

Matthew 18:1-20 & Ezekiel 33:7-9
“Warning the Little Ones”
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 6, 2020
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro & Ezekiel’s Doubts]

The 18th century American statesman Daniel Webster once said: “The most important thought I ever had was my individual responsibility to God.”¹

This may sound odd, but each Christian has an individual responsibility to God in what we think, say, and do. Or, you may be more familiar with this phrase: our thoughts, words, and deeds.

The prophet Ezekiel held himself responsible to God. Last week, we heard that the prophet Jeremiah thought of himself as a laughingstock as no one seemed to listen to him as he proclaimed God’s Word (Jeremiah 15:15-21). And, for a time, Ezekiel – *in today’s Old Testament reading* – thought of himself as a failure to God.

So, why did Ezekiel conclude that he was a failure?

At first, Ezekiel spoke to the nation of Judah – *the Jewish southern kingdom*. He spoke explicit warnings that if the people did not repent to God, they would face God’s wrath. But, the people didn’t listen and would rather live in their sin. Afterall, sinning is fun! But, this fun would end.

Babylon soon conquered the kingdom of Judah and the people he warned were exiled to Babylon. You would think that this would wake up the Judaeans. But, it didn’t. They just continued in their sins while exiled from their land. The people would rather listen to the false prophets who promised them that nothing bad would ever happen of them because of their sin. Afterall, why not live your life? The false prophets proclaimed that if sinning makes you feel good, go ahead and do it. What could happen?

¹ *Encyclopedia of Sermon Illustrations* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 172.

For this, Ezekiel thought of himself as a failure. After all, the people didn't listen. They just continued in their sins. They were taken over and exiled to a far away place. Their culture was destroyed, but the attitude of the people never changed.

As Ezekiel was down in the dumps, God begins to answer his doubts. In fact, God reassures Ezekiel that he is in fact still a watchman of God. His commissioning has not changed. He did what God called him to do. He warned the people to repent and proclaimed God's saving message for all sinners.

God reassured Ezekiel saying, ***“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul”*** (Ezekiel 33:7-9).

Even though the people did not listen, God was still speaking through Ezekiel. Through God's love in desiring the sinners to be saved, God still spoke His saving Word through Ezekiel. But, as fallen human beings, we have a free will. The Jews then chose to listen or not to listen to God's Word. Today, we have the same choice. So, are we listening to God's Word? Are we today, *who have been called by God through the Gospel*, watchmen and watchwomen of God's Word? Are we proclaiming the Truth from God's Word?

[We Are All Vulnerable to Stumble]

Some 600 years after the time of Ezekiel, Jesus – *the very Son of God* – came into our flesh. During His earthly ministry, the people would still rather sin than repent.

Jesus taught the disciples: ***“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, 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”*** (Matthew 18:5-6).

Jesus begins with such positive words: ***“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,”*** but then immediately His teaching becomes stern, and for some, His words become even appalling: ***“But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, 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.”***

Here, Jesus is issuing a warning about mistreating or neglecting the care for ***“one of these little ones.”*** Now, these ***“little ones”*** are fellow disciples who are weak in the faith and have utter dependence on being taught what is true, right, and saving from the watchmen and watchwomen, such as pastors, teachers and other Christians who are strong in their faith.

Jesus is calling us, His hearers, both then and now, not to neglect even ***“one of these little ones”*** in need, but to show such concern for one another that when a believer is lured away and begins to wander from the fold, that others will imitate the care of Jesus – ***the true Shepherd*** – and bring back the one who has strayed.

You see, we are all vulnerable to stumble into despair, ruin, and unbelief.

Jesus says, ***“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”*** (Matthew 18:7)

Since we live in the world, temptations to sin are all around us. Afterall, Satan is able to deceive us into thinking that evil is good and good is evil. Satan has a way to make sin seem fun and pleasing. Satan has a way to make us even think that sin may even be “God pleasing.”

We all struggle with temptations to sin every second of our life. We ask ourselves: “Should I do this?” “Should I click that?” But, even in our struggle, there is no excuse for our sins of thought, word, and deed against God the Father.

[The Lying False Prophets]

Back during the time of Ezekiel, the false prophets said that no bad outcome would ever come because of sinning. Oh, how they were wrong! They were very wrong! The people were exiled, and their culture was destroyed.

Today, there are still false teachers that proclaim that sin is still not a big deal. They say, “Just live your life.” And, “What I do in my life won’t affect your life.”

Today, more than 61 million babies have been murdered due to abortion, since Roe v. Wade. Sadly, many Christian denominations have no issue with this, despite God's Word championing the sanctity of life of every human being from conception to natural death. And, if you have had an abortion or know of a person struggling with the effects, through repentance, every sin is a forgivable sin.

Also, the Supreme Court's ruling on gay marriage has had a profound affect upon the family, society, and upon the church. Again, sadly many Christian denominations jumped onto this bandwagon, despite God's Word proclaiming that marriage is a holy estate between one man and one woman. Just like abortion, the sin of homosexuality is also a forgivable sin through repentance.

And, just this spring and summer, many churches have latched onto the violence that is promoted by Antifa and Black Lives Matter without ever questioning their motives. If these churches actually proclaimed the Word of God, they would know that vengeance belongs only to God, as He says repeatedly in the Old Testament and New Testament: "***Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord***" (Romans 12:19, Hebrews 10:30, Deuteronomy 32:35).

So, what do all these false teachings and sins all have in common? Instead of trusting in one true God, they are trusting in themselves and sinful man. This all goes back to the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods." This means that "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

To be frank, we all fail at this. Every single one of us. Instead of depending on God, we look to our fellow man – *and ourselves* – to bring results. We often forget to pray to God in our daily lives. We often forget that we – *as sinful human beings* – only deserve God's wrath and punishment. We also often forget that – *as Christians* – we are to lead by example in our thoughts and actions, so that we do not lead the weak and "little ones" in the faith astray.

The Lutheran Reformers were clear that “*submission and compromise in external things where Christian agreement has not already been achieved strengthens idolaters in the idolatry.*”² This means that when the church gives in to worldly things that go against God’s Word, this only strengthens the sinful world to seep more into the Church, and thus forming a slippery slope of more and more false doctrines infecting the Church.

[The Screwtape Letters]

In C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*, Satan’s minion named Screwtape writes to his junior tempter nephew named Wormwood to support his endeavor to convince “the patient” to turn from Christ and instead follow his sinful instincts, so he would be added to hell.

In his 16th letter³, Screwtape writes to Wormwood the following:

“You mentioned casually in your last letter that the patient has continued to attend one church, and one only, since he was converted, and that he is not wholly pleased with it. May I ask what you are about? Why have I no report on the causes of his fidelity to the parish church? Do you realize that unless it is due to indifference it is a very bad thing? Surely you know that if a man can’t be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that ‘suits’ him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches.”

Screwtape later continued writing about sending the patient to a church that stands for nothing. He wrote:

“I think I warned you before that if your patient can’t be kept out of the Church, he ought to at least be violently attached to some party within it. I don’t mean on really doctrinal issues; about those, the more lukewarm he is the better.”

So, just because some Christian churches proclaim sins to be God pleasing, this doesn’t make it fact. The Triune God is not going to just look past sins, because a false church proclaims that that sin is no longer a sin. False teachers and false churches only lead their followers to one place – **hell** – *eternal punishment apart from God* – and to its weeping and gnashing of teeth.

² *The Book of Concord: The Formula of Concord – Solid Declaration, Article X* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 638.15-16.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 81, 84.

This is what Jesus is warning us all about! The sinful world does its best to lead us away from Jesus. Thus, away from the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The sinful world, led by Satan, does not want anyone saved from the powers of the evil foes: sin, death, and himself, Satan.

This is why Jesus says it is better for the false teacher to ***“have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea”*** (Matthew 18:6). God will not take it lightly when His little ones are caused to stumble. False doctrine, otherwise known as heresy, is dangerous. Actually, “dangerous” is too mild of a word. False doctrine – or, heresy – is the road to hell.

