

**"Love Through Due Process"**

COMMUNION

Sept. 6, 2020

Ezekiel 33: 7-11

*<sup>7</sup> So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup> If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. <sup>9</sup> But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. <sup>10</sup> Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" <sup>11</sup> Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?*

Matthew 18: 15-20

*<sup>15</sup> "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup> But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be*

*bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

*<sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

## Romans 13: 8-14

*<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. <sup>11</sup> Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup> let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*



As we began our "Learning to Love Our Enemies" sermon series last Sunday, we looked at how we are called to stand out because of our faith. At times we will be called to stand up for others and to stand up for justice and for good.

Some of the time, this will lead to potential conflict or even confrontation. Not too many of us like conflict or confrontation. When we allow God's love to lead and guide the way, God will help us and others experience growth in healthy and vital ways. When we show genuine, brotherly love for those who, at least in that particular situation, appear to be our enemies, then we are opening the door for God's holy presence to bring new insights and understandings. As we begin this morning's message, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin, I invite you to turn to Ezekiel 33. Ezekiel was a prophet during the exile in Babylon. The nation's sins had led them away from God. As a consequence, the Babylonians conquered them and hauled many people off into captivity. Ezekiel was one of the people carried into exile. In exile, Ezekiel preached a message of repentance for about twenty years. As we join him today, at this stage in his ministry, the people were not heeding his words. His ministry feels fruitless and Ezekiel becomes discouraged. He is beginning to think that his words are falling on deaf ears and he is becoming despondent. In our passage today, Ezekiel is reminded that he is still Israel's sentinel or watchman. A sentinel was one who stood watch and warned the people of the coming danger. He peered out into the dark and tried to protect the people. God reminds Ezekiel that it is still his job to be a prophet to the people, to see their misdeeds and to call them away from their sins and back into a right relationship with God. The passage also reminds us of our call to be on the lookout and speak out or to stand up when sin or evil is present. Starting in chapter 33, God renews Ezekiel's call to be the voice of God to the people.



God warns Ezekiel in today's passage of the cost of failing to speak truth into peoples' lives. In verse eight, God warns Ezekiel, saying, *"If I say to the wicked... and you do not speak to warn the wicked... the wicked will die, but their blood I will require at your hand"*. If Ezekiel fails to be the sentinel, the punishment the people receive will be on his hands. If the people ignore the warning, God tells Ezekiel that he will still have *"saved your life"*. As the passage continues, God reminds Ezekiel that God's intent is not to punish. In verse eleven we hear God address this as he says, *"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked"*. Instead, God longs to see *"the wicked turn from their ways and live"*. God is a God of love who desires good things for his children. In a general sense, we have all experienced this process – especially as parents. At times we will see our children about to do something potentially harmful or maybe risky. We have a feeling that things will not turn out well. We do our best to warn them, but they do not always heed our wisdom or advice. We do all we can do, realizing that sometimes our children just have to learn the hard way. As parents, we never give up on our children. But at times, there is only so much you can do, right?

We have this responsibility to be sentinels with our families, as well as with our friends, our coworkers, our acquaintances, and even with the strangers we meet. Out of our love for all of our fellow human beings, we should desire to see all of them turn from their evil ways and to live a life that is pleasing in the site of God. There will also be times when a believer stumbles and strays or when a follower of Christ makes a poor decision and needs a gentle correction or rebuke. When we see this, the Holy Spirit will try to call us or to nudge us into action. When we are willing to speak up, there is often good that comes from doing so.

Recently I was on the receiving end of just such a gentle rebuke. About two years ago I was officiating a funeral. The man who had passed was a veteran and the American Legion was present to offer military honors at the end of the committal service at the cemetery. As the day of the funeral dawned it was grey and cloudy and cool. It had been raining off and on for the previous few days and the cemetery was a muddy mess. As the memorial service time neared, it began to rain pretty hard. The widow was older – a little unsteady and slightly frail. It was suggested that the honor guard do the 21-gun salute just outside the entry to the church and then play taps just inside the door, to shorten the time at the cemetery. I thought it a good idea and went along with it. The next Sunday an older gentleman asked for a moment of my time after church. He was being a sentinel for all of his fellow members of the armed services.



Bob was so gentle and kind in explaining the error of the decision that I was a part of making. He knew that I was the one with the final say in such matters and he knew that I should know why not to make that decision again. What he said made perfect sense. Having never served in the military myself, my awareness was limited. It was not an intentional wrong that I had committed, but nonetheless the decision was not the right one to make. Bob gently let me know I was wrong without making me feel bad. He did not get upset or condemn me or even make me feel bad. Afterwards I was amazed and impressed with how he handled the situation. I thought, 'What a great way to handle a difficult situation'. In this way the confrontation did lead to growth – to my growth. My knowledge grew and I better understood how to handle myself in similar situations in the future.

Ideally, we would all handle conflicts and confrontations with such skill and compassion and maturity. But that is just not the norm in the world today, is it? I think this is one of the major reasons we avoid conflict and confrontation. We have lost the art of conversation and dialogue. We have lost the skill to disagree and still be friends. Our next two passages for this morning look at how and why we need to have healthy confrontations as people of faith. In Matthew 18 Jesus speaks of how to pursue reconciliation with a fellow Christian. In Romans 13, Paul addresses loving our neighbor by living honorable lives ourselves. The way that Bob treated me aligns well with the guidance we receive from Jesus in Matthew 18. This morning we will be looking at verses fifteen through twenty. Turn with me to Matthew 18.



In these six verses from Matthew 18, Jesus teaches that the restoration of a relationship should begin privately and should move to the public arena only as a last resort. This is the model I believe almost all of us use in dealing with the sins that we have in our lives. In the act of communion later in the service, we will each pause to privately name our sins before God as we confess and repent of them. That is our preferred method. We do not publicly broadcast our sins to the church or to the world. We do directly to God to restore our relationship that has been damaged by our sin. This is also how we hope to be treated when we have sinned against another. When we have wronged another believer, we would hope that they would come to us in person rather than turn to the gossip circles or to social media. That is exactly Jesus' advice in today's passage. He details how to lovingly correct another by following a set process.

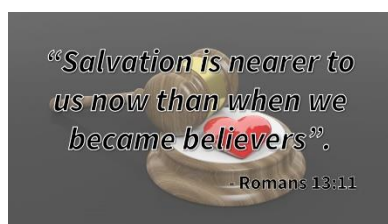
In verse 15 we read, *"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone"*. From there, what Jesus says aligns with what God said to Ezekiel in our first passage: if they listen, one has been returned to faithful living. But he differs as we continue in this passage. Jesus instructs us to take one or two others along if the offender did not listen to the private correction. Bringing others would prevent any slanderous or unsubstantiated accusations from being presented or shared – both from the one offering the correction and from the one being corrected. If the person still refuses to listen, then Jesus tells us that the matter should be brought before the whole community of faith. A failure to listen to wise counsel at this level would lead to discipline by exclusion. Unrepentant sinners such as tax collectors and Gentiles were not allowed to participate in the fellowship and worship of the church. The purpose was not to exile someone forever. The time apart was rooted in the conviction that God's people are holy, and that unrepentant sin corrupts fellowship. The hope was that the time apart would lead to a personal restoration of holiness. The closing verses are a reminder that what the church decides within the community, if done in alignment with God's will and ways, are eternally binding. The communal decisions of the church are powerful and must be covered in prayer. In prayer, Christ himself becomes a part of the decision.



As we turn to Romans 13, the focus shifts to how we as believers are to relate to other people. In verses eight through fourteen Paul shows us how to truly love others

and closes this section with why it is important to love others. This is a continuation of the teaching from last week. Last week's passage from Romans

12 focused on having genuine love for all people, including our enemies. Last week's call to stand out is echoed in all of these passages today, but especially in this final passage. Beginning in verse eight, Paul connects again to the idea that when we truly love others, we are fulfilling the law and commandments. There is a legal, due process feel to Paul's words today. In one translation that I studied from this week the word was "obligation" instead of "owe". When we think that our obligation as Christians is to love others, then we understand this call as something we must do rather than something we can do. Paul begins by going back to the foundation of the Law and commandments for Israel. In verse nine Paul reiterates that the Ten Commandments are summed up in the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. The logic here is simple. If we love our neighbors as ourselves then we would not commit adultery or murder. We would not steal from them or covet what they had. He summarizes this first section by stating, *"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law"*. As we turn to verses eleven through fourteen, we begin to hear why we are called to speak words of truth and correction, why we are called to gently rebuke our fellow believers, and why we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.



Verse eleven reminds us of a reality: *"Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers"*. This is so true. Today we are one day closer to eternity than we

were yesterday. How many of you believe this? How many are grateful for these words of truth? It is wonderful news that we are one day closer to our final victory over sin and death. Amen? Yes, amen!



This truth, my friends, is also the truth for those who will not wear the crown of glory. This is “why” we are to be love lived out in the world.

Paul calls us to wake from our sleep and to live in the light. Paul is referencing the Jewish understanding of light and darkness here. Jesus often used this terminology as well. In the ancient world light and daytime were associated with good and holy living. The darkness and night were associated with evil and sinful living. Revelry and drunkenness, debauchery and other sinful living tended to happen at night. These behaviors often led to quarreling and jealousy. Paul calls on the believers to *“live honorably as in the day”*. Here he is encouraging all believers to live lives that are honorable and that set an example for others to see and follow. Paul encourages us to *“put on the armor of light”* and to *“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”*. He is calling us to live out our Christian witness. Why does it matter that we do this on a daily basis? It partly matters because today we are all one day closer to the salvation of our souls. But it really matters because non-believers are one day closer to an eternity in darkness and pain and torment and the gnashing of teeth. If we are to truly love our neighbors, especially those that are lost and that do not know Jesus as Lord and Savior, then we must live as examples of the light, of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, we live as Christ’s light and love in the world so that others can come to know Jesus as Lord. We stand out so that others notice, become aware of a better way, are drawn to Christ, and then can come to a saving faith in our Lord and Savior.



From Ezekiel and through Matthew and into Romans, we hear the call to love others as ourselves. It is a charge to speak truth when truth needs to be spoken, to be honest and up front with others when they have hurt or harmed us or others, to treat all with respect and honor, and to live as examples of Christ because we live in a world that is so in need of a savior. As we turn to a time of confession and repentance, we remember that in order to do all these things, to be love lived out, we ourselves must be right with God. As we enter into this time of Holy Communion, I invite you to bow your heads, to still your hearts and minds, to pause for a few moments, to consider the condition of your soul, and to confess your sins, to repent, and to seek God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. As a community of faith, let us now turn to God in these moments of quiet. Let us each pray to the Lord our God...

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. Is God calling every Christian to be a sentinel or watchman like Ezekiel? Will God hold us accountable for not warning people?
- 2) *Pray*. Is there anyone in your life with whom you need to reconcile? If so, seek Holy Spirit guidance for how to pursue reconciliation.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 18: 21-35. Why does Jesus follow up today's passage with this teaching on forgiveness? How does this next passage play into reconciling with a neighbor or friend that you are in conflict with?