

Keep Watch Over Souls (Ezekiel 33:7-11)

- 1) Speak God's strong message
- 2) Seek their salvation

It's amazing how darkness can affect our thoughts or emotions. If you've gone camping, it soon becomes apparent how much we depend on light. I don't know about you, but when I'm sitting around the campfire and hear something rustle in the bushes, I get a little concerned. Not scared of course because men don't get scared. But I would like to have a flashlight to see what was making the noise. Because when you can't see what's there, you start to feel uneasy. This isn't a new idea. In times and places where artificial light wasn't common to shine the darkness away, it would be normal to have watchmen keep a lookout for the night. They would keep watch in order to protect people. And if they get wind that danger was coming, they would sound the alarm to warn everyone.

This role of a watchman is how God describes what Old Testament prophet Ezekiel was for the nation of Israel. He was their spiritual watchman to warn them of sin's danger for their souls. And as we look at Ezekiel's particular calling, we see how it is we are to keep watch over our souls today. We do so with the doctrine of the keys of God's forgiveness. There's the key to lock a person's sins to them by refusing forgiveness. And there's the key to release a person's sins to them by granting them forgiveness. Knowing when and how to use the correct key is the question. And that's what we're going to learn this morning – to keep watch over souls by speaking God's strong message and by seeking their salvation.

Ezekiel lived around the year 600 B.C. and God wasn't happy with the Israelites. They had long ago strayed from the law given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. By and large, they paid lip service to God instead of worshiping him with believing hearts. Israel was but a shadow of its previous glory. But soon they wouldn't even have that. King Nebuchadnezzar was coming with the mighty army of Babylon to destroy Jerusalem. And Ezekiel had a strong message for the Israelites. God says, **“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his**

ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.”ⁱ

Ezekiel was duty bound to keep watch over the souls of the Israelites. To the souls that needed to repent, he preached the locking key. To the souls that were already repentant, he preached the releasing key. I’m guessing Ezekiel would have preferred to only preach the releasing key – to give everyone God’s forgiveness whether they were ready for it or not. But that wouldn’t make Ezekiel a good watchman. A watchman speaks God’s strong message of death for the wicked so as to warn them. And by warning them, he excuses himself for their wicked deaths.

While Ezekiel had a special call from God, you and I have a general charge to keep watch over souls. God has entrusted the locking and releasing keys to us as evidenced with the Gospel for this morning.ⁱⁱ You and I are duty bound to warn people when they are in spiritual danger.

But when you see danger coming, do you gladly take the initiative to warn people? Or are you more likely to wait, look around, and hope that someone else will take care of it the situation?ⁱⁱⁱ Maybe you’re hesitant to speak God’s strong message of death for the wicked because it strikes your heart. Our sinful nature revels in the forbidden. There’s a rebel inside us and it feels good when we do things we know we shouldn’t. To demand repentance means no more sinful fun. Maybe you’re hesitant to speak about the locking key because of past sins. If you speak out, do you know what the people are going to say? *“Who are you to tell me what to do? You’ve done it too! So don’t you come to me with that ‘holier than thou’ attitude.”* It’s hard to speak God’s strong message to others when it speaks to us as well. The wicked will die for their sins. That includes you and me.

But God’s strong message is more than death for the wicked. It’s also salvation for the repentant. To say it in another way, God’s strong message is more than the key that locks our sins onto our soul. It’s also the key that releases our sins from our souls. When the Apostle Paul rebuked Saint Peter in our 2nd Lesson from Galatians chapter 2 he said, **“A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”**^{iv} Salvation from God comes by faith in Christ – trust in what Jesus has done for us. When you hear about Jesus’ impossibly perfect life, believe it! He kept every one of God’s laws without exception. When you read about the horrific sufferings that Jesus endured leading up to and on the cross, know that he endured them for you and me. The wicked will die for their sins. But

that won't be you and me. Christ has died for our sins in our place and given us his forgiveness. You and I are not wicked in God's sight. We are loved and called his dear children. All of our wicked sins are washed away. Remember that time you kept quiet when you should have spoken up? Gone. Remember that time you indulged your sinful wants because it felt so good? Erased. Remember that time you didn't keep watch over souls because you remembered your past sins? Removed. For you are forgiven by God Almighty through faith in Jesus Christ. Your sins have been released from your soul. Heaven is now your home.

This strong message of judgment and salvation is the message we get to share as God's spiritual watchmen. Don't shy away from speaking about the locking key to stubborn souls. The locking key is essential to the Christian life because it points us to Christ. Why did Jesus die on the cross? For your and my sins. But if we remain silent about God's judgment for wicked sins, where does that leave the cross of Christ? It becomes pointless. Jesus' death on the cross becomes unnecessary. Don't undervalue what Jesus gave up for you. Use that locking key and warn unrepentant souls what God's judgment is for wicked sins. Be ready to use the releasing key and build up repentant souls with the forgiveness Jesus freely offers those with faith.^v That is what it means to keep watch over souls – to share with them what our Lord says, harsh and nice, as we point all people to Christ in everything we do.^{vi}

And as you keep watch over your and others' souls, let your attitude be that of God's. God called Ezekiel to be Israel's spiritual watchman because he wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.^{vii} As Ezekiel chapter 33 tells us, **"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, O house of Israel?"**^{viii} Why did God send King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army to destroy Jerusalem? To show them the error of their ways so they may once again place their trust in God alone! So that they wouldn't die for their wicked sins! Why do we today warn stumbling souls of their sins? To bring them back to God in repentance. To receive his forgiveness and live in joy of what is theirs through faith in Christ.

Seek their salvation as you keep watch over souls. Encourage those who are strong in their faith to remain strong in their faith. If you already make regular time for God outside of Sunday morning, invite someone to come along with you as you

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get into God's Word. If Sunday worship is about the only time you hear what God has done for you, do yourself a favor and come to a Bible study here at Grace Lutheran. Not only will you learn something new, but you'll do some preventative work to strengthen your faith when Satan comes with his temptations. When you see someone putting their faith at risk, warn them of God's judgment for sins. Use the locking key so they may come back and be secure on the straight and narrow path to heaven. Reach out to the lost by expanding your circle of friends and acquaintances. Get to know and care for them so that when you speak God's strong message, they know it's coming from someone who is concerned for them.

But also keep watch over your own soul. It's easy to forget about the plank of wood in our eye as we chase after the speck of sawdust in our neighbor's eye.^{ix} Before we go out seeking the salvation of others, we need to bring it home so that what we're doing is genuine. Examine your life in the mirror of God's law. Consider your sins to realize your need for a Savior. Go to the cross of Christ and believe what God offers you there. The full forgiveness of all your sins. The love and attention of your almighty Father in heaven. Your Savior who wanted you to be saved so much that he gave himself in your place to receive your punishment for wicked sins. The guarantee that heaven is yours. All this is already true for you through faith in Christ. So keep watch over your soul to make sure you never lose it.

There's a lot to consider in these 5 verses from Ezekiel. The two keys that every Christian has to forgive sins or not and how we are to use them. The role we all have as spiritual watchmen of our and others' souls. How we warn people of God's judgment for wicked sins whether it's welcome or not. How we seek the salvation of all people as we keep watch over souls. But may God help us to always keep watch over souls. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Ezekiel 33:7-9. All biblical quotations are from the 1984 edition of the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 18:15-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psychologists call this the “bystander effect” and cite the murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 as one piece of evidence.

^{iv} Galatians 2:16a.

^v Ezekiel 33:10 hints at this.

^{vi} As God spells out in Ezekiel 33:8,9, a watchman is not responsible for the actions of the person who is warned. His job is to warn them of the coming danger. Whether a sinner responds in faith or not is the work of the Holy Spirit. But if the sinner remains in unbelief or persistent sin, the spiritual watchman can soothe their guilty conscience. They did their job as a watchman and warned them. They were faithful in their work as God charges all Christians to do. They aren’t responsible for the wicked person’s death.

^{vii} 1 Timothy 2:4.

^{viii} Ezekiel 33:11.

^{ix} Jesus uses this metaphor in Matthew 7:3-5 and Luke 6:41,42.