

Sermon for Sunday, May 30, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"SOMEBODY'S PEEKING AT YOUR SECRET SINS"

Psalm 90; St. James 5:13-16; I John 1:5-10

Text: "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light
of thy countenance." --Psalm 90:8

In the 90th Psalm, the writer speaks of secret sins. All of us know what he is talking about. Every one of us this morning has secret sins--sins we hope to heaven no one finds out about. But that's just the rub. The heaven we are hoping to that no one finds out about is just the place where someone is peeking at our secret sins. As the Psalmist puts it, "Thou hast set out iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance." And all of us have such secret sins. It may be some evil desire, some hidden vice, some covered-up lust, some dark deed. So, when the Psalmist speaks of secret sins, our ears perk up--he is talking about something we understand!

Let me share some observations about so-called "secret" sins. First, to call a sin secret implies that it is hidden. Most of us have a number of devices for hiding our sins. For example, a businessman may be dominated entirely by the desire to make a buck, but he hides his sin of greed behind a false front. He regards himself as a benefactor to society because he is providing employment for others. Or he will claim that his product benefits mankind or is beneficial to society. Or he will point to other benefits his company might have for the community which are cover-ups for his own greed.

Or, again, we may hide our sins behind our prejudices. We say such things as "He is happy the way he is." Or, "They really want their own community." Or we say, "They don't know how to take care of good things when they have them." We excuse lack of opportunity or poverty or sub-standard wages by saying such things as, "He could do better if he applied himself." Or, "He doesn't want to work so he doesn't try to do better." And often we quite ignore the fact that a person may be an economic or educational or cultural prisoner, a victim of crushing circumstances.

Or, again, we hide our sins behind rationalizations. To rationalize is to justify some act or some attitude which the conscience knows to be wrong. You see, few of us are willing to accept the blame for our mistakes or failures and we shift the blame to something or someone else. David did this in his affair with Bathsheba. David had his general, Joab, put Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, in the most dangerous part of the battlefield so that he would be killed. He justified this by saying, "for the sword devoureth one as well as another." By the same token, the man who excuses his excessive drinking on the grounds that he must do so with business associates is rationalizing. The student who blames his poor grades on the fact that someone cheated and broke the curve, or that teacher doesn't like him, is rationalizing for the fact that he had not studied and was not prepared for his exam.

Another way we hide our sins is behind our good deeds. It works this way: we balance a good deed over against a bad deed so that the whole thing comes out in our favor. See how it works! "I may not go to church, but I believe in God." Or, "I may not be very easy to get along with at home, but I work hard at the office." Or how about this--"I may cut a few corners in business, but I do a lot of good with my money."

Then, another way we hide our sins is by comparing them to the sins of others. You see, if I can put one of my sins up beside one of yours that is worse, then I can justify my own sin. Listen to how it works. "I may treat my wife rudely, but she is a terrible housekeeper." Or how about this one: "I may not give much to the Lord, but I know people who make more than I and give less." And the one I hear so often goes like this: "The preacher a) doesn't preach good sermons, b) didn't call on me when I was sick, c) didn't show me the attention I deserved, d) has a very unfriendly church, or e) doesn't run things the way I think they should be run. Therefore, I am justified in a) not coming, b) not giving, c) murmuring behind his back or d) sitting on my hands. So, we hide our sins by comparing them to the sins of someone else so that it comes out in our favor. Very few of us would even consider comparing our sins to the life of Jesus or one of the great saints of the church!

So, the first thing we can say about a secret sin is that it is hidden and we use many devices or go to any lengths to hide them from the world and from ourselves. The second thing we can say about our secret sins is that they are not hidden from God. Our text for this morning says, "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance."

That's a sobering thought, isn't it? There is no human act, no human deed, not even a human thought that escapes the surveillance of God. Our iniquities are set before him. The darkness of our secret sins is lighted by the light of his countenance. Louise Edwards in her poem entitled, "My Shadow", puts it this way:

I dug a grave and laid within
Its secret depths one secret sin.
I closed the grave, and know full well
That day I shut myself in Hell!

