

# Splinters, Beams, and Clear Sight

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THURSDAY, AUGUST 3, 2017

“If you see a splinter in your brother’s eye,” Jesus never said, “ignore it, because you probably have a splinter in your eye, too, or something worse.” A splinter in the eye hurts. He warns us against spiritual pride, against believing ourselves better than our brother because we happen not to be afflicted with that particular splinter. That’s why he calls the proud man, in the parable he really told, a hypocrite. But notice what he adds: “First take the plank out of your own eye, and then *you will see well enough to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye.*”

Jesus waves no banner for splinters. He wants them out. He commands a serious examination of our consciences, a spiritual house cleaning; we must be merciful with sinners, but intolerant of sin, beginning with our own. Are we angry with our brother? Did we gaze with lust at that woman? Do we seek the highest place at table? Do we pray conspicuously, to be noticed? Have we nursed vengeance against those who have hurt us?

Hypocrisy, pride, wrath, lust, covetousness, vanity, vindictiveness – these are all sins or sinful dispositions, to be hated as we hate diseases of the body, because they, like cancer, actually do harm to the real moral constitution with which God has endowed us. Think of serious sins as foreign bodies lodged in the bone, the blood, the brain, the heart. Jesus wants them out.

We can draw a sharp distinction between the realism of the Church and what I’ll call the “irrealism” of our time, a failure to understand the reality of sin. When I say, “Detraction is a sin,” I mean more than that detraction hurts its victim’s reputation, or that God has

condemned it, or, to be a sophist, that “society” frowns upon it. I mean that God condemns it in the same way that a doctor hates cancer.

Plato understood the point – how can Christians miss it? Detraction really does gnaw out the insides of *the detractor*: the sinner is the sin’s first and most terrible victim. We do not follow the moral law as an arbitrary set of cultural restrictions. God has made us so as to thrive by obeying the moral law and to sicken, decay, and die by ignoring it or violating it.



*The Parable of the Mote and the Beam*  
by Domenico Fetti, c. 1619 [The  
Met, NYC]

That’s regardless of opinion. It is the law written on our hearts; the law by which our hearts work, and in this respect every single human person is like every other. There are not two or three kinds of human hearts that pump blood to every cell in the body; only one. There are not two or three separate testimonies of the moral law written upon the heart; only one.

The physical heart is formed for blood, not water or glue. The moral heart is formed for what really is good, not for hypocrisy, pride, wrath, lust, covetousness, vanity, or vindictiveness.

Of course, if you are surrounded by people stuffing their moral hearts with glue and calling it a different kind of blood, and you are led by their example, you may not be guilty of an open-eyed and defiant

violation of the law of God. Your guilt is mitigated by your foolishness. But glue is still glue. Call it what you will; the sin does not bend to your naming. Call the melanoma on your brother's cheek a beauty mark; its dangerous tentacles will work all the same.

And why would you call it a beauty mark? Perhaps you do not really believe what the Church teaches. You may follow it in your own person, but you give it no real credence. It is the residue of a cultural habit; you are like a Jewish person who follows the kosher laws but who won't insist upon it for his children, because he no longer senses any connection between those laws and the covenant between God and Israel. It is not real to him.

So you say *you believe* that fornication is wrong, because God has condemned it, but you do not really believe that fornication *is wrong*, and that therefore God's condemnation is a guardrail, an alarm. God will, you say to yourself, ignore the wrong, just as you yourself ignore it, because it is more comfortable that way.

You are not a judgmental hypocrite. *You are a non-judgmental hypocrite*, congratulating yourself for a broad-mindedness that in reality is just indifference or cowardice.

Or you call it a beauty mark because that's what everybody else calls it, and somehow you hope that God too will play along. You say that since everybody's a sinner, it hardly matters which sin disfigures you or your brother. God will wipe them all out in the end.

But that attitude cannot be reconciled with the words and the example of Jesus, nor can it make any sense of the Cross. Why bother dying for people palsied with sin, when it would be much easier to shrug at the palsy, wave a magic wand at the resurrection of the dead, and, hey presto, everybody's a saint?

There is no love in that. If you see the cancer, you don't say, "Well, everybody is going to die of something eventually, so what's the big

deal?" If you see the man in the ditch, beaten within an inch of his life, you don't say, "Well, if it weren't this it would be something else," and go on your way.

Does it matter if the man in the ditch threw himself into it? Does it matter if your brother is noosing a rope to hang himself? Does *volition* alter the reality of the harm? If two people playing Russian roulette agree to the game, does that make it less deadly? Mutual consent in evil can as well aggravate the culpability as mitigate it. Duelists consent.

Time, dear readers, to return to reality.