

## Sermon 7, Greater Sanctions, Hebrews 2:1-4

**Proposition:** Because the New Covenant has greater sanctions against violators than the Old Covenant did, it is imperative that we listen to God’s revelation through His Son!

- I. The Levitical System Punished Sins Against It, v. 2b
  - A. Eye for Eye, Tooth for Tooth, Exodus 21:23-25
  - B. High-handed Sins Punished by being Cut Off from Israel, Numbers 15:30
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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the concept of “sanctions” is one familiar to most of us because sanctions have been a preferred tool in the history of US policy toward enemy nations since the 1930s. When Russia invaded Ukraine a year ago, or rather accelerated its existing invasion of Ukraine a year ago, one didn’t need a Ph.D. in international politics to predict that our policymakers’ tool of first resort would be sanctions against Russia. “Sanctions” usually means, in American political discourse, a ban on the sale of certain technologies, commodities, and items to the nation on the naughty list. But the concept of “sanctions” is actually broader than merely economic warfare. The word simply means any negative consequence for bad behavior. US policymakers try to apply negative consequences to Russia for its bad behavior. As you’ll see from a cursory glance at US history, our sanctions appear to do little other than salving some consciences in Washington.

Today, though, we’re going to speak about sanctions with teeth, sanctions that actually do something. You are of course familiar with the basic point of Hebrews, a point we’ve been looking at together for nearly two months now. That point is that Jesus is better, that the New Covenant system is better than the Levitical way of access to the Father. Right off the bat here in ch. 2, in the first major section of application, the writer applies this idea to something you’ve probably not considered before: One of the things that makes the New Covenant better is that it has stiffer sanctions. The way of access through Jesus is superior, which makes the penalty for neglecting it higher.

Now, we tend to think that “better” probably means “more lenient,” and regard the NT God as more permissive than the OT God. Hebrews is here to attack that idea. “Better” means

“stricter.” To return to the opening illustration, we have had sanctions on Cuba since 1959, and on Iran since 1979. Both nations are quite functional and quite anti-American right down to this very moment. The sanctions show no sign of either crippling our enemies or turning them into friends. Better sanctions, we could posit, would be the kind of sanctions that could, all on their own, bring about regime change. The best sanctions would be sanctions that, within hours or days of being levied, would eliminate the wicked and replace them with the righteous. These sanctions would be *effective*.

Brothers and sisters, the new covenant has just such effective sanctions. Their effect is utterly inescapable. That’s what our text this morning says.

### **I. The Levitical System Punished Sins Against It, v. 2b**

As we saw last week, this exhortation consists of a double if-then.

Here’s the “if” we saw last week: “If the message God transmitted through angels was reliable . . .” The “then,” of course, is “then how much more reliable is the message he transmitted through His Son?” That is the first part of the if-then conditional in these verses.

The second part, “If the message communicated by angels had great penalties attached for disregarding it, then how much greater will the penalties be for disregarding the message conveyed through the Son?” is the part we want to look at this week.

We know that this is not a real hypothetical; it is stated as a hypothetical for the purpose of arguing from the lesser to the greater. The Levitical system is the lesser, but even in the Levitical system every last transgression and disobedience received a just payment of wages. In other words, the Israelite living under the Mosaic system didn’t get away with sins. He did not just do what he wanted and then go down to the Temple with a lamb and say “We are delivered!”

Let me just pause here to say that this penalty is not talking about people outside the covenant. The Bible is not saying that “Egyptians and Canaanites who disregarded the Mosaic system were severely punished.” Rather, it’s saying “Israelites who disregarded the Mosaic system were severely punished.” The message here is not for outsiders, but for insiders, not for nonbelievers, but for believers. We can get wrapped up in the perfectly true idea that without Christ, people are going to Hell. But we need to spend a little more energy on the truth that people in the visible church, who are pretty sure they have Christ, can also be headed to the bad place. The Old Covenant had sanctions against sinners, and those sanctions were enforced both by human justice and by God Himself.

Let’s look at a few of the Old Covenant’s statements about the penalties attached to transgression and disobedience.

#### **A. Eye for Eye, Tooth for Tooth, Exodus 21:23-25**

The basic principle here is life for life. If you take life, your life will be taken. Not only is that the clear teaching of this passage and many others in the Bible (esp. Gen. 9), but it is the mainstream view in the historic Christian church. Though Pope Francis has said that the death penalty should not be used today, his traditionalist defenders hasten to assure us that what he means is merely that in view of the present circumstances and spirit of the age, the death penalty

should perhaps be suspended for a time. Of course, even that is contrary to historic Christian doctrine and the plain teaching of this passage. Murder demands the death penalty.

We hear of seven different injuries, and that they are to be recompensed by corresponding injuries.

### **1. This Is the Maximum Penalty Consistent with Justice**

Two points. Jesus speaks of this law and says that you shouldn't respond to injury to extracting eye for eye and tooth for tooth. Instead, He says you should turn the other cheek. Does that throw this law out the window as an example of injustice? Not at all. The law of talion is the maximum penalty consistent with justice. It is a cap, the heaviest sentence that may be imposed by justice among God's people.

