

*Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.*<sup>8</sup> *When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.*<sup>9</sup> *But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.*<sup>10</sup> *“Son of man, say to the house of Israel, ‘This is what you are saying: “Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?”’*<sup>11</sup> *Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’* (Ezekiel 33:7-11)

### What Does God Really Want?

What does God want from us? Does that seem like an impossible question? Or does it seem like an obvious one? Does that question seem too complicated to deal with in one sermon and are you getting a little worried about how long we’re going to be here this morning? If you follow the kind of theology you hear from politicians and university professors and on TV today, you’ll probably think that question can’t be answered. So instead, you’ll talk about Jesus in terms of inclusivity and diversity. “Jesus accepts everyone” – so don’t call homosexuality a sin and don’t condemn people who believe in different gods. You’ll observe that there are so many different churches and they all claim to be right. How can we know what God really wants? Yet, the question can be answered in a very simple way: by opening our Bibles. Today, we want to hear the Bible’s answer and understand, **what does God really want?**

#### I.

Our reading this morning is from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. In this chapter, Ezekiel records a conversation he had with God. The gist of that conversation is **God wants us to preach the law.** God says, **“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.”** In the ancient world, watchmen stood on towers and looked out for enemies while the rest of the people went about their work. If they saw an enemy approaching, they sounded the alarm so that the people could defend themselves. Ezekiel was a spiritual watchman. He was supposed to sound the alarm when spiritual dangers approached. God makes it very clear what those dangers are: sin. Ezekiel’s job was to warn believers that living in sin brings death.

We die because we’re sinners. And if a person lives in unrepentant sin, his death is the beginning of God’s judgment. But in the Bible, death as a judgment from God usually means more than just physical death. It means all that God visits on the unbeliever when that person dies. It means hell. Ezekiel’s job was to warn the chosen people that they couldn’t just rest on their laurels. They couldn’t figure, “We’re circumcised descendants of Abraham. We’re God’s chosen people. We’re going to be in heaven.” If they give in to their own sinful natures, they would go to hell, in spite of who they were and all the sacrifices they had offered and all the work they had done.

God says, **“When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.”** Ezekiel was supposed to warn sinners. But if he doesn’t do that, the sinner would still die and go to hell for his sin. He doesn’t get to whine, “I didn’t know!” He did know. God gave him a conscience that did condemn his sin. And God’s standard is perfection. If we don’t live up to that standard, then we get what our sins deserve. But notice that God would hold the prophet accountable. That preacher, too, would be guilty because he didn’t do what God commanded.

When preachers fail to call sinners to repent, that’s sin. But being unsuccessful is different. God said to Ezekiel, **“But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.”** The most any prophet can do is speak the word of God. Only God can change hearts. God calls his servants to be faithful, not successful.

Just as God called men like Ezekiel to be prophets to his Old Testament people, God has called men today to speak his message to his people. That message includes the law. God calls us to warn you of the

danger sin poses. Someone called me “a closet Baptist” this past week because I do preach that law. He meant it as a compliment although it’s hard for me to take it that way, because my work is all about the gospel. I always need to ask myself if you’re walking out of here thinking about law or the gospel of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. But as I examine the balance in my preaching, I dare not forget a basic truth: God wants us to hear the law so that he can convict us of our sin.

How do you like being convicted every Sunday? How do you feel about God sending guys like me to do that to you? Do you think it makes us “holier than thou”? Or “out of touch” with what people want from their churches today? Do you think the time for “fire and brimstone” is over? My friends, as long as this world lasts, we will need to hear that we are sinners. That is the only way for us to see Jesus for what he really is. What good is Christ to you if you’re not a sinner? What good is the gospel that says that Jesus lived and died for you, if you don’t think you need someone to pay for your sins?

Our sinful hearts find all kinds of ways around our guilt. They like to trust in what we’ve done. Again and again, when I ask people why God should let them into heaven, they give me some variation of the answer, “I’ve tried to be a good person.” The Israelite version of that was, “We’re circumcised. We’re descendants of Abraham. We bring a tithe to the temple and we don’t eat unclean food or work on the Sabbath.” The Lutheran version is a little different. “We were confirmed. We went through two years of catechism class or six months of Bible Information Class. We showed up for church. And we’ve given a ton of money to this church. We’ve done a lot for this congregation and we’ve been good people at work and at school and at home.”

Do I doubt any of those things? Not really. I assume that most of us here today are good husbands and wives, parents and children, and workers. I know that you did go through those classes and you do show up and get things done here and that your offerings do pay our bills. But that does not earn you a free pass. Even if you’ve spent decades serving God faithfully here, if you get caught up in sin and refuse to repent, all those years of faithful service count for nothing. You get a big, fat zero in God’s ledger.

