

## Sermon 5, Two Alternatives, 2 John 8-9

**Proposition:** Loss of faith and/or love brings tragic consequences in its wake.

- I. Either Guard Yourself or Lose Your Reward, v. 8
- II. Either Abide in Christ's Teaching or Lose God, v. 9

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the either-or is a thing we really don't like. Like Megyn Kelly, most of us would prefer to settle for more. We like the both-and. We want to have our cake and eat it too. We want mutually exclusive things. But John tells us today what we have already known in our hearts from the very beginning: there is a real choice between life and death. You can really wash out of the Christian life. I'm not saying you can lose your salvation in the sense that God will take away His gift of life from you. But you certainly can stop doing the Christian thing and come out as an atheist, an unbeliever, an unrepentant sinner, etc. John presents two hard alternatives to us in our text this morning. Either guard yourself or lose your reward. You can't have both. If you guard yourself, you won't lose your reward. If you don't guard yourself, you will. Either abide in Christ's teaching, or lose God. Either one or the other. John begs the church, in no uncertain terms, to guard themselves and abide in the teaching of Christ — or else to lose everything, including God. This is a genuine either-or. John is serious when he warns about the consequences of walking away from God.

#### **I. Either Guard Yourself or Lose Your Reward, v. 8**

Verse 8 presents a command: watch yourselves. It also presents a consequence of ignoring the command, which is the loss of what we have worked for, and the loss of a full reward.

Now, this is the first point of the sermon because this is the point John is making in the text: If you don't guard yourself, you will lose. You will lose the thing you've worked for, and you'll lose the reward God has for those who work for Him.

Now, we have talked a lot recently about guarding ourselves. What does it mean? When John says "watch yourselves," he means "Recognize yourself as a threat and take appropriate precautions." You may well remember a famous passage in the Gospels in which the Lord Jesus warns His disciples about the sinful condition of their hearts. In an age when the religious leaders of Judaism effectively communicated that defilement and sin come from outside and mess people up, Jesus insisted on the exact opposite truth. It's not the bad people around you who defile you. It's not the bad things. It's not the alcohol, drugs, mouthy neighborhood kids, and TV shows of the world that defile you. Instead,

"He was saying, 'That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.'" (Mar 7:20-23 NAS)

And brothers and sisters, that declaration of Jesus is essential for us to keep in mind as we examine John's command that we watch ourselves. This command was anticipated in the famous text of Proverbs: "Keep your heart with all diligence." Above all guarding, guard your heart! Now, we tend to hear that and think it means "Don't let your heart get attached to things in the world out there." When you're talking to that cute girl, guard your heart. When you're watching the yacht show, guard your heart.

Now, don't get me wrong. That meaning is correct as far as it goes. We really are called to keep our hearts from getting overly attached to things. That's what the tenth commandment means. But this passage is actually saying that the heart is the problem. The problem is not merely the heart *doing* something, the heart getting attached to something it can't have, etc. The problem is the heart's condition. The heart is being guarded, not in the sense of being protected from harm, but in the sense of preventing it from getting out and putting its evil inclinations into practice. Guard your heart from acting out its own wicked desires!

In short, when we are told to guard the heart, we are being warned not that the heart is vulnerable to a harsh world and is going to be hurt unless we take steps to protect it. While that is true, God expects us to learn that from natural revelation, by observing this world. But special revelation tells us that our hearts are dangerous and need to be kept under careful watch.

Brothers and sisters, is this an easy command? Of course not. We are called to watch over ourselves. That's who we are: we are dangerous. That's not a pleasant thought, and one we would rather not face. It's much easier to think that we are really good, and that it's everyone else who's bad. But Solomon tells us that our hearts are corrupt and that we have to watch them carefully to prevent them from breaking out in evil.

So how do you do this? How do you set a guard over your heart and keep it from wickedness? The answer is really something that the whole Bible talks about. You have to leverage the resurrection power of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit to stop your heart from doing what's wrong. And how do you do that? You listen to your father's words of wisdom. You fix your eyes on Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God. And you change your heart from the inside by filling it with God's word. That's what the passage just said!

So let's get this straight. To guard your heart means to walk with Jesus Christ, letting Him transform and renew you from the inside out by His word and Spirit. As you're walking, you must remember that your heart is a threat. Part of the reason you need to constantly remind yourself of your status and duties as a son is because at the very core of your being you've got this rebel heart that doesn't want to serve God.

This kind of rebellion is the most dangerous kind. It's a rebellion from within, and not simply from within but in the very control center. Imagine Tsar Nicholas II joining the Bolsheviks. That's the kind of anti-law upheaval that I'm talking about. Your heart determines everything you do, as the NIV paraphrases the second half of v. 23. Literally, the Hebrew says that the wellsprings of life flow out of your heart. That is, the heart is the core of your being and the source of your life. Everything else — actions, thoughts, opinions, attitudes — is downstream. The heart is the headwaters of consciousness, the source of everything you do. The

only thing prior to it in the order of being is the foundational word of God that created you from dust.

So why stop your heart from acting out? Because it controls you. You don't need to be told to "follow your heart." You already do. But at the same time, we are complex beings, and just as your heart controls you, so you control your heart. What this means is that you can only control your heart from your heart. If there's no part of your heart that wants to obey God, then you cannot guard your heart, for you are your heart.

So guard it. Don't let it do the evil that it so often wants to do. Stop yourself from doing evil at the core. That's what Proverbs 4:23 means, and Proverbs 4:27 only expands on it by telling you to stop yourself from doing evil in the actions that flow from the core.

And if you do guard yourself? Then you accomplish what you and the apostles have worked for. You get a full reward.

What exactly have we worked for? We have worked to build the church. We have worked for the coming of the kingdom of God. We have worked for the time when every knee will bow and every tongue confess. We have worked for the discipling of each other and the discipling of the nations. If you have ever given a dime in the collection plate of this church, you have literally worked for the preaching of the word and the maintenance of the institutional church so that it can do what it does — make disciples, worship God, and be disciples. You can summarize that as worship, witness, walk. That's what we are working for.

The kingdom will still come, and others will perhaps make disciples if you stop guarding yourself. But if you let yourself simply do what feels good, if you let yourself walk away from Christ and towards apostasy and abomination, if you slowly let living for pleasure and stuff and power and food creep in, you won't see the reward. The coming of the kingdom will be a curse rather than a blessing. The coming of the light will only expose your darkness, rather than magnify the light you've been shining. Brothers and sisters, John presents the choice in stark times: Guard yourself and see the fruit of your work. Or stop guarding yourself, and lose every particle of reward too.

Did I just say the word "reward"? I sure did. That's because John did. That's because the New Testament does. You can call it Catholic if you want. You may think that's a pejorative name; actually, in this case, it does indeed simply mean that the universal church, like the whole Bible, is comfortable with the language of reward. The term that John uses here appears about 75 times in the Bible, and the first time it appears it clearly is a message that yes, you and I will receive something great, indeed, the most valuable gift imaginable, for walking with God. I am speaking, of course, of the covenant with Abraham passage in Genesis 15: "After these things the word of Jehovah came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (Gen 15:1 ASV). Yahweh God is Himself Abraham's exceedingly great reward. In one sense, this passage alone is enough to spell out for us everything we need to know when John says "Don't lose your reward." Don't lose Christ! They lose nothing who gain Christ. And they indeed lose everything who lose Him, though they gain thirty or thirty million pieces of silver by the deal.

Let me also glance at the words of Boaz to Ruth. Gents, this is how you speak to the lady of your dreams: "The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Rut 2:12 ESV). Yes, Boaz dares to speak of the Lord repaying in a positive sense. He dares to speak of the rewards offered by the Lord to an obedient daughter who left everything to follow Christ — and to become His grandmother. Clearly in the book of Ruth at least part of that reward was a husband, a home, status in Bethlehem, and a son. Ruth had none of those things. And then she had them all. It's rather like Solomon's comment: "Children are a gift from the LORD; the fruit of the womb is a divine reward" (Psa 127:3 CEB).

And, lest you think "Well, that's all OT teaching," I urge you to listen to the words of the one who rewarded Abraham and Ruth: "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mat 5:12 NKJ). The persecuted have a reward in heaven. Meanwhile, those who never rise above the ungodly's ability to love only those who love them back have no reward (Mat 5:46). In other words, folks, there is nothing distinctively Roman Catholic about the concept of wages, reward, or even (dare I say it) merit. We may prefer to say "reward," because in English that word has the sense of something offered simply for doing the right thing: "If you return my lost cat, I will reward you with \$500." Well, you were supposed to return the cat anyway, and the money is just an extra gift from someone who is really glad to have his cat back. That seems a little different from "If you operate this lathe for me for a week and make the metal parts I need, I will give you \$1500." That seems more like a wage offered for something you really didn't have to do. I agree that we ought to use the term "reward" rather than the term "wage" because every good deed that we do is something we were supposed to do anyway. Ruth was supposed to follow God and be an Israelite even if Boaz never realized her charms and married her. You and I are supposed to stand fast in following Christ even if we get persecuted here, regardless of whether God will give us an extra reward in Heaven. Indeed, that highlights it: We have a great reward in Heaven no matter how easy our Christian life is. But at the same time, there is no doubt that the Bible teaches that suffering creates a greater reward. We tend to think of Heaven as undifferentiated bliss. But Heaven is no more all the same than earth is. When you think of the difference between Aspen, Colorado, and Moorcroft, Wyoming, you will recognize that some earthly places are nicer than others. Some heavenly places are too.

John says that if you and I guard ourselves we will receive a full reward. Just like the full joy that we looked at last week, so this full reward is variable in a certain sense. The key point is simply that your reward will be maximized, the largest it can possibly be, if you guard yourself and protect what we have worked for. Great is your reward in Heaven. The martyrs have a great reward. We would all agree with that statement. John adds that those who guard themselves have one too.

## **II. Either Abide in Christ's Teaching or Lose God, v. 9**

But that said, he immediately identifies a particular place where we must guard ourselves. This is the locale of doctrine. Either remain in the teaching of Christ, or progress beyond it and in so

progressing lose God. This is the only place where the Bible speaks of “the one who goes on ahead” — a first-century version of the progressive, if I may use a completely loaded term. John seems to be talking about someone who progresses right out of the truth about Christ. He had the truth, and he moved on.

What happens to this individual? He loses God. Indeed, John puts it even more starkly: he does not have God. No comment here on whether the progressive ever had God. But when he stopped listening to Jesus’ teaching in the word and the church, when he stopped abiding, one thing was clear: he did not have God. In fact, he didn’t have Jesus either. The one who progresses out of the teaching has neither the Father nor the Son. He has neither God nor Jesus.

Talk about losing your reward! Talk about forfeiting everything you’ve worked for! That’s what happens when you do not abide in the teaching of Christ. That’s what happens when you stop listening in general, and when you stop listening to Christ in particular.

Where does He speak? In nature, for sure. In your biology and anatomy, of course. But He speaks verbally in His word and in the preaching of His word. If you’re into the art world at all, you know that people love it when the artist speaks and verbally explains his work. Well, the artist has spoken. He has explained His work.

How do you abide in the teaching of Christ? By doing the things that make an apostle happy — walking in the truth. Participating in the doctrinal, ethical, and devotional aspects of the faith. Brothers and sisters, that’s what we need, and that’s what we have. Stay there. I don’t want you to lose what we have worked for. I don’t want you to lose Christ. I don’t want you to lose the Father.

If you won’t listen to Christ you lose the Father. They are a package deal; if you have the Father, you have the Son. If you lose one, you lose both. They are united, and they work and come and dwell together.

Brothers and sisters, guard yourselves. Abide in the teaching. That’s what the Spirit says to us through the Apostle John this morning. Amen.