In your personal life, you don't have the right to take eye for eye or tooth for tooth. Revenge is allotted to the state in its role as guardian of justice, or assigned to Christ in His role as judge. You are not supposed to be taking revenge, but rather showing mercy.

### **2. These can generally be converted into monetary restitution**

The other point regarding this law is that all of its penalties can be converted into monetary restitution, except the penalty of death for first-degree murder. Numbers 35:31 specifically says that the death penalty cannot be converted into a cash settlement — leading the rabbis, and Christian interpreters after them, to infer that all other penalties under the law can be paid in cash. Instead of taking the eye of one who blinds someone, you can take 500 shekels.

So keep this in mind as you hear that every transgression and disobedience received a just reward. Israel did not have a huge number of disabled and toothless people running around. But at its best, the justice system rewarded sins against others with a proportional penalty, whether by fine or by physical beatings or something like that.

### **B. High-handed Sins Punished by being Cut Off from Israel, Numbers 15:30**

But in addition, the law contains provisions for sins that go beyond the personal injuries listed in the law of talion.

If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. 28 And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. 29 You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them. 30 But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. 31 Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him." (Num 15:27-31 ESV)

We have here, in the Mosaic legislation, a distinction drawn between unintentional sins and high-handed sins. The just punishment here is that the sinner is exiled from the community of Israel — excommunicated from the synagogue, no longer welcome in the tabernacle worship, and kicked out of the state.

Have you ever sinned intentionally? Of course you have. So have I. So have all Christians. The idea that every Israelite could be cut off from his people for any intentional sin is terrifying. In practice, I believe that this refers to unrepentant sinners. Those who do something with a high hand, and refuse to apologize or seek God's forgiveness, are cut off from Israel. Still, it's worth noting that there is no provision for deliberate sins in the Mosaic legislation. That's why Psalm 51 says "You do not desire sacrifice, or I would give it." There was no sacrifice for murder and adultery committed deliberately and concealed for a year. David did not have any provision in the old covenant system to deal with those sins. And so, if he had rebelled against God's word when Nathan spoke it to him, he could have been cut off from his people, exiled from Israel and forced to live out his days as a client of Achish king of Gath.

Every transgression received a just reward. I'm telling you what. The OT is clear about this. Think, for instance, of Ahab, struck down by Jehu right on top of Naboth's vineyard. Think of the Benjamites, almost exterminated from Israel after one of their cities became worse than Sodom.

### **C. Idolatry Punished by Stoning, Deuteronomy 17:2-7**

"If there is found among you, within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing his covenant, 3 and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden, 4 and it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, 5 then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones. 6 On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. 7 The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

(Deu 17:2-7 ESV)

Once again, we see the just reward attaching to sins against the old covenant. Someone who has secretly converted to paganism and been worshiping strange gods is to be taken to the gate and stoned to death. Again, apostasy, like sins that injure another's body or high-handed sins against God and neighbor, is justly punished in the OT legislation.

I think we would agree that these punishments are pretty severe. Indeed, in our permissive, "enlightened" age, we would regard some of them as what the constitution calls "cruel and unusual." There is pretty much nothing you can do to be cut off from your people, unless you choose to go and become a foreign national fighting against your own country. There is no way to be stoned, nothing is considered idolatry anymore, and the law of talion is widely regarded as barbaric.

Anyway, I think we can say that the Hebrew writer has made his point. The Old covenant contained some pretty stiff sanctions against anyone who went beyond the (clearly defined) boundaries of upright living.

## **II. The New Covenant Punishes Sins Against It More Severely, v. 3a**

But here's the thing: the writer isn't arguing "Thank God that those barbaric days are over and we live in an enlightened era when mercy triumphs over judgment. You won't be cut off from your people, stoning is banned, and when you smite someone's eye or tooth, he will just turn the other cheek and you will get off scot-free." He isn't saying "Under the old covenant, every transgression received a just recompense of reward, but under the new covenant justice is out the window and mercy rules everything."

No. He's saying "Under the old covenant, every transgression received a just reward, and under the new covenant, every transgression also receives a just reward."

Okay. Fine. What's the difference? How is this an argument from the lesser to the greater?

### **A. The Salvation Is Greater**

The answer is that the salvation is greater. I know I said in the first sermon that the new covenant is a different administration, not a different salvation. I stand by that. Moses bore the reproach of Christ, the Hebrew writer tells us. Moses had Christ, and Christ was not somehow lesser 3500 years ago than He is today. To have Christ is to have the Father and the Spirit and every spiritual blessing.

But at the same time, the salvation that we have in the new covenant is indeed a greater salvation. To pick two things that this epistle emphasizes, it is (1) greater in clarity because God's last-days speech in His Son is final and more complete than His piecemeal revelation through the prophets, and (2) greater in cleansing power because it cleanses the conscience and not just the body. The salvation is greater. And that's the "greater" element.