God condemns us to death and hell when we trust in what we have done. Every one of us needs to hear that. Only when we abandon all thought that we’ve done something for God and trust in Jesus to take our sin away, only then do we have eternal life. Jesus, the Son of God, came down here and he lived the life you and I cannot live. He was perfect in his dedication to God from start to finish of his life here. Jesus stood in our place and he lived the life we cannot live and then he gave it to us. He also gave it for us. He died to pay for what we are guilty of. That shouldn’t even have been possible, because Jesus is God and God can’t die. But God the Son did die. His death is worth more than all of our sin. His death more than pays for all that we are guilty of. The hell he suffered on the cross more than pays for all the hell that every human being deserves. Jesus rose to say to you and to me that we are paid for and forgiven. We have eternal life with him.

## II.

When I tell you what God commands and you feel the heat of hell on the back of your neck, that’s not because I’m a good preacher. It’s because God’s Word is powerful. God makes you feel that heat. But that law is not God’s true work. His true work is the gospel. His true work is to give us peace because Jesus has taken away our guilt. **What does God really want? God wants to give us life and comfort.**

When our sinful hearts hear the law, it’s natural for us to plug our ears and refuse to listen. We make excuses for our sin. We drown God’s threats with activity or boasting or destructive behavior. But there’s another way our hearts can abuse God’s law: despair. We think that there’s no hope for us. The people of Israel were in exile when Ezekiel had this conversation with God. They felt that despair. You see, 800 years earlier, at Mt. Sinai, God had promised them that if they were faithful to him, he would protect them from their enemies and they would live in the land of Israel forever. But the Babylonians had dragged them away. Under the Mt. Sinai covenant, that could only mean they had sinned. Now they were saying, **“Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?”**

You and I don’t live in exile and we’ve never lived under the Mt. Sinai covenant. But there are many of us who live in a kind of despair. I know people who can’t escape from sins they’ve committed in the past. They wish every day that they could erase their history. Any counselor can tell you stories of people who come to them looking for some kind of peace in their despair over the things they have done. But even if you never go to a counselor, if you’re at all like me, you remember things that you’ve said and done and how it hurt people, and you wish you could erase it. The devil loves to whisper in our ears, “You rotten sinner! You’re going to hell!” He wants us to give up all trust in Jesus and assume that God would never forgive us for a sin

that bad. He wants us to drink, to kill ourselves, to torture ourselves and retreat into ourselves thinking that no one has ever been as sinful as I am. That despair leads to giving up on living a Christian life. Why try? I might as well live it up because I'm going to hell anyway.

God said to the Israelites, **“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?”** God sends pastors to counter the lies of the devil. Yes, we're sinners. But God does not want to send even one of us to hell. God wants you to live with him forever. God wants me to comfort you with the clear and certain promise of his love and forgiveness in Christ.

When you feel guilty, you need to hear about Jesus. You need to know that the Son of God knew your name before God created the world. He knew your name when he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born in Bethlehem. He knew that he was hanging on the cross for you, he suffered hell and he died in your place. Then he rose so that you now have forgiveness and life. God wants you to live with him forever. God wants you to have comfort and peace in your life now. God has erased all the sin that we can't erase from our memory banks. Jesus has taken it all away! God counts us as perfect and righteous and when we despair and feel like giving up, God says, “I love you and I have forgiven you.”

And when we give up on living for God, either out of despair or out of hard hearts, God says to us, “Turn!” He's talking about repentance. Repentance is a complete change of mind and attitude. Instead of hardening our hearts and finding excuses for our sin, repentance kneels before God and confesses our sin and our guilt. But it does not despair. Instead, it clings to the blood of Christ. It says, “I know that Jesus died and rose for me. I know that I am forgiven.” And when the devil accuses us, repentance says, “You're right. I'm a sinner. But so what? Jesus died for me. Jesus rose for me. Jesus stands in heaven and he speaks for me. I will not die for my sin. I will not spend one minute in hell.”

That repentance leads us to turn from our evil ways. Once we recognize how sinful those old ways are and how Jesus has rescued us from death and hell, then we don't want to live in sin anymore. Now, because we are sinners, it's going to be a battle. We will never be perfect in this life. But faith means that we trust in our Savior. Faith gives us the desire to fight that battle day and night until we reach eternity.

To every sinner who doesn't see that, God asks, “Why will you die? Why are you insisting on going to hell? I love you and I want you to be mine.” That's God's true work. What does God really want? God wants to give us faith in Jesus so that we know that we are his. God wants us to live a life that shows that faith. God wants us to be with him forever. Amen.