

“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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ “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?” ’ ¹¹ 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)

God Wants us to Live

Have you ever seen a movie with a tough drill sergeant who really has a heart of gold? It’s kind of a stock Hollywood character. A few weeks ago I saw a very young John Wayne playing that part in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, so it goes back at least to 1949 when that movie was made. But I’ve seen that character in movies about the Army, the Marines, naval aviators and even in a movie about Coast Guard rescue swimmers. I’ve actually been through basic training and I’ve known a few drill sergeants. None of the ones I served with lived up to that Hollywood stock character, but I think that most of them believe that by breaking down raw recruits and then building them back up again, they give them a better chance of survival. The best drill sergeant wants his trainees to live.

There is a life lesson there. Nobody expects that drill instructors should be nice guys. They’re tough on their trainees, because those trainees have important things to learn. It’s not fun to be a trainee. In real life, sometimes we have to do and say things that people don’t like to hear, because that’s what’s best for them. Teachers make kids do things they don’t really want to do. I don’t recall one single teacher ever asking us if we wanted to learn math this year. They just plowed ahead and we had to learn to plow with them. We parents don’t ask our children if they want us to discipline them or not. We just do our jobs and that includes doing things that neither we nor they enjoy, because that is what’s best for them in the long run. Believe it or not, the same is true in the church. More than any drill instructor or teacher, more even than any sinful parent who has ever lived, God wants what’s best for us. He is willing to do whatever it takes for us to have it. **God wants us to live.**

I.

God wants us to live, so he sends watchmen to call us to repent. That’s what we see in this portion of God’s word. But God is not talking directly to us, or even to the people of Israel in these verses. He’s talking to the watchman, to the prophet Ezekiel and he 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.”** “Son of man” here is just a Hebrew way of saying, “human being.” God is reminding Ezekiel who is who. God appointed Ezekiel as a watchman for the house of Israel. Understand, in Ezekiel’s day, a watchman’s job was to stand on a wall or in a tower, day and night, and watch for enemy soldiers who were coming to attack. There was no radar or spy satellites to give early warning. There was no radio that long range patrols could call back with. An enemy army could get really close before anyone knew they were in danger. So watchmen were posted to serve as lookouts and then to sound the alarm, usually by blowing a trumpet. Then all the farmers and the people who lived outside the city could run for safety and all the soldiers could put on their armor and grab their weapons.

Ezekiel did not literally have that job. He was a priest who lived in exile. Ezekiel’s job was not to warn about enemy armies. It was to warn people of spiritual danger. God was tired of his people’s disobedience and unfaithfulness and he sent Ezekiel to warn them, to call them to repent and to leave their sin behind. God has done the same thing for us today. In every age of the church, God sends watchman to warn his people and to call them to repent. In our gospel lesson for today, we heard Jesus commanding all Christians to do that for each other. But in a very special way, every pastor has the job of calling people to repent when they sin.

God warned Ezekiel that sinners die in their sin. Understand, he had more than physical death in mind. Physical death is part of God’s punishment for sin, but the greater part is hell – which the Old Testament also

often calls “death.” When someone refuses to repent, they destroy their faith and they die and go to hell. So God told Ezekiel that when God condemned sin, but Ezekiel failed to transmit that message, the sinner would still die. He was guilty. But God said to Ezekiel, **“I will hold you accountable for his blood.”** If Ezekiel warned the person and he didn’t repent, that was different. But if Ezekiel failed to issue that call, he was just as guilty of sin as the person he was supposed to warn.

Why did God set up a system like that? It lays an enormous burden on every pastor and teacher he ever calls. God called me to be your watchman here at Peace. Before me he called other men and I’m sure there will be pastors who follow me. But God called all of us to watch over this part of the house of Israel. And if we don’t call you to repent, if we don’t warn you when your sin is leading you away from God and into hell, we are guilty. Why did God lay you as a burden on us?

Because he loves you. God does not want you to die and go to hell. So he gathered you into a congregation and he called a watchman to watch over you. Then because God knows that he called a sinner like me to be your watchmen, because he knows how lazy and unfaithful we watchmen can be, God lays your blood on our doorstep. God holds us accountable for whether we call you to repent or not. He calls us to be faithful so that you will live. And you know what? No one likes being called to repent. No one likes having someone tell them that they’re sinning. But if no one ever calls us to repent, we will die in our sin. So God does the hard thing. God calls those watchmen knowing that some of the people he sends them to are going to get downright ugly about it. God loves you so much that he sends those watchmen to endure that.

