

Sermon for September 10, 2023 – 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 33:7-11 (EHV)

Theme: **You are a watchman.**

- 1) Understand your duty.
- 2) Understand your message.

⁷But I have appointed you, son of man, to be a watchman for the house of Israel. So whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you are to warn them from me. ⁸When I say to a wicked man, “Wicked man, you shall surely die,” if you do not speak to warn the wicked man against his way, that wicked man will die because of his guilt, but I will also hold you responsible for his blood. ⁹But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he will die because of his guilt, but you will have saved your life. ¹⁰So you, son of man, say the following to the house of Israel. This is what you people are saying: “Certainly our rebellion and our sins weigh us down, and because of them we are rotting away. How then can we live?” ¹¹Say to them, “As I live, declares the LORD God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from their way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why should you die, O house of Israel?”

Would you want to be an Environment Canada meteorologist responsible for issuing severe weather warnings? That would be a frustrating job. Why? Aside from the fact that predicting the weather with any accuracy is extremely difficult, many people don't take weather warnings to heart. On top of that, if your severe weather prediction doesn't occur, people get mad at you for giving a false alarm.

So, what should meteorologists do: ignore the signs that a severe storm is brewing because they don't know exactly how it will turn out? Should they only tell people what they want to hear? Even though we may get frustrated when weather predictions don't come true (especially if we change our plans based on a warning), none of us want a “fair weather” meteorologist. We want to be alerted to potential danger. We want to be safe.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: God has made us all watchmen in his kingdom. He wants us to warn people against a more significant threat than tornados and blizzards that can only harm the body. The danger we warn against kills the soul: unrepented sin.

People do not like us talking about sin. “Stop trying to make me feel guilty and telling me how to live my life. I don't believe God would punish me for things society accepts. Stop trying to scare me into your religion.” It's hard being a watchman when people don't want to listen. So, should we tell them only what they want to hear? Should we stop warning people about sin altogether?

Let us learn what to do by listening to the command that God gave Ezekiel, under the theme: **You are a watchman.** 1) Understand your duty. 2) Understand your message.

Part One: Understand Your Duty

Our text begins with the LORD commanding Ezekiel: *I have appointed you, son of man, to be a watchman for the house of Israel. So whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you are to warn them from me.*

Ezekiel's duty as Israel's watchman was not to assess God's warnings and decide whether they were serious enough to pass on, nor was it to "sweeten" God's Word so people would find it more palatable. No, Ezekiel's duty was simple: Listen and tell them everything the LORD told him.

As the LORD called Ezekiel, He calls all Christians to be His representatives in the world. The apostle Paul writes: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, inasmuch as God is making an appeal through us.*ⁱ And what appeal is God making to all people through us? St. Paul tells us: *We urge you, on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*ⁱⁱ The Bible is clear: God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. He *wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*ⁱⁱⁱ He wants everyone to repent and live, so he calls us to be his watchmen.

But how are we to accomplish our duty? The same way God told Ezekiel: listen and speak. Since the LORD only promises to talk to us through His Word, God wants us to take the opportunities he gives us to study the Bible through private devotions and together in Bible class and worship. Then, after personally taking to heart the things he tells us in His Word, the Lord wants us to speak: simply telling our family, friends, and neighbours the truths we learned from Scripture.

It is not your duty to coerce or entice people to believe. God doesn't want you to cut out the parts of His word that people might find problematic or "offensive." He simply wants you to listen and speak the truth in love – warning our neighbours caught in unrepentant sin and pointing them to their Saviour, Jesus.

"But," someone might say, "That is hard to do. Joe is my lifelong buddy – closer to me than a brother. We used to get into all sorts of trouble together when we were younger. How can I tell him he shouldn't be shacking up with his long-time girlfriend? They will probably get married someday. I tried talking to him about it once before, but he just got mad and told me never to mention it again. He said that if he wanted to get some religion, he'd call the pastor or talk to someone who wasn't so hypocritical. That hurt. Maybe I should just let Joe be. It's ultimately between God and him, right?"

Listen to what the LORD says: ⁸*When I say to a wicked man, "Wicked man, you shall surely die," if you do not speak to warn the wicked man against his way, that wicked man will die because of his guilt, but I will also hold you responsible for his blood.*

Did you catch that? God will hold you accountable if you fail to warn someone about their sin. "But that seems so unfair! Why should I be held accountable for what other people do? Joe's an adult and should be able to figure these things out on his own."

Think of it this way: Imagine a meteorologist sees a devastating tornado approaching a town but chooses not to sound the alarm because he feels people should be able to figure it out on their own.

The storm strikes, and people die. Don't you think the meteorologist should be held accountable for not doing his job? If this is true in earthly matters, how more valid is it in spiritual cases?

Telling someone they will go to hell if they continue in their sin is not a popular message, but it needs to be said. Why? So that a person might see the seriousness of his sins and repent.

⁹But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he will die because of his guilt, but you will have saved your life.

No one can blame Environment Canada if people die because they ignored the weather service's warning and did not seek refuge during a severe storm. The same holds for us. It is not our job to make people repent. Our job is simply to warn against sin and point to Jesus for refuge. It is not our fault if people choose not to take our warning seriously – although the devil may make us feel this way. Our responsibility is to inform people of the truth lovingly. They are responsible for what they do with that information.

When I reflect on how I have fulfilled my duty as a watchman, I must confess that, at times, I have let my fear of how someone might react prevent me from lovingly warning someone against sin. Aren't we all guilty of that to some degree or another?

“But pastor, God doesn't want us to be like those crazy street preachers who do nothing but proclaim “the end is near – repent or be doomed to hell,” does he?”

While God certainly does not want us to preach his law in a hypocritical way, He wants us to lovingly warn those who are unrepentant and may not even realize their sins. Yes, I understand how hard it is to do that because I also don't want to offend people! I know how easy it is to use the excuse: “It should not be my responsibility to warn them.” But here's the thing: God has made it our responsibility. He wants us to love our neighbours as much as he loves them. He wants them to find refuge in Jesus. How can they unless someone warns them of the danger of unrepentant sin and points them to Christ's cross for forgiveness?

Let us then repent of our dereliction of duty as God's watchmen and ask the Lord for forgiveness. And do you know what happens when we do that? The LORD forgives us for Jesus' sake. All our sins were placed on Christ – including our failures to warn. The LORD held Jesus accountable for our sins. He died and rose again to show that our sins are forgiven, which should lead us to pray:

“Dearest Jesus, thank you for forgiving my sin of failing to warn those caught in impenitence. Help me be the kind of watchman you want me to be. Help me understand my duty and carry it out faithfully and lovingly: leading lost souls to you for forgiveness.”

Part Two: Understand your message.

Now that we understand our duty as watchmen let us contemplate the message God wants us to share.

When the LORD threatens to kill the wicked, it is not because he takes pleasure in their death. No, he threatens so sinners might see their situation's seriousness, repent and live.

There are usually two types of unrepentant sinners: The first type loves their sin and has no desire to change. They have no qualms of conscience and treat God's warnings as if they were a big joke. To such, God's law must be preached in all its severity.

The other type of unrepentant sinner is the one who feels so burdened by guilt that he thinks God could never forgive him. This is the type of person the LORD refers to in our text when He says; *This is what you people are saying: "Certainly our rebellion and our sins weigh us down, and because of them we are rotting away. How then can we live?"*

I have met many people who felt this way. Why? Because they never heard the good news of God's forgiving love for them in Christ, they felt so overwhelmed with guilt over their sins that they thought all hope was lost. What should our message be to such people? God says:

¹¹Say to them, "As I live, declares the LORD God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from their way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why should you die, O house of Israel?"

In other words, God doesn't just want us to tell people about his anger over sin; he also wants us to tell them about his mercy, grace, and forgiveness, which we receive through repentance. God truly desires the salvation of everyone to whom we talk. Tell people in despair over their sins that Jesus died for them. Every single sin of theirs has been paid for in full; Jesus' resurrection proves it! Show them how God promised to adopt them as his dearly loved children through baptism. God hates seeing sinners punished. He wants them to repent –turn from sin to him for forgiveness – so they can live with him forever in paradise.

Being a watchman for Christ is a tough job. We have an unpopular warning to sound. Nobody likes hearing that their sins have separated them from God, but they need to know it so that they might repent and find refuge from God's wrath in the forgiveness Jesus won for them.

And why do we want to faithfully fulfill our duty of warning against God's coming judgement and pointing to Jesus for refuge? Because the Bible says: ¹⁹*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders away from the truth and someone turns him back, ²⁰let it be known that the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*^{iv}

Wow, what a great reason to be a faithful watchman! Therefore, let us ask the Lord to help us do just that - understanding the importance of our duty and the blessed, soul-saving message we proclaim. Amen.

ⁱ 2 Corinthians 5:20a, EHV

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 5:20b, EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 2:4, EHV

