

October 05, 2025

Luke 17:1-10

“Pay Attention to Yourselves!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When I was young I decided to make a trigger stick box trap to catch a rabbit. I have no idea what I was going to do with the rabbit if I caught one. I guess I was just interested in seeing if I could fool the rabbit and make the trap work. I never did catch a rabbit, for the short time I tried, probably because I used poor materials, poor bait, and didn't have enough patience.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus begins by saying that "temptations to sin are sure to come ..." The original meaning of the word, that is translated in our Bibles as "temptations," literally evokes the trigger stick of an animal trap. Over time, the term became broadly used for anything that might cause another person to trip so that they fall to their ruin. Figuratively, it points to any influence, teaching, or behavior that might cause a person to sin and fall from the faith and enter spiritual ruin. It's like a trigger stick box trap that someone has made so that they might have rabbit stew.

"Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!" These traps or points of stumbling have come from someone or many. In other words, there are those who set up enticements to trap us to our spiritual doom - to fall away from Jesus and all he gives. Of those who set up these enticements, Jesus pronounces "woe" on them. That word "woe" means moral outrage and is connected to a bad final judgment. This is made even more obvious when Jesus adds the following to those who set up such trigger sticks or places of stumbling: "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin [to be trapped or to stumble and fall from faith in Jesus]."

Who are these "little ones?" We usually think of only children, but the term in this context is talking about new disciples of all ages who are in need of instruction and are especially vulnerable, though the way in which this text is structured makes it applicable to any disciple who is being led astray. At the beginning of our gospel text Jesus is addressing all his disciples and later says, "Pay attention to yourselves!" In other words, do not set up things that cause people to fall from the faith, and be careful that you do not fall from the faith yourselves. And if anyone is the cause of such falling away, it would be better to be drowned with a stone hung around the neck than to face the final judgment.

Again, **Pay Attention to Yourselves!** This demands an active, focused response rather than casual notice. The verb addresses the mind (understanding truth), the heart (cherishing truth), and the will (acting on truth). And this is a big problem for all of us because we tend to love casual Christianity rather than focused Christianity. Casual Christianity not only makes us vulnerable, but it can cause us to say and do things that will lead others to their spiritual ruin.

As I was working on this sermon, I was interrupted by a phone call from someone who was interested in our seminary and, in the course of the conversation, said that regardless of what church you belong to, they all teach the same things and are on the same road that leads to the same place. That is casual Christianity and it is deadly. So I had to gently explain to him that many churches claim that the road to heaven is faith in Jesus and doing good works, which Paul says is no gospel. I told him that Paul says

that we are not saved by our good works, but by the good works of Jesus in his life, sufferings, and death. I had to tell him that the Bible says that our good works are the fruit of faith that comes from the vine who is Jesus, so that whatever good we do is from him. I had to tell him how many churches tolerate and promote all kinds of false teachings that are like gangrene that eventually kills justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. I had to remind him that Jesus and his apostles have warned us that there will be many in churches wolves, and that we must flee such wolves and their teachings. I encouraged him to find a confessional Lutheran Church. After a long silence, and as I pessimistically was expecting the worst, he sincerely thanked me for taking the time to explain these things to him.

Another example of casual Christianity is the kind where right or wrong is relative to the individual or the culture, so that the moral law and what God has ordered among his people is up for debate. Here, saying that you believe in Jesus, without really understanding his person and work, is a uniting principle. But, everything that the church believes and teaches and your morals are up for grabs. In this casual Christianity, most everything is reduced to a slogan, while the pursuit of real doctrinal truth and holding to that truth is unimportant. Part of the problem with this is what Jesus says in John 8:32-36, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free ... Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

When Jesus says to us **Pay Attention to Yourselves!** he is closing the door to casual Christianity. We may not like to hear it, but he requires us to preach and teach his gospel of forgiveness in its truth and purity, and administer the sacraments according to his institution and promises. We are to grow in our understanding of the person and work of Jesus. There are no ifs ands or buts about it. Sin and grace is the heart of it all. Moreover, we are not rugged individuals living a solitary Christianity where you do your own thing, your own way, and I do mine, my way. We are keepers of one another as Jesus was our keeper in the cross and empty tomb.

Everything in Scripture and our lives is to revolve around Christ crucified. This is what we preach and bestow in the Sacraments for washing and ongoing refreshment and reassurance. Jesus hits us hard when it comes to our breaking the commandments and the death we deserve. He wipes out the casual Christianity when he bestows the forgiveness of sins that he earned for us in his horrid sufferings and death. We should consider carefully the serious nature of our salvation and what it cost our Savior. We should contemplate the extent of his love for us, dying our death, experiencing our hell, forgiving our sins, and sending his Holy Spirit to begin the work of making us a new creation.

The weight of sin and grace wipes away casual Christianity, and really does cause us to take a good look at ourselves and the eternal gift that is at stake. The love of Jesus is his sacrifice given to cleanse us of our sins. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, that we might be relieved of shame and death. This is the way that he has cared for us. He has loved us with forgiveness, that even anticipates eternal paradise. In Jesus we find the pattern for our own lives. He says: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." As you can see, when the love of Jesus in the forgiveness of all

our sins is graciously given to us, it stirs us to pay attention to ourselves so as to avoid sin and avoid promoting sin in others. Who we are, and all that we say and do, has as its supreme goal in giving and preserving the forgiveness of sins for everyone.

Knowing and growing, in what we have in Jesus, leads to disciples who rebuke and forgive others as we have been rebuked and forgiven. The church is the body of Christ with Christ as the head. The church is committed to exposing sin and forgiveness in the cross and empty tomb. It is a community that pays attention to itself, so that it may save the lost and build up one another in the faith, having at its core the atoning sacrifice of Jesus and the hope of heaven. The central teaching and core of who we are and all that we say and do is found in the cross of forgiveness and eternal life in the paradise of God.

Jesus would have us to see that we are to forgive again and again. That indicates, to some degree, the nature of our state as Christians in the church. We live as saints in the forgiveness of Christ who are still in danger from the sinful flesh that wreaks havoc in our lives and the lives of others. The apostles say in our text: "Increase our faith!" and rightly so. We need an increase in our faith because we live in a foul world with an old self that would do everything to take our salvation away. In the love of Jesus, others need our love to cleanse them and keep them clean before God. Jesus did and does this for us, and we should pay close attention to present ourselves in the same service in Christ for others. That's what faith does. It's what unworthy servants do. They do it, not because they have to, but because Jesus has done it and continues to do it for them!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott