

Dangers of Apostasy

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Bible Text: 1 John 5:16-21

Preached on: Wednesday, December 29, 2010

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All right. If you will, look with me in your Bibles to 1 John chapter five. We will be finishing up this epistle of John the first of his three, Lord willing, this evening in this message.

My text is 1 John chapter five and verses 16 through verse 21. And I would like to speak with you about God's warnings against apostasy.

We read here in verse 16:

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.

We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not. And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.¹

Now in reading this some might look at the warnings here and kind of shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, there is no real immanent danger of apostasy for any that are the Lord's." We kind of assume that if God chose us in Christ, redeemed us and the Spirit has called us that this must be speaking to someone else.

But I would have you consider not only the necessity of these warnings here, but the urgency. There must be a very real danger for any of us even sitting here that given the opportunity or left in a particular situation that we understand that in our nature we would easily fall away were it not for the grace of God.

¹ 1 John 5:16-21.

And I believe it is so important to keep Scripture in its context. So many times you will read some commentaries and it is almost as if each individual verse is different subject the way the commentators go down through it. But I see one link. I see one heading, one title here and that is the warnings against apostasy. And these warnings are addressed here to the Lord's children because in verse 16 it says, "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him [that is, God shall give him] life for them that sin not unto death."²

So very clearly the context here is addressing one of the Lord's. "If any many see his brother sin."³ It is not talking about a brother in the flesh, but one who is a brother in the Lord. And I say that because verse 21 caps it all. The conclusion is, "Little children..."

Well who is John writing? When he says, "little children," he is talking about those that are the Lord's by election, redemption and regeneration.

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols."⁴

And "Amen" simply means so be it.

Now when he says here, "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death,"⁵ notice the word "if" is not in the sense of conditional, but it could also be translated "when." So the assumption is that at various points in our life when we sin, when we see another sin a sin which is not unto death. Now we all sin as is clearly set forth in verse 17.

"All unrighteousness is sin."⁶

Unrighteousness is that which is contrary to righteousness. So even for a believer, can we ever say that we are rid completely of self righteousness? That is contrary to true righteousness. Can we ever say that our hearts are not lifted up in pride thinking ourselves to be somebody when we are nothing? The Lord has to constantly teach us to look away from ourselves and to Christ alone, the one true righteousness. And so we have all that propensity in our heart to sin. But, as it says there in verse 17, "There is a sin not unto death."⁷

Here I believe that the word "death" has to refer to eternal condemnation, because we are all going to die unless the Lord comes back. So to say there is as in not unto death, which there are certain groups that believe that, that if you could just live a perfect enough life, attain a sinless perfection that you would never die.

² 1 John 5:16.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 1 John 5:21.

⁵ 1 John 5:16.

⁶ 1 John 5:17.

⁷ Ibid.

I find it interesting that not one of those that teach that from the beginning till now have remained alive, you know. They will die.

So they preach something that is in theory only because if it were not so they wouldn't die. But there is, as it says in verse 16, "a sin unto death [and] I do not say that he shall pray for it."⁸

In other words, as it becomes evident, you know, we all have this propensity toward idolatry. We just read it in Colossians three. Covetousness is idolatry.

And "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every [man] to his own way."⁹

That is what sheep do. They are dumb animals, see. They wander. But there is a sin unto death and here John says, "I do not say that he shall pray for it."¹⁰

Judas would be such a case when it became evident that the Lord exposed him as being a son of perdition. Our Lord didn't pray for him. In fact, Christ said, "I pray not for the world, but for those that thou hast given me from the world."

Saul would be a classic example of one who sinned a sin unto death. There was a time when Samuel was praying for Saul and the Lord told him, "Don't intercede anymore for him." He made it pretty plain that this was a sin unto condemnation, unto death.

Some who appear to be brethren in the beginning when it becomes evident that they are not.

You say, "Well, how does it become evident?"

Well, they become hardened against the gospel. They become hardened against this righteousness which the Lord Jesus Christ worked out and satisfied and God imputed to the account of his people.

And they fall back into a Legalism. I say, "fall back into it." It was never out of their heart to begin with. It was just hidden. And that is what Paul, as we read in Colossians two, warned the Colossians of. These were men among them and it became evident as time went on that their real intention and motive was not Christ. They were deceiving others in the body with vain philosophy and deceit. Deceit, you know, something that is truly deceit, it is not evident. If it were, no one would believe it. But it is deceitful because it has a little bit of apparent truth to it, but ultimately it is false.

You know, rat poison, you open it up, D-con, you know, it has got lice in it. It might look appealing and you look at what percentage of it is arsenic. It doesn't take much, you know, to poison and to kill.

⁸ 1 John 5:16.

⁹ Isaiah 53:6.

¹⁰ 1 John 5:16.

And so I believe here we have a very clear instruction to those that are the Lord's to beware that idolatry is as close to us as our own hearts.

“Keep thy heart,” it says in Scripture, “for out of it are the issues of life.”¹¹

You say, “Well, how do you keep the heart?”

Well, just like John said, “Keep yourselves from idols.”¹² We have the Word. We have the revelation of God. We have the Spirit of God to give us discernment and instruction. And everything that the Scriptures call idolatry we renounce as idolatry. And I believe, notice it says in verse 21, “Keep yourselves from idols.”¹³

Legalists like to look outside themselves to others just like the Pharisees. They were concerned about the little splinter in the eye of the other that they were not even aware of the beam in their own. That is why it says, “Keep yourselves from idols.”¹⁴

Let each of us weigh our own hearts by God's grace and by the light of his Spirit and by the instruction of his Word and pray that the Lord would cause us to cast down every idol.

Are we idolaters by nature? Does that go away when the Spirit of God reveals Christ in the heart? No. I believe it becomes all the more apparent as the light shines.

Someone once said, “The closer you get to the light the more evident the darkness, the more evident the sin, the more evident the nature of this heart.” And by God's grace we run to the light and flee these things.

If you wonder whether or not this is apostasy is a very real danger, you know, if Aaron could stand here tonight and testify, he would say, “Don't take it lightly.” You know, he under pressure and influence of the children of Israel made a golden calf. He gave them what they desired it and even to the point of calling it blasphemy or calling to Jehovah is what I meant to say, Jehovah which is a blasphemy. To take a golden calf and name it Jehovah and then to defend it by saying that he took the jewelry from the children of Israel and when he cast it into the fire out came a calf.

Now did he sin a sin unto death? Well, you could say on the one hand he did because the Lord took him out of the priesthood as a result. He died. But that is not what John is talking about. If Aaron was the Lord's, then when Christ came and died he paid even that sin debt for him.

¹¹ Proverbs 4:23.

¹² 1 John 5:21.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

But there are those... there were many even of those that he... And imagine. You know, I think in one sense when the Lord took him out and spared him from seeing the ultimate result of his sin which led many to die and perish in that wilderness and the Lord was merciful to him even though he had been involved in the same idolatry for which the Lord destroyed the rest.

Now you stop and consider yourself. Why would the Lord be merciful to me knowing my heart to be an idolatrous heart? You know, I have no ground at all to judge any other man when it comes to apostasy and idolatry and walking down that path and never being brought back.

You say, "What makes the difference?"

"Who maketh thee to differ?"¹⁵

It is the Lord. It is his grace. It is the death of Christ that paid that sin debt.

You know, if you have any question about the very real danger of idolatry and apostasy, ask Moses. If Moses could stand here today and say... and, you know, we read those portions and we think, Moses, what on earth were you doing? When the Lord told you just to speak to the rock and in anger you struck it?

And how serious was that? Well, the Lord took Moses' life. He would not have him go into the Promised Land. He saw it from afar. And the Lord gave him eyes to be able to look at it, but he didn't enter in.

Now was that a sin unto death? Well, in the one sense you could say it was because the Lord took his life, physical life. But it wasn't a sin unto death in the sense of eternal condemnation. That is why I say that Canaan is not a picture of heaven. You know, we sing that song or have sung it in the past, "On Jordan's stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye," as if, you know, the other side were heaven. You know, if that were the case, then Aaron had no hope and Moses had no hope, because they didn't enter in.

I believe that it is more of a picture of the promises of God being fulfilled in Christ and the rest that the Lord promised to the children of Israel who entered in.

You know, the following after our hearts leaves no rest. Following after Legalism leaves no rest for the heart. It is taken away. Following after idolatry, being left to our hearts to go the way the heart would go there is no rest. Rest is in the Lord Jesus Christ. And I believe that is the example that we have of Aaron and of Moses.

You know, is apostasy a very real danger? Ask Solomon. You know, if you look in 1 Kings chapter 11. And I wrote down a number of these. I am sure you can probably think of some others. I don't want to dwell too much on it, but if you look in 1 Kings chapter 11, some in looking at Solomon, I believe it might be 2 Kings chapter 11. Let me see if

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:7.

we can turn there. Or I may have completely written the wrong one down. But... look at 2 Kings chapter 11. Let's see if that is it.

