

Written Copy: Matthew 18:10-14 “Watchmen So None Might Perish”

15th Sunday @ Pentecost: Proper 18

Sunday, September 10th, 2023

Text: Matthew 18:7-10, 14

¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Exegetical Statement

Temptation to sin is bound to come upon every Christian. But it is the Father’s desire that none of His chosen children be lost to unrepentance and fall away. He desires each of us to recognize the sins we struggle with and avoid those things that act like triggers to sin at all costs. For to fall into unrepentance and die in it means an eternity worse than living forever in a maimed body. We are to see ourselves as dependent children constantly needing Jesus’ love and forgiveness. In this light we should view our fellow Christian brothers and sisters, reaching out as the Spirit’s tool to bring back and restore those who have wandered away from their faith in unrepentant sin through frank and prayerful discussion about how the Lord calls both of us to live according to His will stated in the law. We reach out through the Office of the Keys warning that unrepentant sin remains bound to us and will condemn us to eternal suffering. But when the Spirit calls us back to faith through sorrow over our sin and grants once again our dependent faith upon His work of salvation, we by His promise in the absolution are restored to fellowship with Him and with us, His Church. We do this with the same love and concern that the Father has for all His precious children.

Focus Statement:

Through the Spirit’s work of confession, He moves us to see ourselves as needy dependent children, needing His love and forgiveness daily for our many sins. He promises that all sins are forgiven and washed away to the cross as we hold fast to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. His Spirit works in us as His means to reach out to others to keep them from straying through Christian fellowship, and when they do stray lovingly and winsomely call them back into our fellowship of faith.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

We can take a very hands-off approach to our brother/sister in Christ and their faith life, seeing it as “Not my responsibility”. But here Jesus makes us responsible to guard our walk in faith so we can minister to our needy brother who is straying and in danger of perishing in unbelief.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Christ promises to be present among us and His Spirit works within us to keep us in repentant faith and thereby able to be His means to call our straying brother/sister back in faith, while working to keep others in repentant faith just as we are.

Subject Sentence: Repentant Faith Protects You from Perishing

Introduction

It's audience participation time! Everybody raise your right hand. C'mon you guys and girls in back; I said your **right** hand! Okay, good. Now raise your left hand. Hmm... that's interesting. All of you seem to have both right and left hands. Okay then, raise your left foot in the air. Hmm...now maybe we're getting somewhere. Not too many of you are doing that. Alright, I imagine that's because of the pews, they make it hard. So, on the honor system, is anybody missing a right or left foot? No? Interesting! And looking at you it appears you all have two eyes. In fact, that's kind of troubling.

Do you know why it's troubling? Did you forget what Jesus said in our Gospel Lesson in **Matthew 18:8-9**? Jesus said **⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.** Now, as I recall from the beginning of our Worship Service, all of you were asked, "***to consider your unworthiness and confess before God and one another that you have sinned in thought, word, and deed, and that you cannot free yourself from your poor sinful condition***". In fact, last Sunday you confessed "***I, a poor miserable sinner...***" And how was that sin demonstrated in your life? By what your hands did or didn't do. By where your feet went or didn't go. By what you saw or refused to see. All of you, including me, should be missing at least one hand, one foot, and one eye, if not both of them.

Now before anyone gets out the meat cleaver and starts chopping, I can assure you that Jesus is using a figure of speech called hyperbole: an exaggeration that is meant to make a point. He wants us to focus on the sin in our lives and how dangerous it can be. But more than that, not simply the sin, but the attitude we can have towards it.

Being Watchmen Who Take Sin Seriously

In our Old Testament Lesson, the LORD calls Ezekiel as His prophet to the exiles in Babylon to be a watchman over them regarding wickedness in their life. Here in this section of the Gospel Jesus is calling us to do the same, be watchmen over ourselves, and our fellow Christians. But the concern is not just simply that you and I sin. We are not to be the kind of watchmen the cries out "***Hey! You! You just said a naughty word! Hey! Was what you just said the God's honest truth?! Hey! You are looking at your phone instead of listening to the sermon!***" Well, wait a minute; maybe He does want you to yell that one out if you see your neighbor on the phone when I'm preaching! No! Just kidding! While those are things we should be concerned about personally in our life, they are not things we should necessarily call our neighbor out on as sinners bound for hell .

Jesus here in this portion of the Gospel is not just talking about individual sins. After all, when you confessed your sins at the beginning of worship you heard me pronounce the Gospel promise that you should hear and hold fast to just as if Jesus was standing here saying it Himself. He tells you that all of your sins are completely forgiven. Here in this passage the English translation falls short and muddies the water about what Jesus was actually getting at. The word translated as “sin” is not the normal Greek word for sin. The literal meaning of the word we have here is **“the trigger of a trap-the mechanism by which a trap springs shut ensnaring its victim”**. The figurative sense is a stumbling block, something that causes us to stumble in our faith walk and become trapped in sin. What Jesus is talking about is falling into a lifestyle of unrepentance. It means ignoring and excusing certain sins that we hold too precious to do anything about. It’s seeing these sins as no big deal, because after all, aren’t all sins forgiven? Besides, God wants me to be happy, doesn’t He? And if no one knows about it; well, if I don’t say anything about it, then maybe God won’t say anything either. In these scenarios, and there are others, our sinful self makes excuses that it’s okay to sin. It loves to make excuses and we can all be pretty good at it. We can spin it just as good as any politician.

The danger in all of this is that we can enter into a lifestyle of unrepentant sinning, when we allow our sinful heart to convince us that for whatever reason sin no longer matters. If our sinning no longer matters, how much does our Savior matter? How much do we really need Him?

Jesus’ point is that unrepentant sin is a life-or-death issue. When sin no longer matters, and our Savior no longer matters, then there is no forgiveness, because flame of faith has been extinguished. With no forgiveness these sins are bound to us, they are not washed away to the cross. They will remain and we will be judged worthy of eternal suffering on the Last Day. And how bad is that eternal suffering? Jesus says better to live eternally maimed and lame than to go into eternal hell with all your body parts. And how bad is it if my unrepentant lifestyle causes another to fall away? Jesus says in **Matthew 18:6** that...**“it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.** It would be better to suffer the agonizing death of drowning in deep water with a huge millstone that is too heavy for a man to turn but would normally be pulled by a donkey; to have that wrapped around your neck so there is no chance you could ever swim up to reach the surface. You just keep sinking down deeper and deeper, as you try to hold your breath, until you can no longer hold it, and water fills your lungs as you choke to death. For me that is a very scary end. For those who die in unrepentant sin, the end will be even worse. It’s eternal suffering and torment, physically, emotionally, and spiritually,

Being Watchmen So that No One Should Perish

Why is Jesus using this extreme figure of speech to warn us? He tells us in **Matthew 18:14** **it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish**. Who are these “little ones”? You, me, all who believe in Him with humble and repentant hearts. All who truly confess we are poor miserable sinners and that without Jesus in our life as our Lord and Savior we have nothing good to offer Him or anyone. You are members of His Church, His kingdom, not because of who you are by yourself, or because of anything you have done, or could do. It is only because He loves you so much, He came to give His life on the cross to save you from the eternity of suffering you and I justly deserve. All those sins that would condemn you have been washed to the cross and to the tomb and were buried there with Him. He rose again, but your sins didn't. Your baptismal faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior keeps them separated from you, washing your sins every day to the cross, and to the tomb, and they are gone. God remembers them no more.

You and I are assured of this by the work of the Holy Spirit. He is at work in us daily to keep us in repentant faith, so that those sins stay buried in the tomb. He points to some of the ways we sin in our lives as we study His word, especially those He wants to work on with us. He does this not to crush us beyond hope, but so that we can see how very much we need Jesus as our Savior every day. So that we see ourselves as needy and dependent children who would be lost without Him, but through our faith in Him we are constantly forgiven and restored as His precious children. Through our faith in Him we are declared to be good enough to be with Him in His kingdom, His Church, now and forever. His Spirit moves us to watch for the sin in our lives, so we can watch them being sent to the cross and sent away from us forever-as far as east is from west.

The Holy Spirit is at work in you every day to protect you from stumbling into that trap of unrepentant sin that can lead to falling away from faith. He is at work to equip you to be a watchman; not just over yourselves, but also your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. No one is immune from temptation. And no one is immune from stumbling into unrepentant sin. He wants you and I to be on the lookout for those who may be straying away from the faith and from Christian fellowship by engaging in lifestyles where they are practicing what God has declared to be wrong, such as: alcohol or drug addiction, pornography, spousal abuse, gambling, lying and constant gossiping about others. These and others are the kind of sins that we can become so comfortable with that our sinful heart begins to make excuses for them. This condition is compounded when our attitude toward worship and Bible Study becomes that they are not really necessary. When we forgo the means by which the Spirit works to keep us in repentant faith that trap can close, and our faith can starve itself to death before the person realizes that it's happening. Take it from someone who knows from firsthand in the past. There was a time when I allowed unrepentant sin to starve my faith, and I fell away.

But Jesus didn't want me to perish, so He sent a Pastor who convicted me of my sins and preached the Gospel of forgiveness into my ear and my heart. As His watchman He wants you to be on the lookout for any and all who are struggling in their life of faith. He is sending you out to come alongside them. To go and talk to them. To ask them what's going on, and spend a good amount of time listening, all the while praying. And when the Spirit provides the opportunity, in a gentle, loving, winsome way, explain not just how you see them struggling with sin, but also confess that you too struggle. But then confess how Jesus is the answer for your struggles. Explain how His Spirit shows you your sin, then shows you your Savior, confirming in your heart that all of your sins, even those you struggle with, are forgiven and forgotten by the Father. And how through that love that sent Jesus to the cross the Spirit creates and maintains the desire in you to stop sinning. He creates the desire to turn from that sin and live in obedience to Him and in love toward your fellow man. And each time you fail, you start over again and keep trying, going forward not with the plan and purpose to continue sinning, but to live instead for your Lord and Savior. He sends you to spend time with them in talking with them, sharing God's word with them, and praying with them and for them.

It's not an easy task He calls us to. When I worked as a manager at Hillers there was a lady who worked in the Deli who I will call Cathy (not her real name). She was a very strong-willed woman, and the other employees, including the Deli Manager feared her. And to be honest, I did as well. I learned later that she grew up going to Church but stopped going because she found everyone there to be hypocrites. It came about that I had to let go one of her friends, someone who she helped get a job in that store. This person was caught stealing. But Cathy defended her and refused to believe she was guilty, even though we had evidence to the contrary. Needless to say, Cathy was boiling hot mad when her friend was fired. She dressed down and cussed out the Deli Manager who she accused of being behind it all. Then she came and found me. She began to yell at me. Thankfully I was able to convince her to go into the back room where she continued to verbally attack me. She knew I was a Christian. So, at one point she said, "Aren't you all about love and forgiveness? Don't you know my friend has a little girl to take care of, and you just took away her livelihood? Like you've never come back and sampled the Chicken Salad when I was making it. You're no better than she is. Who are you to judge her? And you call yourself a Christian! Is that how a Christian is supposed to act?"

I was speechless for several moments, mostly because I was so angry, I couldn't respond. But her accusations pierced me like daggers. And then, the Holy Spirit provided me with a witness that was prompted more by Him than anything within me. I told Cathy, "Your right. I am no better than she is, or anyone else. But what I am is forgiven for every wrong thing I've ever committed, because I believe that Jesus loved me so much, He died to forgive all my sins." And with that, I walked away from her. The next day she knocked on the door to the office and wanted to speak with me. She said she felt terrible about how she treated me and wanted to apologize. And she said she wanted to hear more about how Jesus forgives all the wrongs we do.

Conclusion

All of us certainly deserve to enter eternity minus a hand, or a foot, or an eye. In fact, what we deserve is to be barred from eternal life forever and instead spend eternity suffering. But thanks be to God that Jesus doesn't desire that any of His little ones should perish forever. And so, He came to do something about it. He sends His Spirit to point to all the ways we earn eternal death, and then points to all that Jesus did in His life, death, and resurrection to make us right with God now and for eternity to come. He warns us when we become too comfortable with sinning, not to ruin our day, but to keep us in repentant faith, trusting in Him alone. And with that faith He sends us out as watchmen to keep an eye not just on ourselves, but our fellow brothers and sisters too. He wants us to do more than just yell warnings. He wants us to come alongside those who are straying, who are in danger of losing their faith, or have already lost it. His Spirit can work to call them back to faith with the same power that He uses to keep us in faith. He wants them as well as you and I to see ourselves as dependent and forgiven children, loved and forgiven by Him now and for eternity to come. Amen.