

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ⁸ When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

¹⁰ *“Son of man, say to the Israelites, ‘This is what you are saying: “Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?”’*

¹¹ *Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’ (Ezekiel 33:7-11 NIV2011)*

Remember, You Are God’s Watchman

Maybe you are different from me, but I do not think there’s much from Ezekiel’s life I would particularly enjoy doing. Here’s a guy who God appoints to be his spokesman to a stubborn group of people. Here’s a guy who, as part of his job as spokesman, God told him he would then not speak to get a message across to the people. So, Ezekiel would be mute for over a year. Here’s a guy who God told to shave off his beard and cook his meal over a pile of dung as an object lesson. That’s gross enough for us. It was worse for him. Ezekiel knew his fellow country men and women would not listen. God had told him as much. He knew that his efforts would seem like a waste of time. God had told him what was going to happen. And still God places him as watchman over Israel. And now God reminds Ezekiel as he is in Babylon knowing that his homeland is being ravaged by war and the inevitable fall of Jerusalem is coming: your job, Ezekiel, hasn’t changed. **“Son of man,”** God calls Ezekiel, **“I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.”**

The watchman’s job is quite simple. Watch out for danger. And when you see danger, warn the people. Pretty straightforward. If the watchman does not do his job, then the people are in danger and it’s on the watchman’s head. It’s his fault. But if the watchman does his job, then it’s on the people to react accordingly. As a watchman, and as God’s mouth-piece, the Lord commands Ezekiel, **“Hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.”** The warning is just as simple and straightforward as the job description: **“You wicked person, you will surely die!”** Because of their rebellion against God’s will, they face the danger of God’s wrath. Because of their missing the target of following God’s Law, this will happen. Death always has been the result of not loving God with your whole heart, soul, and mind. Not just death on earth, but eternal death in hell.

But God’s focus here isn’t really on the people. This is for Ezekiel: **“If you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood”** (v. 8).

I have to tell you, these words are difficult for me to hear. Because as pastor this is God’s expectations of me. This is my responsibility: warn the sinner the danger of their continued actions. And if I don’t and they die in their sin, their blood is on my hands.

But before you get too comfortable, this is yours too. Jesus says in Matthew 18, if your brother or sister sins against you, go and show them their fault just between the two of you. You aren’t called as pastor of a congregation or like Ezekiel to preach to an entire nation. You aren’t watchmen to fix the problems of society. You are called to confront your sinning brother and sister in Christ. As the watchman stands on the wall and gives warning of the danger but does not go out searching for it, so we too do not go being nosey and searching out for sin. Be watchful to give warning. We are not the sanctification police making sure everyone is behaving properly. But when we see the danger, it is your God-given duty to give warning when someone is not loving their neighbor or giving glory to God with their life.

There goes the excuse that it isn’t my place to say anything. It is. There goes the excuse that we are told not to judge actions. You aren’t. But you are responsible for giving the warning that God is. There goes the excuse that it’s not my job but the pastor’s job or the leader’s or the elder’s. Yes, it is their job. But it’s yours too.

And you know how difficult this is. We still live in a world that says, “My business is my own and you better stay out of it.” We live in a society where you risk being shamed and shunned if you dare speak anything that might go against what is culturally acceptable. We live amongst people who insist that if you love someone, you will let them do what they want and support them no matter what.

It’s difficult when we see our own sins and failures. Who am I to say anything? It’s difficult when their reasoning makes sense. It’s even worse when we are the ones excusing them.

It’s difficult because you’re sure you know how they are going to react. Maybe you’ve tried this before and you might feel it’s already too late for them. You’re sure they’re going to get mad at you. Or, they won’t even put up a fight at all because they don’t care. You know it’s going to make things awkward and uncomfortable. It’s going to change your relationship. So you want, even hope someone else will take care of it. Maybe, you think, it would be easier if you just try and ignore it—they should know better after all. Or it’s simply because you really don’t want to and so you don’t.

