

Matthew 18:7-9 – “Be Killing Sin or Sin Will be Killing You” – Mar. 17, 2024

1. The title of today’s sermon comes from John Owen
 - a. It is a line from “The Mortification of Sin”
 - b. In that book, and in today’s passage, we see the seriousness of sin, and the measures we must take to put it to death
2. Many of us have grown up in a time where we’ve been surrounded by a partial gospel
 - a. “Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”
 - b. Jesus can help us get the stuff we want
 - c. Closer to the truth – Christ offers forgiveness for sins
 - i. This is true of course but there are two sides on this coin
 - ii. Sometimes even those of us who love the evangelical theology that was recovered at the Reformation can become imbalanced here
 - iii. We can and should love the offer of absolutely free grace that is all over Scripture
 - iv. And if we truly treasure *free* grace, we must guard against it becoming *cheap* grace
 - v. Sometimes we get so excited about Ephesians 2:8, 9 that we forget that they feed into the goal of v.10
 1. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*”

vi. C.H. Spurgeon, in his sermon, "The Two Effects of the Gospel" says
"Some people like to come to Christ for pardon, but they do not care to come to him for purity. They would like to wash in the fountain filled with blood for the remission of sin, but they have no care to be clean in life and conversation."

1. Is this true of us?
2. This approach to the gospel guts the gospel of its ultimate goal
 - a. Do we merely want to be saved from the consequences of sin, or do we wish to be delivered from the grip of sin itself?
3. The purpose of the gospel is not first to save sinners
 - a. The gospel does save sinners, but it does so for the purpose of God being glorified
 - b. The salvation of sinners occurs so that God has an audience to give Him glory as He knits heaven and earth back together
 - c. The gospel gives eyes and ears to a mass of humanity so they can see and savor and enjoy their Saviour
 - d. The salvation of sinners occurs so that He can give a bride to His Son, and share in His inheritance with Him
4. We will never understand the riches of the gospel until we see just how God-centred it is

- a. The gospel frees saved humanity from the bondage of sin in order that they may taste and see that God is good
 - b. The gospel exists so that God can be glorified in His creation
- 5. The gospel repairs what sin has ruined
 - a. Many people see so much corruption in the world and in humanity that they forget what man and nature were created for
 - b. So they end up thinking that grace is something that removes us from the world
 - c. But this is not the case; the gospel restores
 - i. The gospel roots us back into the original purposes of God
 - ii. *Grace restores nature*
- vii. This means that the grace of the gospel reorients our hearts to do what we were always designed to do – live for the glory of God
 - 1. *Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever*
 - 2. this means that we must learn to love what God loves, and to hate what He hates
- viii. *“Some people like to come to Christ for pardon, but they do not care to come to him for purity. They would like to wash in the fountain filled with blood for the remission of sin, but they have no care to be clean in life and conversation.”*

3. V.7 – *“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”*
 - a. Through the Bible, God’s messengers announce two different types of oracles
 - i. Oracle of Weal – blessing (eg. Beatitudes)
 - ii. Oracle of Woe – cursing (eg. This passage)
 - b. Christ is acknowledging the fallen state of the world
 - c. From the Fall, the world has been under a curse and the corruption and temptations to sin persist
 - d. This curse is ultimately from God, so we shouldn’t conceive of this as God losing an arm wrestle to Satan or as though the world is slipping through His fingers
 - e. Jesus says that it is *“necessary that temptations come”*
 - i. In the providence of God, the weight of the curse must be felt for a season
 - ii. *“Because there is sin in the world, things are not as they ought to be. Because God is sovereign, things not being as they ought to be is exactly as it ought to be.”*
 - f. The fact that a fallen world necessarily has temptations doesn’t mean we’re off the hook, however
 - i. *“woe to the one by whom the temptation comes”*
 1. Cf. Matthew 26:24 – *“The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”*
 - a. The sovereignty of God and responsibility of man are both clearly affirmed here

- g. Christ is lamenting the fact that the Fall has corrupted the world, and He is pointing the curse right where it belongs – in the heart of man
 - h. Even if there were no devil trying to ensnare us, we would have more than enough sin in our own hearts to merit this judgment
 - i. Christ doesn't put the blame on Satan here
 - ii. He's not blaming systemic racism or patriarchy or capitalism or colonialism or white privilege
 - iii. He says "*woe to the one by whom temptation comes*"
 - 1. This curse is aimed at the individual human heart
 - 2. The biblical story of fall and redemption works exactly opposite of the world's story (outer corruption/inner salvation vs. inner corruption/outer salvation)
 - i. Because it is us who are the problem, He goes on in v.8
4. V.8,9 – "*And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.*"
- a. This language is an almost identical echo back to the Sermon on the Mount (5:29, 30)
 - i. In that passage, Jesus talks about cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye in order to prevent sin
 - b. It must be pointed out that his is hyperbole

- c. Some in history have done bizarre things (hair shirts, sitting on pole in desert, literal cutting off hand, etc.)
- d. But with that said, we still must feel the force of what Christ is saying here
- e. Killing sin is serious business
- f. It would be better to go to eternal life blind and crippled than to be thrown into eternal torment
- g. The wages of sin is death, and so we must do everything we can to quit earning those wages
- h. There are very practical things that we should do to cut ourselves off from temptation
 - i. Some people shouldn't touch alcohol because of what it entices them to do
 - ii. Some people shouldn't have access to certain apps on their phone, or perhaps they shouldn't have internet access in certain settings
 - iii. Some people need to cut off friendships with individuals who are trouble for them
 - iv. Some need to quit certain podcasts or following certain pages on social media if they are causing problems like lust or envy
 - v. In light of eternity, depriving ourselves of certain unnecessary things is a small price to pay
 - 1. One moment in glory will immediately outweigh a lifetime of suffering or any sacrifice we make in this life
 - 2. Thomas Watson – *“What fools are they who, for a drop of pleasure, drink a sea of wrath.”*

- i. Cutting ourselves off from temptation is absolutely worth the cost
- j. We should also be mindful of where this passage is situated
 - i. In the last passage, we had a focus on spiritual leadership and how those in authority over believers would be better off thrown into the sea with a millstone around their neck if they lead God's children into sin
 - ii. In the next passage we're going to get a picture of what faithful shepherding looks like
 - iii. In the middle we have Christ talking about cutting off hands and feet in order to avoid God's wrath
 - iv. Zechariah 11:17 – *“Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded!”*
 - v. In terms of the overall story line here, Jesus is heaping yet more condemnation on the shepherds of Israel who are shutting the gates of the kingdom to their people
 - 1. Any time parents or civic leaders or church leaders use their position to keep people from the words of life, they are marching right into the woe that Christ is talking about here
 - 2. I must admit that as a minister of the gospel, this is scary
 - a. Jesus' brother James agrees when he says that those of us who teach will be judged with greater strictness
 - b. It struck me as I wrote this out that I may well have this very portion of my sermon played back to me one day

3. But the positive side of this is also part of the reason we elders sensed the need to plant this church
 - a. I don't know how we can have a passage this heavy in the Bible and then distract ourselves with 20 minute inspirational TED talks or silly irreverent gimmicks
 - b. *Heaven and hell are being promised and threatened here*
 - c. *How can those of us who have the words of life act like worship and preaching aren't very literally life and death matters?!*
- k. Now of course we know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus
 - i. One of the biggest challenges with these hard texts is that they often hit the wrong audience
 - ii. Those who are deeply afflicted by the weight of their sin are those who have run to the Saviour and been covered by His righteousness, and those who are listening this morning and these words are just bouncing off without causing any inner turmoil are the ones who need to keep reading this passage until they are cut to the heart
- l. Jesus is threatening hell here for people who refuse to kill sin in their life
- m. He's talking about people being thrown into "eternal fire" in v. 8, and He speaks of the "hell of fire" in v.9
 - i. Mark 9:48 is a parallel passage uses this same vivid language in a way that goes back to the original in Isaiah 66:24

1. *“their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”*
- ii. These early references to hell are dark and disturbing, to say the least
- iii. They are a reference to Gehenna (Valley of Hinnom), which was a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem
 1. In OT times, this was a place where children were sacrificed to pagan gods like Molech (2 Kings 23:10)
 2. Later, this became a place where people threw their household waste, and animal carcasses, and executed criminals
 3. Hell is compared to this dump which was always burning and infested with maggots which feasted on the rotting corpses
 4. These maggots need a host, and notice closely the possessive language in Mark 9:48 & Isaiah 66:24 (*their worm*)
 5. The worms are attached to their own host, and the never-ending, eternal nature of hell means that the host is never finally relieved of his suffering
 - a. His death is not annihilation, but an everlasting death
 - b. The fire is never quenched and the worm never dies because the host and the source of fuel is never extinguished
 - c. His suffering is an eternal suffering
 - d. And just like God’s saints will be able to say *“when we’ve been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, we’ll no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun”* so

these people will have had 10,000 years to think of the impotent, temporary pleasures that led them to this place, and yet they also have no less days of suffering ahead than when they first begun