Of course, his goal is not to make you feel bad or to turn us watchmen into Pharisees who think we’re so much better than you are. His goal is repentance. And repentance is the key to a life lived for Christ. Why do American soldiers acquit themselves so well in some many situations? There are lots of reasons: they have the best equipment in the world, they have excellent intelligence assets, and the list could go on and on. But one key factor is their training. American service members are very well trained and it all starts with the drill instructors who want them to live. God wants you to live. He wants you to come to the end of life on earth and then join him in heaven forever. He wants you to be able to live this life free from guilt and fear. So he sends those watchmen to call you to repent.

What does it mean to repent? It means first of all, to acknowledge our sin. Every one of us here today has to do that. You know better than I ever will what sins you fall into to day after day. What should I be coming to your home to talk to you about? What words of God strike your heart because they convict you personally? Repentance begins when we stop making excuses for those sins and we hear God’s warning that the soul that sins shall die. We deserve to spend eternity in hell because of those sins. But that’s not the end of repentance. In fact, in one sense, it’s not even the most important part of repentance. True repentance is also trusting in Jesus to take that sin away. No true watchman has done his work if he doesn’t point out the love and forgiveness of God.

God does not send watchmen because he’s a tyrant who wants those guys to be on your back all day, every day, pointing out every misdeed until all you can do is hate him. God is a Father who loves us. So when the watchman calls us to repent and we hear his law thunder at us, then God speaks through that watchman and announces that we are forgiven. That sin that you fall into day after day, that sin that you need me or another watchman to talk to you about, that sin that threatens to drag you down to hell – Jesus died and he paid for that sin. His blood washes you clean. You are loved and forgiven. You are his, now and forever.

That is the message God sends people like me to announce. You see that right at the end of our reading for today. God says, **“As surely as I live, 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 does not want to punish us. God does not want to send one person to hell. God wants us to cling to Jesus and know that we are saved. But we cannot claim to be sorry for our sins and then make no effort to turn. Real repentance always leads to a new life, a real effort to change my sinful ways. Now, in this world, it may be a battle to do that. A truly repentant person may very well fall into the same sin the very next day. But that doesn’t mean his repentance was false. It’s only when he makes no effort to live a new life that his repentance is false. God often points to the change we make as the evidence of our sorrow over sin and the trust that we have in Jesus. But to the person who doesn’t want to turn, who likes the sins that he or she is committing, or who thinks that they’ll just do this now and then they’ll be sorry later – to that person, God practically gets down on his knees and begs him to repent, to turn from his sins and live. He asks us why we would insist on

sinning and dying. What a picture, huh? The Maker of the universe on his hands and knees begging you and me to repent, to acknowledge our sin and to trust in Christ as our Savior and then to strive to live a new life. God begs us not to make him punish us. He loves us that much.

II.

But God isn't only concerned with when we don't acknowledge our sin. In his words to Ezekiel, God recognizes that there is another way that we can lose our faith: despair. We can believe that we can't be forgiven. That is just as much a lack of faith in Christ as insisting on sinning is a lack of faith in Christ. **God wants us to live, so he sends forgiveness when we despair.**

God quoted Israel saying, **"Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"** Ezekiel was living with exiles, with people expelled from their homeland because the nation had refused to listen to God. It seemed like his judgment was so severe that there was no hope left. That's when God said that he took no pleasure in the death of the wicked. That's when God begged them to turn from their sin and trust him. God hates punishing sinners so much that he sent his one and only Son to live and die in our place. God wants us to live with him so badly that he asked Jesus to be perfect in our place, to live the life of dedication to him that none of us is capable of living. Then God gave that perfect life to you and me. God wants us to live so badly that he poured all his anger over our sins, all his wrath and judgment out on his Son. Jesus carried it all. He suffered hell in our place. He died in our place. When he rose, God declared that our sufferings and our death were over forever. God wants us to live.

So when we feel so bad about our sins, when we think that God could never love us because we knew better and we still sinned, God holds out hands that are always ready to forgive. He points us to Christ and says that this is his proof that our sin does not drag us to hell. Jesus has paid for us all. God calls us to trust him and live. And yes, we do make a real, daily effort to turn from our sin. We do work at those things that are particularly difficult for us. But we do it because we know our Savior has already won forgiveness for us. We do it because we know that God loves us and wants us to live. We listen to his watchmen and we work with them in our lives, because God sent them to help us on our journey from here to eternal life. God wants you to live. And he will do all that is necessary to make that happen. Trust in him. Amen.