But at what cost? That individual stays in their sin, doesn't see what they are doing is wrong, and then dies. Because they have not repented of that sin they will suffer every single hour of every single day for all of eternity for their sin. But because you did not warn them, their blood is on your hands. The excuse, "No one told me," won't save them. But it may condemn you. You will be held accountable for not doing your God-given duty as a watchman to give warning to the sinner who does not repent.

Like I said, this was difficult for me to read. I know how I have made the excuses for them. I remember how I have not said anything so I give the impression that what they were doing is fine. I know how I have talked about the sin rather than confronting the sinner. I know how I have been more concerned with how other people feel or speak about me rather than speaking the Word of the Lord.

We know how we have failed. So God gives us this warning so that we too turn from our own wicked ways and live. Therefore, confess your sin with me, repent of it, and know Jesus forgives you. And he so thoroughly forgives you that he gives you this opportunity to work alongside him to win over your brother and sisters in Christ for the Lord.

What if they don't listen? It's not on you. Your job, my job is not to change hearts. We can't. Only the gospel can. As watchmen our job is simply to report the coming danger to the sinner so they might be warned and turn. Inevitably they will say in some shape or form as the Israelites did: **"Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"** They will accuse you of not loving them. They will say you don't care. They will push it back on you. But that's what our sinful natures do when confronted with God's Law. That's all it can say in the face of the danger of God's wrath against sin and wickedness. And if we left it at that, they cannot live. The Law may change actions, but it does not change the heart. The Law only kills.

But that's not what the Lord wants. **"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?"**

The Lord does not leave us in the depths of despair weighed down with the guilt of sin. He doesn't abandon us so the shame eats alive and we waste away under the accusations. What brings God the greatest joy and pleasure is to make us alive again. At one time we already were dead in sin. That's what we are by nature. It wasn't just the fact we did wicked things that we were lost. But that is what we were—dead and already condemned. But because of God's great love for us he has made us alive in Christ Jesus even when we were dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:4, 5). And because it was

God's greatest pleasure to give you life he did the unthinkable. He gives you his own child, his only-begotten Son, Jesus to live and die for you. And not only did he give you Jesus but he does not spare him any pain and suffering. The entire debt of sin and wickedness must be paid. So he punishes Jesus and leaves him there alone to suffer for it all.

But he had to because his pleasure is to make you alive again. The Father knew that when Jesus pays the debt it is finished. He knew that in three days he would raise Jesus to life again so you too might live. After all, this was his plan from the beginning. And because it was his Father's will, it was Jesus' plan too. And for the joy set before him with the possibility of giving you life, Jesus faces the cross and scorns its shame. Jesus lifts the burden of sin from you including our sin neglecting to confront the sinner. Jesus reverses its curse. Death will not win, but through Jesus God gives you the victory over death. You will not waste away for all eternity but have been made alive and whole again. God does not find joy in the death of the wicked. He takes pleasure in washing dead sinners like you with the water and Word in baptism making you alive in Jesus. He takes pleasure assuring you when you have confessed your sins that they are truly forgiven. He takes joy assuring you when you receive Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper, "You are not dead. Your sins are forgiven. Live in Jesus' name."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is why we need to be in God's Word and receiving his Sacrament. Here we too receive His forgiveness and love. As we grow in seeing our own need for God's forgiving love the more we grow in wanting to share it. And that's what we are doing as watchmen and women. We aren't looking to prop ourselves up with pride. It's not to put them in their place. It's not to make good people who do the right things. It's to speak this life-giving word to sinners and for sinners so they might turn from their wicked ways and live. It's to care for them. It's to really love them. It wouldn't be loving for me to come and throw a brick through the window in your house. But, if I saw your house was on fire and you were still in it, the not-loving thing to do would be to keep on driving. Out of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ we throw the brick of the Law to wake sinners up so they might turn from their wicked ways and, by the good news of Jesus' forgiving love, live.

Whether you want to or not this is what God calls us to be and calls us to do. But do not despair. You aren't doing this on your own. God works in you and through you according to his purpose. He speaks with your mouth and works with your hands to do the work he has set out for you to do. He promises your work is not in vain. After all, he is the one who appoints you as his watchmen. Amen.