

“On Your Left”

Ezekiel 33:7-11 (NIV)

⁷ “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?’”

In Ezekiel’s day, around 600 B.C., fortified cities would have watchmen stationed in towers or on the high walls who would stay awake through the whole night to see and then call out enemy surprise attacks or other potential dangers. Very much a necessity to keep the people safe, but how would you feel when woken up around 2:00 am from a deep sleep to the sound of a warning alarm? Your first thought is not going to be, “Oh good, I’m so glad we have a warning system.” No, when we hear an alarm, we get startled. It upsets us. Maybe even makes us mad. As much as it is needed, initially none of us like being warned.

I think about that any time that I’m driving along, minding my own business, and someone honks their horn at me. It always startles me. I look around to figure out what they’re honking about, but while I’m doing that, I’m upset, thinking, “Who’s the impatient jerk honking his horn? Was that really necessary?” It isn’t until I see the danger that they were warning me about that I sullenly apologize for the thoughts in my head, realizing now that this person was trying to protect me from danger. Yet, the experience still leaves me frazzled, a bit uneasy.

Because I know what a warning sound does to me, it sometimes makes me reluctant to give a warning to someone else. I rarely honk the horn on my car. More often I have this conflict to warn people when my family goes out on bike rides. I tend to be in the front of our little pack, and I always have a quick internal conversation of when to say, “On your left,” before passing someone. I hesitate to say it because I know that it might make them jump, that the speed with which we’re coming and the fact that they aren’t looking over their shoulders means that they will be startled by this. They might actually jump into my path as their brain is trying to decipher, “On your left.” Does that mean I should move left? Or should I move right? Who’s left? Your left? My left? So, I’m reluctant to warn.

How much more would some of those thoughts have gone through Ezekiel’s mind when the LORD said to him, “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. 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. 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.” (verses 7-9)

Now we aren’t talking about a quick “On your left” or a honk on your car horn and then you probably will never see the person again and so who cares what they think of you and your warning. We’re talking about warning someone because of their sins, face-to-face conversations with people we know and love. What will they do when I warn them of the danger of their sin?

It may startle them because they don’t think that they’re doing anything wrong. In being startled, they might immediately be angry at me for doing such a thing and take a defensive posture. They might get mad at me and throw one of my sins back in my face. Or they may quote at me, “Judge not lest yet be judged, pastor” from Matthew chapter 7, making it clear that in their estimation I have no right to ever warn them of their sins. They may brush it off, laugh at the warning because it poses no danger to them, so they think. Maybe they even use my warning as a punchline in a later conversation. Or they may simply walk away, declaring that they don’t need such negativity in their lives and end our relationship right then and there.

Knowing that people’s responses to us warning them of their sins can hurt us, even end relationships, why do it? What happens if I don’t say, “On your left” when biking past a person and their dog? They might stay exactly where they are on the path and no one gets hurt. Or they might step to their left, get pulled by their dog, and then we have a collision at high speed that is going to hurt a lot, maybe break some bones. What happens if I don’t honk the horn as someone is about to back into my car in the Kohl’s parking lot? It might be okay. They might not hit me. They might stop in time. Or they might not only hit me but also push my car into another car, damaging multiple vehicles and possibly causing bodily injury to all parties involved.

Why be a watchman and warn someone? Because we don't want them or us to get hurt. We want to save them from possible harm. When we point out someone's sin, we can help take them off that path of spiritual danger and destruction. If we don't warn spiritually, it's like watching someone head down a road where you know that the bridge is out, you have a chance to warn them, but you don't because they might be upset with you for yelling and flagging your arms. They might flip you off, roll down their window and cuss you out. But if we do nothing, it's on us that we didn't warn them. It would be as if there was a law that if you didn't warn someone that a bridge was out or "On your left," that the police could come and arrest you and hold you responsible for the injuries of the other person. This is the truth that the LORD gave to Ezekiel, to us.

This is why Paul did the very uncomfortable thing that could have hurt his relationship with the Apostle Peter and other Christians at Antioch. He confronted Peter in his sin of hypocrisy, warned him of the path he was on, a path that other Christians, including Barnabas, were following him on. Paul warned to save them from spiritual danger, because it was worth it no matter their reaction.

But people have a lot of sins. If we point them out all the time, won't they get overwhelmed? I mean, why even have this confession of sins in our worship service? Doesn't that send the wrong message, set the wrong tone? Won't people feel like they're just worthless, rotten sinners? Won't they get depressed? Won't they stop coming to church, cut off their relationship with you? Won't they say, "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" (verse 10)

There is no one in this room who is without sin. And every sin is serious. Every sin drives a wedge between us and God. Every sin is so bad that it merits the death penalty from God. Ignoring this fact will not help people. Glossing over the sins we commit every single day will only cause you agony in the end, that you would feel like David in our psalm today, that your bones are wasting away, that you're groaning day and night because your sin is still there even if we don't point it out.

Here, though, if it hurts you and us to have your sin called out, we'll take that pain because we like the LORD don't want you to follow your path of sin and die in it. We follow the heart of God when it comes to warning people of their sin: "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?" (verse 11)

No one likes to be warned. I jump when someone says, "On your left" or honks their car horn at me. I don't like it when someone calls me out on my sin either. But we warn in order to turn people away from that spiritually destructive path and instead to THE path, to Jesus. It is only he who saves us from our path of sin. This is why Paul warned Peter: to bring him back to Jesus. As he wrote: "[We] know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:16)

When people recognize their sins from our warning, we give them the sweet message that their sins have been paid for by Jesus. God has taken away their guilt, has accepted them, made them pure and blameless, covered in Jesus' perfection, and is now their rock solid refuge. The LORD even treats you as if you have never sinned, never done anything wrong because of what Jesus did for us. We warn people to get them there, to Jesus, where their life is saved from spiritual danger.

So, to whom do you need to be a watchman, even if they don't want one? Who needs to be warned with a spiritual "on your left" so that they don't get hurt by their sin? We don't know how much time we have to warn them. So let's not neglect our duty from God. If you're scared, grab a Christian friend to go with you because they're called to be a watchman too. And know that Jesus is with you too, just as he promised, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20)

The good news is that when we warn people, some will heed that warning. Some will turn from their sin and be turned to Jesus, be forgiven, be saved, just like Peter was, just like Israelites in Ezekiel's day were. And so we warn people because God calls us to, because it can save them. Amen.