

October 20, 2024

Hebrews 4:14-16

“Watch and Pray!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Proper love for the self is when you love yourself and are concerned for your personal well-being so that you may give yourself to another. Wicked love for the self is when you love yourself and are concerned for your personal well-being for yourself without proper consideration of God and neighbor. The heart of original sin is wicked love for the self. Here one is governed by self-interest. Here one makes decisions based on the advantages and disadvantages for oneself.

The Christian's character in this life is the most fragmented among all people on earth. We, who have been called by the good news of the love of God in Christ Jesus, live according to that extraordinary love of the cross and empty tomb, and yet we still have wicked love for the self. We have desires for what is right and we have desires for what is wrong. Life can be terribly confusing for us as Christians and deeply painful due to the constant battle raging within us. Good thoughts can enter into the mind, and with lightening speed there are thoughts that are evil. We long for the day when this battle is over. But for now we continue to be Christians in the spiritual combat zone of daily living. We live in the description of Romans chapters 7 and 8.

It's a good thing that the apostle Paul writes that we are wretched people and then cries out the question that every Christian cries out: "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" And we may all take great comfort in the answer Paul gives, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" And then he goes on to acknowledge the reality of our raging battle, "So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." And then he adds in Romans 8 a reassuring word, that regardless of this battle raging within us, we still remain in the undeserved kindness of God. By faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins we may rest in knowing that there is "... no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." But then he warns us to not set our minds on the sinful desires of the flesh for "to set the mind on the flesh is death." Sin will remain but it shall not have dominion over us.

The devil is always working with this unbelieving world to get us to set our minds on the sinful flesh through endless temptations so that our faith in Jesus Christ and the gifts he gives may die. The devil desires to capture us and put us in his prison-house of hell forever, that we may suffer with him in the agony of everything lost. He wants us to bless ourselves in our hearts by saying what is recorded in Deuteronomy 29:19, "I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart." Such who persist in that thinking are in grave danger of losing their salvation. Today, if we hear his voice, let us not harden our hearts. Rather, let us repent and seek God's forgiveness in the life, sufferings, and death of Jesus Christ, and having been loved in such a forgiveness, may we once again resolve to fight against our sinful desires and the temptations to do evil.

I have read that natives in Madagascar would capture ring-tailed lemurs by their knowledge of their weakness. The natives know that their favorite food is seeds from a type of melon. They cut a hole in the melon just large enough for the lemur to insert his hand to reach the seeds. The lemur will stick his hand in the small hole and grab as many seeds as he can and then try to take his hand out of the melon. This he cannot do. His fist is now larger than the hole. The lemur will pull and tug, screech and fight the melon that

is attached to the vine for a long time. But he can't get free of the trap unless he gives up the seeds, which he refuses to do. Meanwhile, the natives sneak up and capture him.

Temptations are like that. As James writes: "... each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (1:14-15)." We often want to reach into that melon don't we? And we get so caught up in the moment and grab those seeds so tightly that we will not let go to our own destruction. The difference is that we are not lemurs, even though we might find ourselves acting like them. But, for us, there is so much more on the line. We are talking about our relationship with the Lord God and his gift of salvation.

In every temptation, the sinful flesh entices us to question God's holy Word. Satan whispers into our ears: "Did God really say, 'You must not ... [fill in the blank]?" He always makes everything doubtful or questionable to provide any loophole that will tip us to allow sin to have dominion. Moreover, he would have us believe that God is keeping good things from us and that he is not really all that concerned for our personal well-being. And Satan loves to convince us that there really won't be any consequences for what we do. "You will surely not die," Satan wants us to believe.

All of this brings us to our epistle lesson for this morning and some words that are uniquely designed to help us face and overcome temptation. They are designed to teach us to let go of the seeds of the melon to free our hands and save us from a very bad outcome. It says in Hebrews 4:14, "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Those are wonderful words! We let go of the seeds because we have in Jesus a great high priest who has broken every barrier that would keep us from the gracious presence of God. He has passed through the heavens. Jesus has paved the way for us to enter a place that is so filled with love and joy that there is nothing that we can desire down here that can even slightly compare to it.

"Let us hold fast our confession." And what is that confession? Our confession is Jesus - who he is, and all that he has done. The Son of God became one of us and obeyed the law for you and me. He suffered and died for all the times that we have failed to what is right. He covers our sins with his holy, innocent, precious blood so that when the Father looks at us he no longer sees our sins. In Jesus our Savior we have the forgiveness of all our sins no matter how great our sins have been or might be today. And it is in that powerful pardon and the peace that passes all understanding that we become repulsed by sin having fixed our eyes on things above. The great love of Jesus for us and all that he gives confronts our rancid desires and temptations so that we strive to keep our hands out of the melon to grab a fist full of seeds that would bring us to our ruin.

Moreover, it says in Hebrews 4:15, "... we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." What this means is astounding! We do not have a high priest who is remote from us with little or no experience when it comes to our personal difficulties with Satan and temptation. Jesus sympathizes with us, which means that he not only understands, but he chose to join us in our sufferings and has suffered what we suffer. In fact, when it says that he has been tempted as we are tempted, we should consider that the verb is a perfect

passive participle and that means this: Jesus is affected and identifies with what we are going through right now. His work on the cross is finished, but by having endured your temptations and by overcoming them in his perfect life, even paying for your failures, he is touched by what you are going through and helps you through his loving sacrifice - his cross - his powerful pardon - and the hope of heaven.

Thus, the writer to the Hebrews goes on to say in 4:16, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Jesus’ rule is a rule of undeserved kindness that creates and sustains our faith that we may passively receive forgiveness and our Lord’s power to lose our life for him having found true life in him. And Jesus is merciful, that is, he not only knows our predicament, but has done something about it. Thus, we keep watch, that is, our faith is fixed on the love of Christ and motivated to hold on to his cross and empty tomb. We are invited to come to him in faith and prayer so that we do not lose all that he gives.

As you can see, we have a twofold armor against the devil: to listen to the gospel and be comforted and strengthened by it (holding on to our confession); and, we are tenderly invited to lift up our hearts to the very throne of God and cry out for help. And our help is in the name of the Lord. Thus, we have two things. Luther writes:

Either God speaks to us and we are still, listening to God, or he listens to us as we speak to him, praying for what we need. Whatever way it may be, the devil cannot endure it, and he cannot hold his own against it. Therefore Christians must be armed with both, so that their hearts may be everlastingly turned toward God, keeping his Word and with unceasing sighs eternally praying, “Our Father ...” [Sermon from 1539, WA 47:758].

Or, we may summarize it in the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:41, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation ...” To watch means to remain in faith toward Christ and all that he gives, and to pray means to depend only on him to truly help us.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott