

“The Best Defense”

Text: Matthew 18:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Fellow Ambassadors for that same Savior Jesus:

I'm sure most of you are familiar enough with the expression that you could finish this sentence without much thought: "*The best defense is _____.*" The answer, as the saying goes, is "*a good offense.*" I first heard the expression from a football coach – where it makes perfect sense. It's hard for the other team to score if you have the ball. Again, it makes perfect sense in that context. Yet as soon as you shift the expression into the spiritual realm, and change the accent of both the words "*defense*" and "*offense*" to the last syllable, the saying becomes utter nonsense. The best spiritual defense is anything but a good offense.

There are limits on our "freedoms" that Christians recognize, but which the godless do not. While our society is increasingly obsessed with politically correct words and actions, they universally ignore the potential their words and actions carry for spiritual offense. To put it another way, it is a grave sin in our society today to hurt someone's feelings, but it is perfectly acceptable to damage or even destroy someone's eternal soul by our words and actions. Is this dramatic shift in our society's emphasis having an effect on Christians? We address this whole topic on the basis of our text for this morning, found in Matthew's Gospel, the 18th Chapter:

ESV Matthew 18:1-10 *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them 3 and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 ¶ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. 7 ¶ "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! 8 And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two*

hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. 10 ¶ "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

This is God's Word, given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit for our growth, instruction, and edification. That these great gifts might also be our personal possession through the study of these holy words, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

Have you ever had someone unknown to you simply walk into your home uninvited and unannounced? We have, more than once actually, but most probably haven't. Most Americans realize that they are not entitled to simply walk into someone else's home, and therefore not entitled to simply go wherever they want.

What we get from this is that the citizens of our country mostly still have at least a minimal understanding as to the limits of their entitlement. But even that tiny scrap evaporates when it comes to God himself. There, for whatever reason, our society has come to image that they deserve virtually everything, always, and in every situation. No matter that they reject God's Son as their Savior, they still image that God must hear and answer (to their satisfaction) every one of their prayers. Though they have sinned – and are unashamedly unrepentant – they imagine that God owes them forgiveness. Though they freely admit that they have in no way earned it, they still image that God owes them heaven.

Yet all of these things, and countless others, are not entitlements that God grants to the general public. They are special privileges that he promises only to his children – to you who believe that Jesus Christ paid your sin debt. You are entitled to such things because God has promised them to you. The godless have no such promise.

Jesus' own disciples were not immune from the entitlement mentality, were they? They began (badly) in our text for this morning by asking Jesus to settle an argument about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. We would like to be able to put a good spin on this, but this is obviously something that the disciples thought about a lot and argued about on more than one occasion. They wanted to serve Jesus, but there always seemed to be an

element of "What's in it for me?" That misguided mentality was eventually purged from their hearts by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but it plagued even Jesus' closest followers throughout the time of their earthly walk with him.

Yet just here, before we go one step further, stop and ask yourself just how you feel about that. Not how you feel about wanting to be called great in heaven – we'll get to that – but how you feel about condemning this unseemly attitude or character flaw in Jesus' disciples. We could pretty much condemn others all day long and it wouldn't really bother us in the least, would it? Why is that?

The obvious answer is that it is easy and non-threatening to point out problems in others. In fact it would be hard to imagine a better way to make the Christian faith more superficial and less relevant than to spend our time pointing out the flaws and failures in others. Even if we were to go a step further and conclude our general condemnation of others with a good strong proclamation of how Jesus died for their sins and therefore earned forgiveness for them, we would still remain insulated and detached from the whole exercise. Examining even the truth will turn that truth into mere trivia unless and until that truth is applied personally.

The problem, of course, is that that sort of thing *absolutely does* insulate and detach us. Examining and condemning faults in others doesn't tend to help us, guide us, encourage or strengthen us. In fact it's exactly that sort of thing that turns Christians into good little Pharisees – those who strain gnats and swallow camels, or who pick at specks in the eyes of others while ignoring the massive plank that is all theirs. A good Pharisee comes to imagine that condemning sin in others is actually one of the most important good works that he does to earn his way into heaven – which is an extremely seductive lie.

You and I have way too many obvious failures in our own lives to spend our time and energy on others. So also in our text for this morning we err greatly if we read these words and think of others. These words were not preserved down through the ages just so that the living could condemn the behavior of the dead. They were preserved as warnings for you and me. More specifically, this sentence we are about to read again was not carried across the centuries for Peter, James, and John but for you and me. "**Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth**

of the sea. ⁷ ¶ "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!"

Did you think about yourself or someone else when you heard or read these words? Did they perhaps bring to mind some other parent that, in your humble opinion, is failing in particularly spectacular fashion in raising his or her children as they ought, or did you consider your own failures?

Like any good, properly applied spanking, the law has to sting intensely to do any good, and it has to sting *me, not someone else*. You and I have to feel the pain, or we won't be interested in our Savior. The problem here is actually two-fold. Not only can we get pretty good at insulating ourselves by applying the law always and only to others, every time we do so we diminish our Savior – we make him more and more unnecessary. That's when we start to get bored with, and detached from, the Christian faith. Worse still, the problem has a cumulative effect. It builds up over time. Every time I apply God's Word only to someone else, I become a little more self-righteous and a little more detached from and disinterested in *my* Savior Jesus.

Remind yourself therefore, every time you read God's Word, that God is there speaking not to others; he is talking to me, to you – young, old, married, single, parent, or grandparent. You. This morning, for example, our text is not just talking about being a bad parent. It's talking about giving offense – the sin our society has all but forgotten. To "give offense" is to cause someone else's faith to be damaged or destroyed by my words and actions.

God's Word identifies two different considerations that each of us is supposed to apply to everything that we say and do. The first is whether or not God has either forbidden or commanded that particular action. The second consideration – the one on which we focus this morning and which is routinely ignored today – is the effect my actions will have on my neighbor, including also my family members. The first looks inward and asks "What about me?" The second looks outward and asks "What about everyone else?" An action that is not in itself wrong can still result in great harm to those around me. Examples abound. Here's just one: "Am I sinning every time I skip church or refuse the benefits of Bible Class?" A better question would probably be, "What lesson am I teaching my fellow Christians – including my own children – every time I do?"

But is that it? Is all of this just an exercise or function of the law? Is that what Christianity is all about – always doing the right thing? Did Jesus tell us these things simply to correct our behavior? It goes deeper than that. He is telling us these things because he loves us, and he wants us to be with him for all eternity. It really cannot be repeated often enough: *Jesus didn't come to earth just to correct our conduct. He came because he wanted to spare us the eternal torments of hell and to have us instead join him in heaven. He came not to condemn or demand but to provide and save.* Our Lord is not here threatening *us*; he is addressing that which carries the potential to *destroy us* – and others.

This was Jesus' aim and goal every moment of his time on earth. It is why he came to earth – not to condemn and correct our behavior but to pay the debt that we could not. All of you are undoubtedly well familiar with John 3:16, yet the verse that follows is just as beautiful, just as comforting: ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*** This is obviously great news, but listen also to how Jesus further clarifies his mission as he goes on: ***"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*** (John 3:16-17)

Jesus came to pay our sin-debt. He came to remove the barrier that was preventing us from entering heaven – our sin. This he did. You and I stand holy and forgiven in his sight. What now concerns our God is *not* whether or not our sins have been paid for. They have. What concerns him now are those things that destroy the saving faith that he has created within us, and by which we are saved. That is also therefore (obviously) *our* concern. So it is that we struggle to control our words and actions *not* because we need to make up for our sins. That debt has already been paid. The primary concern now is that sin deteriorates and will eventually destroy the faith in Jesus Christ alone that now saves us. Our words and actions will always have an effect on others. They build up and strengthen, or they tear down and weaken.

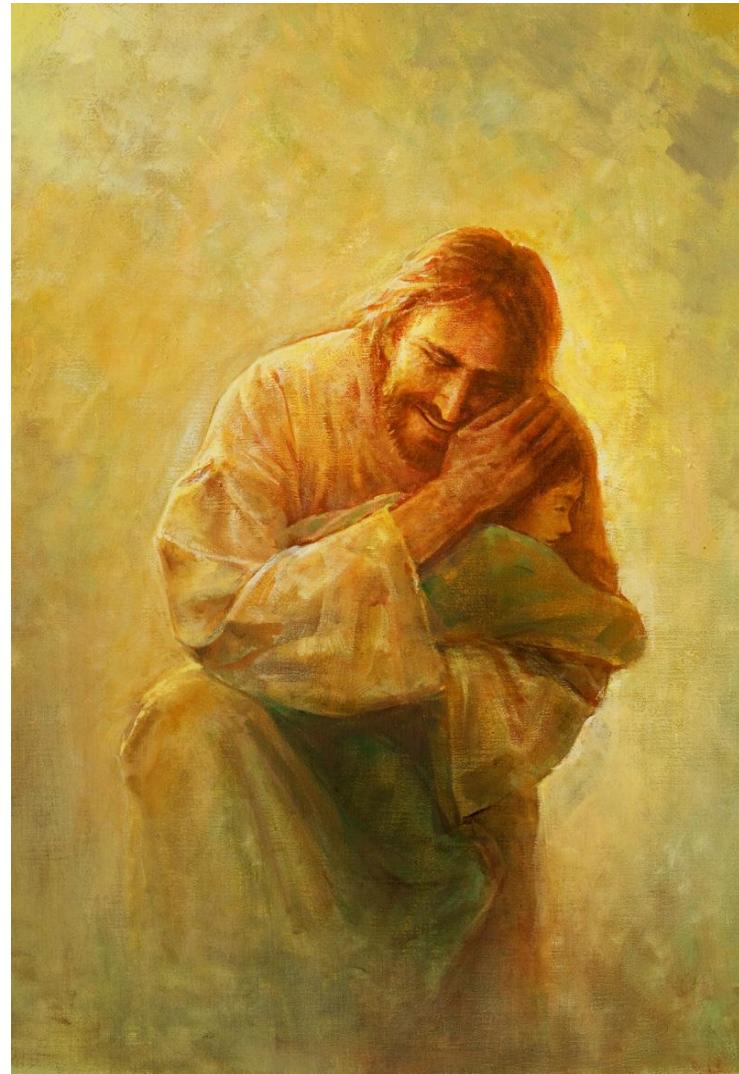
Our Savior reminds us this morning that we never act and speak in a vacuum. Everything that we do and say has a profound effect on those around us. God grant us not only the wisdom to recognize this fact, but a love for the eternal wellbeing of all of those around us. This is just another of the innumerable gifts he offers us freely in his Word, our Bibles – the absolute best defense imaginable. Be wise enough to avail yourselves of God's countless blessings by visiting his Word at every opportunity. There God himself has provided for our *best* defense –

