told to St. Silouan by the Lord: "Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not" (Archimandrite Sophrony, Saint Silouan the Athonite, Crestwood, 1999, p. 460).)

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