This is serious! False doctrine is not something to dabble in. Yes, we all make mistakes, but heresies are persistent errors for which the person or church refuses to be normed by the Word of God, the Bible itself. By refusing to be normed by God’s Word, these false teachers and false churches are proclaiming that they are more enlightened than the Triune God, Himself.

So, instead of caring for the wellbeing of the “little ones,” they neglect them and severely damage their faith, or destroy their faith altogether, and all in the name of “tolerance.”

For these false teachers and false churches, to them, I feel that they believe that being a Christian is just a joke. They say, as a follower of Christ, we can do whatever we want. After all, Christ died for that sin. But, do they preach repentance? No. As the Apostle Paul said, ***“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”*** (Romans 6:1-2)

For Jesus, the whole matter of causing another disciple to stumble into ruin is serious! He says: ***“Woe to the world for temptations to sin”*** (Matthew 18:7a). Sin is no joke. Sin should not be taken lightly. Sin separates us from God. Sin separates us from salvation.

[What Do We Do?]

So, what are we to do? Are we doomed? ***No!*** Jesus reminds us to live vigilantly as we follow Him by following the Commandments. As the Apostle Paul says, we fulfill the Law through love:

“For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Romans 13:9).

We will all encounter causes of stumbling. It’s all in how we deal with it. Do we just fall into sin without thinking of its consequences? Do we turn away from sin? Or, do we accidentally sin, but then when we come to realize that we have sinned we then repent of that sin and seek God’s forgiveness?

Jesus teaches us that ***“if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.”*** He says that ***“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. 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”*** (Matthew 18:8-9).

So, is Jesus literally teaching us to self-amputate? ***No!*** He is teaching us that if a particular thing triggers our ability to sin, then we are to cut that thing out of our life. So, if social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, causes you to sin, cut that out of your life. If television shows and movies cause you to think sinful thoughts, cut that out of your life. Again, Jesus is saying that whatever causes us to sin to just cut out that trigger from our life.

You see, **God hates sin**. And, because of our sin, we all deserve to be thrown into the hell of fire (Matthew 18:9b).

[God Warns His “Little Ones” to Save Them]

God the Father sent the prophets of old to warn us of the consequences of our sin. He sent the prophets, like Ezekiel, to warn us to repent of our sins.

God also told the prophets and us today that if the wicked or unbelieving people persist in their sins, that at least they have been given a fair warning. So, if the Christian believer follows God’s directive and warns the wicked, this believer is not held responsible to the wicked person’s fate, if he persists in evil.

You see, the Triune God does not desire any one of His “little ones” to be destroyed in eternal punishment. Despite our sin, God the Father sent His only begotten Son Jesus the Christ to bear the penalty of all of our sins through His innocent suffering and death upon the cross.

He sent His Son Jesus to warn us of the destructive power of living in sin. But, also through Jesus, God the Father has given us the Way to salvation. Even though we deserve eternal death and hell because of our sin, we have forgiveness, life and salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

You see, when we repent of our sins of thought, word, and deed against God the Father, these sins are forgiven through the hands and feet of Jesus that were pierced for our iniquities and so that through His wounds, we are healed. By His wounds, precious death and glorious resurrection, we, by grace through faith in Jesus, enter eternal life. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, the powers of sin, death, and hell are defeated upon His “little ones.”

Jesus suffered and died for our every sin. Through His blood shed for us upon the cross, our sins are forgiven by grace through faith in Him! At the Lord’s Supper, Christ freely gives us His true body and blood in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins. God through His Means of Grace – Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and in hearing His Word – is constantly forgiving and strengthening our faith in Him!

You see, God does not judge a person on the basis of his or her past. So, when we repent of our sins, those sins are wiped away through the merit and work of Jesus Christ alone.

Even though we sin, God is eager to save! He warns us, so that we can be saved! So, we repent and receive God’s forgiveness, we take up Christ’s cross and proclaim His saving grace as we follow Him! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