against sin and Satan and all the forces of evil that seek to destroy us. Amen.

ESV Daniel 10:10-14 And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. ¹¹ And he said to me, "O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. ¹² Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. ¹³ The prince of the kingdom of Persia withheld me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, ¹⁴ and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come."

ESV Revelation 12:7-12 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world--he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. ¹⁰ And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ¹² Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

ESV Matthew 18:1-10 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ ¶ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ ¶ "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! ⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. ¹⁰ ¶ "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.



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The 15th Sunday after Pentecost – September 18, 2022

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 5 (*Red Hymnal*)

"Lord, Open Thou My Heart to Hear"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (*Brown Hymnal*)

The Scripture Lessons: (*Printed on the back page of this bulletin*)

The First Lesson: (Daniel 10:10-14) As with all things unseen, the subject of angels has long fascinated God's people. As is always true of that which we cannot see with our eyes, our understanding of angels is limited. Our first Scripture reading refers to the Archangel Michael. As with many things taught in the Bible, our full understanding of such things will be limited until all is clarified in heaven. For now, it is enough to know that God's good angels truly exist, and that they labor for the benefit of God's children.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 51 (Page 31) (*Brown Hymnal*)

The Second Lesson: (Revelation 12:7-12) In our New Testament Lesson we again find reference to Michael, who with "his angels" fought against and defeated Satan and those that followed him in his rebellion against God. The good news is that Satan was defeated. The bad news is that he and his evil angels were "thrown down to the earth," where they now seek to destroy God's children. While we may have many questions about why God did what he did, for now we content ourselves with those facts that we do know and with thanking our God for the gift of his holy angels.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (*Brown Hymnal page 15*)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 375 (*Stanzas 1-3*) (*Red Hymnal*)

"If Thy Beloved Son, O God"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 18:1-10 (*Printed on the back page of this bulletin*)

"The Best Defense"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-sermon Hymn – 375 (*Stanzas 4-5*) (*Red Hymnal*)

"If Thy Beloved Son, O God"

Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 23 (*Stanzas 1 & 4*) (*Red Hymnal*)

"Hallelujah! Let Praises Ring"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, join us for refreshments after the service, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (27) Average (33)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Mon-Wed	-9:00 a.m.	– CLC Board Meetings in Eau Claire
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
	-3:00 p.m.	– Meyer-Loeb Wedding

CLC News – Pastor Nathanael Mayhew is considering the call to Immanuel of Winter Haven. Pastor Rob Sauers is considering the call to Redemption of Lynnwood. Ascension of Tacoma has called Pastor James Naumann.

Church Council Meeting – Members of the Church Council in attendance this morning are asked to meet briefly during the fellowship hour.

CLC Board Meetings – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend the annual CLC Fall Board meetings in Eau Claire this week, leaving this afternoon and returning, God willing, late Wednesday evening.

Meyer-Loeb Wedding – Grace Meyer and Preston Loeb are scheduled to be married at St Paul next Sunday in an afternoon wedding. We pray the Lord would bless their special day and their lives together under Christ as husband and wife.

Application for Membership – It is a pleasure to announce that, having completed a course of instruction, Preston Loeb has applied for communicant membership at St Paul. In keeping with our constitution, application is hereby announced to the congregation.