No, because that is not even there talking about Solomon. But we can look it up some other time. The point was that in the wives that he married, as he adopted also their foreign gods. And someone reading about Solomon's life may say, "Well, how could he even be a believer? You know, how could he even say that he was the Lord's?"

I believe that the Lord taught him, you know, through those apostasies, you know. It is there to show us what our heart would be were it not for God's grace. And when you read the book of Ecclesiastes, I believe that you are reading his testimony of how the Lord taught him in the end.

[off mic voice]

It is 1 Kings 11? Ok. Then I... and verse 18.

Change of Voice:

Verse one where it says, "But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites."¹⁶

Change of Voice:

Ok, well, that is right, because in my notes I have got a comma between one and eight so that would tell me. I appreciate it.

1 Kings 11 and beginning with verse one. There we go. And then down to verse eight.

"And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods."¹⁷

Thank you.

You know, ultimately he died. There is a physical death. We are all sinners. But we have every reason to believe and read in his testimony in Ecclesiastes which stands for preacher, he had a story to tell as a result of his wanderings of the dangers of being taken away even for a season in apostasy.

And so I believe that is who John here in our text of 1 John chapter five in verse 16 and following is addressing, you know.

¹⁶ 1 Kings 11:1.

¹⁷ 1 Kings 11:8.

When it says, “If any man see his brother sin a sin,”¹⁸ the context is this of being drawn aside even in the least bit.

“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”¹⁹

And because we see one, you know, it is like a... if you will a car that is out of alignment that takes... you take the hand off the steering wheel and it automatically begins to... it needs aligned. And our hearts need aligned. As we listen to the Word our prayers should be for one another, “Lord, keep us from going the way of all flesh.”

You know, what made the difference between Peter... If you wonder about the seriousness of apostasy, ask Peter who boldly stated, “Lord, I will even go to death for you.”

And the Lord warned him and told him. Said, “Before the cock crows, Peter, you will deny me thrice, three times, not just once, but thrice.”

And, you know, even... you say, “Well, why didn’t he think about those words the first time around that fire?”

The Lord was teaching him that his hope could not be in his flesh. It couldn’t be even in being in the physical presence of Christ, that even as Christ told him, “Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.”²⁰

But the Lord said what? “I have prayed for you. And when you are...” What? Converted. “Go on and encourage the brethren.” You know?

How is Peter’s example an encouragement to us? It is not that we will never wander or deny our Lord. If that is your thought, you are blind. But that in our wanderings he never leaves us alone. In our apostatizing—and I know this sounds strange to some because they say, “Well, one who is the Lord’s can’t apostatize.” There is a difference between apostatizing and being apostate. Apostate is one who falls back unto perdition. Apostatizing is one that for a season it may be the Lord takes his hand off of them and they go exactly the way that the world would go, but he Lord doesn’t leave them there. Just like a wandering sheep. He comes and brings them back into the fold.

And I believe that is the care of what John is talking about when he says, “If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death...”²¹

It is clear he is a brother. He shall ask and he, that is, God or Christ “shall give him life for them that sin not unto death.”²²

¹⁸ 1 John 5:16.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9.

²⁰ Luke 22:31.

²¹ 1 John 5:16.

²² Ibid.

So there is a clear distinction here between one who is the Lord's that the Lord will keep and exercise others within the body to pray for them versus those that are of the world for whom John says, "Don't even pray."

You know, not even Christ prayed for everybody. He prayed for those that the Father had given him.

And that takes this sermon.

And so that is what we see first of all here, the danger of apostatizing. There, as it says there, "There is a sin unto death."²³ But there is also, you can see in verse 17, contrasted with a sin not unto death, in other words, not unto condemnation."

And the one reason that there isn't that condemnation is because Christ has paid the debt.

So you have got the nature there in verse 16, but in verse 17 you have the remedy.

You know, all unrighteousness is sin against God and deserving of death. And David acknowledge that if, "Lord, if you should mark iniquity, who could stand?"

But "there is a sin not unto death."²⁴

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."²⁵

And that is because of the grace of God. That is because of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ by which every one that God has chosen were justified and freely forgiven when Christ died. That is when the sin was put away.

And as a result of that the mercy of God. So you have got the grace of God. You have got the death of Christ. You have got the effectual mercy of God. And that is our hope. You know, when you read in the Scriptures, "God does not hide the sin of his people." That is how I know that the Scriptures were not merely written by men because they would never expose their sin. But the Spirit of God does. And so David can testify to the grace and mercy of God. Was he a sinner? Just as much as anybody sitting in this room.

You say, "David, what made the difference?"