### **B. Because the Punishment Is a "Just Recompense of Reward", It Is Also Greater**

Justice hasn't changed. Justice is what it always has been. Wages earned are still wages earned. But because the salvation is a greater salvation, to sin against it is a greater sin. To sin against 200 lumens of light is not as great a sin as to sin against 2000 lumens of light. In other words, in the New Covenant you more clearly know what you're doing, and you more clearly know what the stakes are.

Allow me to just put it this way: How much does the OT speak about Hell? The answer, of course, is "not really at all." We see Daniel saying that "those who have done evil will rise to the resurrection of judgment" in Dan. 12. But all the statements about the worm not dying and the fire not being quenched are eternized, taken out of the context of earthly punishment where they occur in Isaiah 66, and rendered statements about eternal judgment and eternal hellfire only in the teaching of Jesus and in the book of Revelation. If you want to know about Hell, don't turn to Psalms and Proverbs, but to Matthew and Revelation.

The punishment in the New Covenant is greater and said to be greater. The punishments in the Old Covenant are primarily described in this-worldly terms. The punishments in the New Covenant are primarily described in next-worldly terms.

To say “You will be imprisoned for the term of your natural life” is a stiff punishment. To say “You will be imprisoned in Hell for the term of your immortal soul’s life” is a far stiffer punishment!

I’m not saying that apostates like Ahab escaped hellfire. But clearly, the Old Covenant speaks of Sheol as the undifferentiated abode of the dead, while the New Covenant speaks in much plainer terms of Heaven and Hell.

### **C. The Punishment Is Inescapable**

The last sermon R.C. Sproul preached before his death in December 2017 was on this text. It is a fantastic sermon. Look it up if you can. He focuses on this question: How shall we escape? He gives an involved illustration from *The Count of Monte Cristo* and speaks of the Chateau D’If, the great fortress in which Monte Cristo is imprisoned and from which he so thrillingly escapes in the novel. Escape was possible from that earthly prison. But there are no escapes from Hell.

People get out of North Korea. People fled Stalin’s Gulag. Earthly justice systems have holes, hatchways, secret passages. Guards are bribeable, judges ready to reverse their predecessors’ decisions. But how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? The implication is clear, brothers and sisters. God’s wrath, His just punishment for the sin of neglecting the great salvation we have in Christ, is utterly inescapable. Many fled Hitler’s Germany. A few escaped Stalin’s Gulag. But none has ever walked away from Christ and lived to evade the jaws of Hell.

Stop thinking that Hell is primarily for unbelievers. The Mormons are partly right to emphasize that Hell is for those who were once part of the church and walked away. They take it too far; unbelievers can and do go to Hell. But the warnings of Hebrews are not to unbelievers, but to believers.

There is no escape for those who drift away or stop paying attention. There is no clause that says “If you had good ground to choose secularism/entertainment/the status quo/the zeitgeist/pop culture over Me, you walk.” No. We cannot escape.

### **III. Therefore, Pay Much Closer Attention!**

So brothers and sisters, because there are stiffer sanctions, pay attention! Putin would not have invaded Ukraine if a Navy SEAL had kept a red dot on his chest.

#### **A. Your Walk with God Requires Upkeep**

The bottom line is that your walk with God requires upkeep. You cannot just say “Alright, I’m a believer and that is enough to get me to the end of my life and safely to my heavenly rest.” Just like everything else in this world, your walk with God requires maintenance, and if you don’t maintain it, it stops working. A friend you haven’t called in five years may be a hypothetical friend still, but he is hardly an actual friend. A Jesus you haven’t prayed to in five years may still be your God, but again, the relationship is more hypothetical than actual at this point.

#### **B. Use Your Ears**

So use your ears. Pay attention to what you hear! There are many aspects to walking with God, and I try to talk about many of them regularly. But the aspect under discussion here is to listen, to

pay much closer attention to what you have heard. To keep up your walk with Christ, keep listening to Him and doing what He says.

### **C. Beware the Drift**

Beware the drift! The ship was anchored in a good place, and then the rope broke and the ship just drifted away. Guess what happens if you go with the flow? You drift away. That's what going with the flow means. Brothers and sisters, I just counseled yesterday with someone who said "I guess I stopped seeing the point of going to church and believing in God. I honestly can't remember why it ever meant something to me."

He drifted. And if you don't fight the current, you will too. Beware the drift, because if you drift away, there is no escape. To extend the metaphor, the drift tows you toward a waterfall that will carry you down to Hell. There is no escape once you go over that edge. Beware the drift! Pay attention to what you've heard. The New Covenant has greater sanctions, and if you ignore the salvation you've heard from such reliable witnesses, those sanctions will bite.

Our sanctions on Russia trimmed a few percent from GDP growth, as best as we can tell. We shaved a few dollars off Russia's income. But God's sanctions will do more than skim a few dollars off the top of your bank account. Russia has started selling oil to Dubai to make up the budget shortfall. But there is no way around God's sanctions. Don't mess around. Listen up! He is Lord, He has spoken, and in Him you have great salvation. Do not neglect it! Amen.