

Laying Sin Aside

Hebrews 11:32-12:3

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

The ever-so popular show *SpongeBob SquarePants* is like Pineapple on pizza. Either you hate it, or you love it. Personally, I could probably talk about episodes of SpongeBob for hours. The evening before I prepared this Sunday's sermon, I came across a clip from the episode titled "Hooky." Those who have watched the show are probably able to replay the episode in their minds just from hearing the title. But for those unfamiliar, here's the premise.

Mr. Krabs, SpongeBob's boss, warns SpongeBob and his best friend Patrick about the dangerous fishing hooks that have suddenly appeared in their town of Bikini Bottom. They're shiny, tempting, and baited to drag you away forever. His warning is simple: stay away from the hooks, or you'll end up as someone's dinner or worse, a gift shop souvenir. But Patrick, lured by the excitement, calls it "the carnival," and soon the two of them are riding the hooks like playground swings, jumping off at the last second to avoid getting caught, and snagging whatever bait to enjoy as a snack. By sheer chance, they managed to avoid being hooked.

The next day, SpongeBob, on the way to work, passes a lone hook and can't resist. He sits on it, hoping to relive the fun until he realizes the mistake he has made. It snagged his pants. He is swiftly reminded of the warnings Mr. Krabs gave about the demise of those who get hooked. Panicking and hooked in the pants, he races to work, shouting for help from the terrible fate that might await him, only to lose both his pants and his dignity. It turns out to be a prank by Mr. Krabs, who hooked him to teach him a lesson, and the look on SpongeBob's face says the lesson stuck.

I. Baits, Hooks, and Consequences

Baits, hooks, and consequences—these are things we are often far too familiar with. Hooks may be funny when SpongeBob and Patrick deal with them, but real hooks are far from a joke. Sin, like a shiny bait before a gullible fish, sure has a way of presenting itself as enticing. Those who live in unrepentant sin present it as something that they can't live without, and in the unbelieving world, it is treated like a carnival where all joy and wonder are to be had in giving into the desires of the flesh. Meanwhile, the scriptures teach us that sin is something we cannot live with. It is the reason for our death and the reason for our separation from God. As James 1 states, "But 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."

Behind the allure of sin lies a shiny hook, ready to unveil the trick once the bait is taken, revealing that sin leads to nothing but ruin. Unlike the harmless prank played on SpongeBob, failure to follow God's commands doesn't just lead us to potential harm, but it absolutely

destroys our relationship with God. The hook of sin does not let go. It drags us toward spiritual death, all while promising life.

When reading our text for the sermon this morning, the command to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings closely” stands out as a stark impossibility when we examine our lives. We know that “with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26), but those sins that we struggle with daily appear to have dominion over our lives. With that comes the consequences that are both temporal and eternal. Some of these sins may be obvious to the world, while others are far more hidden and easier to keep to ourselves.

These we might even call our “pet sins” that we keep around for those times when we feel stressed, lonely, angry, depressed, or anxious. For some, it may be greed or envy, where we are constantly comparing ourselves to others and what they have that we wish we could have. Or perhaps it’s bitterness and hatred, where we never let go of an old wound that someone inflicted on us, because letting it go and forgiving it feels like losing. Maybe it’s the trap of lust that promises a quick escape in sins such as adultery, homosexual acts, or pornography, but leaves shame in its wake or destroys our marriages. Perhaps, it’s the allure of abusing drugs or alcohol that seemingly helps us to escape the worries of the world, but brings ruin to our bodies, our minds, and our relationship with God and others.

These are just some of the examples of the sins that cling so closely. These are the ones we excuse, protect, and keep close, but in the end, they only tighten the hook and pull us farther from the life God calls us to live. And without repentance and rescue, these sins do not simply weigh us down; they condemn us before our Holy God.

II. Sin Clings Closely

Every one of us has a sin that clings more closely than the rest. It’s the one we’ve wrestled with for years, the one that keeps trying to hook us, no matter how many times we’ve seen its danger. And if you’re thinking you don’t have one, that’s likely the one that has hooked you. I will share that this issue regarding wrestling with “pet sins” and what it means to walk as a child of God has been something I have struggled with all my life. I know many who feel the same, and really, we all should. And there is one Spirit-inspired writer I know who describes the issue well. Paul in Romans 7 writes, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”

Paul, like us, knew exactly what it was like to feel trapped by sin that clings so closely. Before Christ intervened, Paul was an executor of God’s children. But if this wretched man could be saved from unrighteousness, and if he can feel the way that we feel about sin and “pet sins” even after knowing Christ, then we should not be surprised when we feel that way too. For our benefit in the struggle, Paul continues with the familiar verse that we should all hold onto when the guilt of sin and the accusations of Satan plague us.