It was the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, that righteousness that he worked out. And upon completion of his death, that righteousness, that work was put to David's account when Christ died. If you look in Hebrews chapter nine you will see what I am talking about here. Hebrews chapter nine, speaking of Christ in verse 15.

²³ 1 John 5:16.

²⁴ 1 John 5:17.

²⁵ Romans 8:1.

It says, “And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament.”²⁶

You say, “Well, David was already dead. He wasn’t part of the New Testament.”

But it says here, “That by means of death, [notice] for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament.”²⁷

You see, at what point were Abraham’s sins put away? At what point were David’s sins put away or Moses or Aaron, any of these that sinned but it was not a sin unto death or condemnation? Well here it clearly states it was when Christ died.

And “they which are called [or the called] might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”²⁸

When did they receive it? When Christ died. And the reason is verse 16.

“For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator.”²⁹

It wasn’t enough just to be named in the will, to be counted justified or forgiven. There had to be the death of the testator.

And verse 17 says, “For a testament is of force after men are dead.”³⁰

We know that. Wills aren’t read until the person dies and then they open the will and figure out who are the heirs, all right?

“For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.”³¹

Christ had not yet died when David lived and died, when Moses lived and died or Aaron. So it is when the testator died that they, that eternal inheritance was earned and merited by Christ’s merits on their behalf. It is when he died.

You say, “How did God deal with him?”

In forbearance. It was the forbearance of God, God withholding that condemnation. It wasn’t that they were any less guilty than anybody else, but God withholding that condemnation until Christ should come and put it away. There was a stay of execution for every one of those. And, you know, that is what was typified.

²⁶ Hebrews 9:15.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hebrews 9:16.

³⁰ Hebrews 9:17.

³¹ Ibid.

“For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book [that is the Scriptures], and all the people.”³²

This is a bloody book.

“Saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you.”³³

Telling of Christ’s work which he should accomplish.

And so that is what John is writing about in verse 17 when he says there is a sin not unto death. And if you will just remember we have been a while getting through 1 John, but if you will just remember, for example, 1 John one and verse nine where John said, “If we confess our sins, say the same thing about our sins as God says, we don’t try to justify them, he is faithful...”

Who is he faithful to? His Son.

“...and just to forgive us our sins.”³⁴

Actually, the sense there is they have been forgiven and he continues to forgive. There is nothing going to change God’s mind about any one of his own that Christ has redeemed.

“...and to cleanse...”³⁵

And, again, continue to “cleans us from all unrighteousness.”³⁶

Right there that is a proof that we are unrighteous still in our nature. But in our standing before a holy God, why does God show mercy? Why does he show grace? Why can it be said that there is a sin not unto death? Only one answer. The Lord Jesus Christ.

All right.

So by that remedy, you know, he has saved his people. There is a just satisfaction. This is not God looking the other way with regard to David’s sin. This is not God looking the other way with regard to Jacob’s sins. This is not God looking the other way with regard to Peter’s sins.

Why were they spared and Judas not? You know?

Well, it is because of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. But also if you look at verse 18,

³² Ibid.

³³ Hebrews 9:20.

³⁴ 1 John 1:9. .

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

coming back to 1 John 5:18, those that he has saved by his blood he keeps. He will not lose one.

And that is why we read here, “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not.”³⁷

See a lot of people say, “There it is. There is that sinless perfection.”

But don't take it out of the context. “Does not sin as these apostates do who fall away into perdition.” The Lord will not lose one.

And, you know, you ask yourself why you are sitting here tonight, believing this gospel when a number who have sat with us have gone away. You know, the Lord knows their hearts. I don't... I am not going to try to judge who is and who isn't, but, you know, there are some the Lord just takes away the burden to pray for.

You stop and think about some who have sat with us and heard this message and gone away. You know, if the Lord doesn't burden you to pray for them, there is a reason. You know, there is... sometimes you... when it is fresh on your mind you look to the Lord and then when it gets into, you know, one year, two years, three years, five years, 10 years, the Lord takes away the burden. You know, there is something to be said for that. You know, they still might be the Lord's. It might be that the Lord would draw them long after we are gone. We don't know. We are not to judge that. But I do know that whatever is born of God or whosoever is born of God cannot sin unto perdition. That is what it is talking about, cannot fall away unto perdition.

“But he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.”³⁸

Doesn't the Scripture teach us to beware of Satan who goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour? The Lord is never going to give one of his own over to Satan to be drawn away into perdition. But nonetheless, even Paul said, “Satan has buffeted me,” with that, you know, thorn in the flesh.