Many years ago when Stanford University was first built, it was proclaimed one of the finest universities in the country. Soon afterwards, however, the new stone walls began to crack and give way. As it turned out, the massive buildings were not what they appeared to be, for the contractors had put only a veneer of stone on the building and the interior of the walls was filled with chipped stone and poor cement. The great memorial arch, which was praised as one of the finest bits of mural work in the country was a complete ruin, showing glaring pieces of rotten masonry that no building inspector would have passed. The buildings had a secret sin that destroyed them. To the eye, the buildings were firm and strong, but inside they were filled with trash. God sees behind our "fronts" and our external appearances and sees underneath our pretensions to the real us. He sees our inner trash. Didn't Jesus once say something about people who were like whited sepulchers, outwardly beautiful, but inwardly filled with dead men's bones? No, our secret sins are not secret from God.

The third observation we can make about secret sins is this: not only are they not secret from God, they are not really secret from us. Dr. Weatherhead in his book, Psychology and Religion, tells us there are three levels of the mind. First is the conscious level. Your conscious mind is, I hope, occupied at this moment with what I am saying. Then, second, there is the subconscious mind where we store all the memories that we can call up at will to the conscious mind. It is the place where we keep familiar names and places, recent events, and even old memories that are readily called to mind. But below this level of the mind, there is a third level, the unconscious mind. Here lives old memories, old events, old incidents, old repressed things which are hidden away from the conscious mind. We think we have forgotten them, but they are very much alive. Psychologists tell us that

we never really forget anything, but that all we do and say and think is hidden away in the unconscious mind. A great many of our fears, for example, may be due to some incident that happened in childhood that has been pushed down into some unconscious mind. We think it is forgotten, but it still has its dreadful impact on us. We feel fear or distress or uneasiness and we can't really put our finger on what is bothering us. Actually, something down deep in our unconsciousness is very much alive and very much at work. Often, it is our secret sins that have been repressed and pushed down. There, buried in the unconscious mind, sin has a new dark area in which to continue its dreadful work, creating misery and fear and anxiety. We may have consciously forgotten them, but they have not forgotten us. We may have buried them, but they are still dreadfully alive.

What do we do about our secret sins? We read two passages of Scripture this morning that give us a key to dealing with our secret sins. The first passage is from St. Luke, "Even so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

(St. Luke 15:7) You see, as long as we keep our sins a secret, they are unrepented of. And an unrepented sin can destroy us. Isn't that what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah? God called upon them to repent of their sins and when they did not, that sin destroyed them. As long as you are hiding a sin away, it is unrepented of. And when you have not repented of your sin, God cannot forgive you. That unrepented sin lies buried within us, like an unexploded shell, full of danger and potential destruction. Do you remember the story of Jonah, how God commanded him to preach to Nineveh? And the Bible tells us the people of Nineveh repented. We read, "And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them." The Bible says the King himself cried out, "Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands." As a consequence, when they repented, forgiveness became possible and the Bible says God did not destroy them.

The same is true for you and me. If we keep our sins secret, hidden away in our hearts, they will destroy us. First we must repent of them. The second passage of Scripture dealing with our secret sins reads this way: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) God has provided a way to deal with our sin. He sent His son to die for our sin. The Bible tells us that God so loved the world that He sent His only son to die for our sins. Do you sometimes wonder if God could forgive you your sin? Do you sometimes think that your sin is so big or so bad or so terrible that God can't--or won't--forgive it? I invite you to turn the eyes of your heart upon the cross of Calvary. See Jesus, God's own son, dying there. No, your sin is not too big for that; and no, God's love isn't too small for your sin. He loves you so much that if you were the only person in the whole world, still Jesus would have died for your sins. The only sin that is too big for God is the secret sin, the unrepented sin that lies unconfessed in the human heart.

Do you remember the story of the prodigal son that Jesus told? He took everything the Father gave him and went off to a far country. There he spent all he had in sinful living until at last, as a keeper of pigs in the service of some stranger, he discovered where sin had brought him. Then he determined two things in his heart. First, he would repent of his sin and go home. Second, he would confess his sin to his father. The Bible records it this way, "I will go to my Father (repentance) and say to him (confession), 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against thee and am no longer worthy to be called thy son.'" And do you remember what happened? The father opened his arms to his son, took him to his breast, and rejoiced.

That can happen to you this morning. If you will repent of your sins and confess them to God, he will forgive you. Do you remember how the Bible puts it? "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Without exception this morning each of us has secret sins. We may hide them from others and we may even hide them from ourselves, but there is someone who sees them--and that someone is God. Those secret sins can destroy us unless we repent of them and confess them. The prodigal son didn't like living with the pigs. He wanted to repent and go home. How about you?