He later writes in chapter 7, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The same Lord who endured the cross for the joy set before Him is the One who has taken the hook from you. He bore in His own body the punishment your sin deserved, and in exchange, He gives you His righteousness. You may still feel the pull of that old hook in this life, but in Christ, it no longer has the right to claim you. Each time it tries to drag you away, you have a Savior who has already broken its power and stands ready to pull you back to Himself through His Word and Spirit.

Picture the hook of sin. It’s sharp, barbed, and lodged deep in your soul. Pulling only tears it more. But Christ takes the line in His own hands, and instead of cutting you loose to drift, He draws the hook into Himself. On the cross, He bore its tearing and its sting until it was spent. And for you and me, He left behind in the grave and rose with the victory that He now gives to you. Therefore, when temptation pulls us, we look to the One who has already taken the hook’s worst and has promised to never let us go.

Notice that Paul never once tried to say that his sin was okay, that it was not damaging his relationship with God, that it was okay to live in sin day after day as if Christ had given you permission to live a life of ease and one without struggle. Instead, Paul lived a life of daily repentance where he constantly returned to Christ for forgiveness and strength. That is not an easy task, but it is the solution to the problem. So, if you are looking for the solution to your sin or your “pet sins,” repentance and the forgiveness of sins, is where the answer is found.

That is what the Christian life is all about. It is not the absence of sin in this life, but the ongoing drowning of the Old Adam and the rising again of the new man in Christ. Every. Single. Day. Bring your sins, even the ones that cling so closely to the place where Christ meets you—the Cross where He took it all. And because God is faithful to His promises, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” and “His mercies are new every morning.”

III. Help from The Cloud of Witnesses

The great encouragement that comes from our text for this morning is that God has given us such a great cloud of witnesses to look to in those moments when sin seemingly has overtaken us and crushed our faith. These are not perfect people who ran flawless races. Gideon doubted God’s call and demanded repeated signs before he would act. Barak hesitated to obey until Deborah went with him. Samson squandered his strength on selfish desires and reckless living. Jephthah made a foolish vow that cost him dearly. David committed adultery and arranged a murder to cover it up. Samuel’s own sons turned aside after dishonest gain.

And yet, every one of them is named here not because of their failures, but because God brought them back. He forgave them, restored them, and worked mightily through them despite their sins. Their lives bear witness that our standing with God rests not on our ability to run perfectly, but on His power to pick us up when we fall and carry us forward in faith. And what’s

more, if the men and women who have gone before us could endure suffering, torture, pain, and execution, how much more through Christ can we endure the temptations of greed, selfishness, lust, and all that may plague us.

Even in the present, do we as brothers and sisters in Christ who are going through the same exact things that others are going through, not have each other for the bearing of one another's burdens? So instead of condemning, we must be there for one another, encouraging one another in Christ, just as the saints encourage us. Whether it's a private confession with our Pastor, speaking with a family member, or consolation from a friend, God has given us this great cloud of witnesses that will include you and me, to help us run the race to the end, to the eternal Kingdom.

So don't grow weary in the race. Run it with confidence that God is faithful and forgives us of our sins. By the Holy Spirit that dwells within you, keep fighting those sins that seemingly hook you. Say no to sin and turn to the one who has taken all your sin for you. Never let the devil convince you that you have lost what Christ has gained for you, so long as you remain in Him. Laugh in the face of Satan with the knowledge that you are forgiven in Christ Jesus.

Look to the cross that reminds you that your sins were nailed there and in Him are forgotten. Look to the cloud of witnesses that surrounds you, where believers who have gone before us have run the race to the end, struggled and endured with their own sins and "pet sins." And having been forgiven in Christ, take sin seriously. Never fall into the illusion that Christ died so that you can sin, but so that you can be free from sin in this life, and perfectly free from sin in the life to come. Walk as a child of God, striving by His strength to lead a pure and decent life in what you say and do, and not because you are the best runner, but because He has already run the race and won the victory for you.

Amen.

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