And I wrote an article on that not too long ago if you will remember. We think the thorn in the flesh was something physical. But if you look at the context, I believe it had everything to do with pride, that if Paul had been left to himself and there might have been reason for his own thoughts to think, “You know, I have... the Lord has given me a lot of knowledge. By many revelations is what Paul said, a thorn in the flesh by Satan was given unto me.”

You know, people get upset when you say this, but Satan is God's Satan and he can use him to test his own. He will not give them over to him, but he can certainly cause Satan to oppress them. That is what he said to Peter. Satan hath desired to sift you.

³⁷ 1 John 5:18.

³⁸ Ibid.

And when Peter in essence denied the death of Christ there in Matthew 16, right after he confessed, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,”³⁹ the Lord said to him, “Get thee behind me, Satan.”⁴⁰

Satan means adversity and adversary. And so we know that the Lord’s grace must keep us lest the wicked one should touch us in the sense of drawing us completely away, you see.

So that is the remedy.

In verse 19 we see the contrast, you know. Grace makes the difference. In verse 19 he says, “We know that we are of God.”⁴¹

But it also contrasts that by saying, “And the whole world lieth in wickedness.”⁴²

You know, we have the same nature, but “who maketh thee to differ?”⁴³

You know, it is God himself.

And so all of the trials and afflictions and part of living in this flesh would be... we would know the same end as this world that lies in wickedness were it not for being the Lord’s when it says we are of God. It means that we are his, you know, by election, by redemption, by regeneration. We have been sealed in Christ and that is the only thing that makes a difference. So we see that contrast.

But in verse 20, fourthly, we see the discernment needed, these warnings against apostasy.

He says in verse 20, “And we know that the Son of God is come.”⁴⁴

He came, lived, died and rose again. That is all summed up in that word “come.” Ascended on high. He has fulfilled all righteousness.

And now “hath given us an understanding.”⁴⁵

This is not just a knowledge of understanding, but it is a discerning understanding. It is knowing the difference between truth and error. And before the Lord opened our eyes and taught us, we were dung. We were blind. We were lost. We couldn’t see. You know, fell easily into deception. And we fell back to the works of the flesh. But now it speaks of those that have been taught of the Spirit.

³⁹ Matthew 16:16.

⁴⁰ Matthew 16:23.

⁴¹ 1 John 5:19.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 4:7.

⁴⁴ 1 John 5:20.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

“... that we may know him that is true.”⁴⁶

See, that is where you can boil the whole of doctrine down to him, to know him, to be found in him is what Paul said, “not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”⁴⁷

“And we are in him that is true.”⁴⁸

If we know him that is true it is because we are in him that is true.

“...even in his Son Jesus Christ.”⁴⁹

And then the rest is, “This is the true God, and eternal life.”⁵⁰

“That they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”⁵¹

That is why, you know, we constantly come back to what that hymn says.

My hope is built on nothing less,
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame...

It is often when you are in the sweetest frame that your wandering has begun. You know, you are asleep in the boat and the current is taking you away. You know, that

We dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But holy lean on Jesus’ name.

My hope is built on nothing less,
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

And then, you know, the urgency would be the fifth thing I would bring out here, the urgency in verse 21.

“Little children, keep yourselves from [false gods].”⁵²

An idol is an idea. That is where it begins. If in our minds we begin to think that it is really not that serious or as some say so lightly, “It is all under the blood, brother.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Philippians 3:9.

⁴⁸ 1 John 5:20.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ John 17:3.

⁵² 1 John 5:21.

You know, I don't believe the Lord deals in the hearts of his children that way. There is an urgency. There is a crying unto the Lord for mercy. There is an approaching unto his throne of grace that we might find grace to help in time of need.

You know, if we ever come before the Lord in any other state or frame of mind other than being a needy sinner, the danger has already begun. Any kind of coldness of heart towards Christ and his work, any kind of seeking after traditions of men, you know, idols, they have different faces. And, you know, we need to be aware.

Keep yourselves from traditions.

It is easy to compromise because everybody else is doing it this way or that. Keep yourself from tradition.

Keep yourself from superstitions. Keep yourself from images. Keep yourself from religious practices and observances that are introduced by those who call themselves Christian. And that is where most are deceived.

Well, you know, this church has been doing this for years. This preacher is well known. You know, he doesn't see anything wrong with it.

Well, our standard is not other churches. Our standard is not other preachers, other men. It is this Word. And that is why the Lord has given it to us. And if anything is not according to the Scripture and giving all the glory to Christ, it is idolatry. It is just that simple.

And so may the Lord, you know, keep us. Keep me, keep you from idols. And then amen. So be it.

Let's take our hymn books and sing hymn number 211.