- n. As much as people like to complain about hellfire sermons, very few of the people who complain about them have actually heard them
 - i. It can be overdone, yes, but I don't think an overemphasis on God's holiness and His anger is exactly the most pressing danger of our era
 - ii. A strong sense of the problem is what sends us to the solution
 - 1. Your gospel is only as amazing as the problem it saves you from
 - 2. *"Maybe if we had more hell from our pulpits we'd have less of it in our homes and in our society"*
- o. We've seen a powerful warning about getting rid of our feet, hands, and eyes in order to keep ourselves free from sin
- p. We do use all of those things to carry out sinful actions, and yet there is something far more corrupt in each one of us
 - i. Far dirtier than our eyes or our hands or our feet is our heart
 - ii. In the final end, it is actually our heart which is directing our eyes and our hands
 - iii. Out of our hearts come each and every sin imaginable
 - 1. Matthew 15:18-20 – *"But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft,*

false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”

- iv. Our eyes and our hands are merely tools of our heart, so if removing eyes and hands is worth the cost, what is really being driven at here is that our heart needs to be cut out
- q. This cutting away of body parts as a reminder of keeping God’s covenant was exactly what was in view all along
 - i. Deuteronomy 10:12-16 – *“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? 14 Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. 15 Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. 16 Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”*
 - 1. There’s often discussion of what circumcision is all meant to symbolize, but already in the days of Moses, it is explicit that one thing circumcision is communicating is the rebirth
 - 2. A part of every boy’s body is permanently cut off in order to remind him that covenant breakers are cut off

3. The old heart of stone likewise needs to be cut out and replaced with a new heart
 - ii. Jeremiah sees how this old covenant is pregnant with the new covenant when he says in 31:31-34 – *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”*
 - r. Amidst all this talk of hell fire and cutting off body parts to prevent sin, there is a solution
 - s. If we are students of Scripture, the cutting off of body parts under threat of hell fire should point us to the cutting off that points us to the new covenant
 - t. In Christ, the full blow of God’s anger has landed once and for all
 - i. If we are in Christ, the circumcision of our heart has happened, and we have received a new heart with God’s law written on it

- ii. Richard Sibbes – *“One thing that hinders the comfort of Christians is that they forget what a gracious and merciful covenant they live under, wherein the perfection that is required is found in Christ.”*
- 5. Remember that the goal of the gospel is not for us to receive a get out of hell free card
- 6. The goal of the gospel is to restore us into the image bearers of God we were designed to be
 - a. The goal is to love and enjoy God for who He is
 - b. If we want pardon but not holiness; if we want forgiveness but not obedience, then we are attempting to use God instead of enjoying Him and living for His glory
 - c. If that is your approach to the gospel, then you have failed to see the gospel - you have not had your old heart cut off
 - d. To receive real forgiveness is to receive all of Christ
 - i. Receiving all of Christ means receiving a new heart; the old has been cut off
 - ii. We are learning to love what Christ loves and hate what He hates, and this means we desire to walk in holiness
 - iii. We desire the joy and the peace and the freedom of holiness and of walking in God’s law
 - e. Thomas Brooks – *“A hypocrite may be willing to embrace Christ as a Priest to save him from wrath, from the curse, from hell, from everlasting burning – but he is never sincerely willing to embrace Christ as a Prophet to teach and instruct him, and as a king to rule over him.”*

- f. So my question to you this morning is to ask how willing you are to be cut in order to have peace with God? Are you willing to have all of Christ, for all of life?
 - i. Are you trying to keep your fallen self in one piece so you can keep enjoying sips of momentary pleasure but be forced to swallow an ocean of wrath?
 - ii. Or do you have the humility to be cut deeply by God so that you can know true joy?

7. CHARGE

- a. *Christ has forced us to face the woe of a fallen world, weighed down by the curse of sin. He pronounces woe not just to the world generally, but to each individual who refuses to fight temptation. We are better off having eyes, hands, and feet cut off than being thrown into the eternal fire of hell. The old covenant cutting ceremonies pointed God's people to this reality, and the new covenant fulfillment delivers the substance to us. If we are in Christ, the old members have been cut off. If we are in Christ, we are a new creation with a newfound desire for holiness. Holiness is not easy. Holiness does not come naturally. But holiness is worth the fight. So the charge is this – heaven has already declared you holy. Now become what you are. Holiness is life. Holiness is joy. Holiness is glory.*

8. BENEDICTION

- a. Jude 24, 25 – *“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, 25 to the only God,*

our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time8 and now and forever. Amen.”