

## The Lessons of Lent – Ignored Warnings

The goal of our Midweek Lenten services involves studying the mistakes we identify during our reading of our Lord's Passion and learning from them. Again, the intention of any and every warning in God's Word is not that we make mistakes to learn from them, but to learn to avoid them altogether. This evening we seek to learn the lesson of *Ignored Warnings*.

We find our fourth lesson in the 27<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew's Gospel:

**ESV (Matthew 27:19) *While he (Pilate) was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."***

This is God's Word. We ask God the Holy Spirit to open our minds to understand and our hearts to believe all that he here desires to teach us as we pray, ***"Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"*** Amen.

While it may not be every man's worst nightmare, it may be in the top ten or so for some: You notice the oil light on in your wife's or your teenager's car, ask them about it, and hear: *"Oh yeah, that. I've been forgetting to ask you about that. It's been on for a while now."* General rule of thumb: If the dash light is yellow, tell dad when you get home. If it's red, stop as soon as you can and call. Yellow means caution; red means stop.

Warnings are there for a reason. Warnings, by definition, aren't really designed to tell you that something bad *has* happened. They're designed to tell you that something bad *is going to* happen unless you take steps to correct the problem. It's no longer a warning if the bad thing has already happened. Then it's just information. You don't need a warning light to tell you that your engine just seized up because it had no oil. You'll figure that out all on your own. You need a warning to prevent that.

Our modern existence is filled with more warnings than at any other time in history – which is actually part of the problem we are examining this evening. In addition to all the dash lights in the vehicles we drive, your vehicle warns you if your seat belt isn't buckled, your door, trunk, or hood are open, you're about to lock your keys in the car, there is a vehicle in your blind spot, you are drifting into another lane. Some even now warn you if you have left something in the back seat and can detect if you are getting drowsy and warn you to pull over and rest. And that's just our cars. We also have sensors to warn us if your house is on fire, if someone is at the door, there is an intruder in your house, someone made an unauthorized purchase on your credit card, your freezer or garage door was left open, someone pulled into your driveway, Grandma fell again, a deer walked by your trail camera, you've received an email, someone just accessed your bank account, the road curves up ahead... You get the picture. The list of warnings in our world is virtually endless. Our modern world is filled with so many warnings it has become increasingly difficult to pay attention to all of them. The result is that, consciously or unconsciously, we adapt by prioritizing. Some of that prioritization is both obvious and harmless. You might not drop everything when your phone app notifies you that a deer just walked past your trail camera (*might* not), but you probably would if your smoke detector or burglar alarm goes off.

As all of this applies to our study this evening, consciously or unconsciously we are in constant danger of mentally filing away God's warnings with those that can safely be ignored, at least for a time. No immanent threat. Yellow lights, not red.

The problem, of course, is that God never issues warnings that mankind can safely ignore. Unlike man, God doesn't deal in trivialities. Nowhere in God's Word are we therefore warned to never draw to an inside straight, to use caution when drinking hot liquids, or to brush twice a day to avoid tooth decay. Solid warnings, but God deals with infinitely weightier matters.

In fact it's striking, when you look through the pages of your Bible, how often God's warnings preceded utter calamity for those being warned. God warned Cain. Cain ignored the warning. You know the result. God warned all of humanity in Noah's day. All but Noah's family ignored. You know the result. God warned Pharaoh ten times. Ten times he ignored. You know the result. So also God repeatedly warned the Children of Israel, before they even entered the Promised Land and after they occupied it. God warned King Saul, all the wicked kings that followed, Balaam (from the mouth of a donkey), Peter, Judas, etc.

Ignoring God's warnings brought calamity, but not all warnings were ignored. When they were not, good always followed. Ninevah was warned and repented. Paul, when he was still Saul, was warned to stop persecuting God's own Church, and he became God's great missionary. The subsequent Epistles of Paul are filled with warnings to the various congregations in Asia Minor – warnings that they evidently took to heart.

Which brings us finally to our text, which may well serve as the single most consequential ignored warning in all of human history. Pontius Pilate's wife delivered to him a timely, specific, well-reasoned warning: **"Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."** The warning was *timely* because it was delivered to Pilate when he still had a chance to make the right decision. It was *specific* in that it told him exactly what to do: **"Have nothing to do with that man."** It was *well-reasoned* in that it told him exactly *why* he should have nothing to do with that man – he was, after all, **righteous**.

Some might argue that since Jesus came to earth to die for the sins of mankind, therefore those involved in his crucifixion were "bound by fate" to do what they did. In other words, Judas and Pilate had no choice but to betray and convict. That idea is based, however, on the illogical and unfounded assumption that since Jesus had to die, he therefore had to die exactly the way he did. Since it had long been prophesied that Jesus would die by crucifixion, that death was absolutely going to happen. The fallacy was that his crucifixion therefore had to come about exactly as it did. It did not. The Jews would have found another way to arrest Jesus without the betrayal of Judas. Pilate did not have to be the one who sentenced Jesus. Had he, for example, released him, the lawless Jews could have either crucified him themselves or they could have hauled Jesus to Herod, the other official in Jerusalem at the time who also had the power to crucify. It is, in other words, not only foolish but blasphemous to imagine that God ever issues warnings that man is incapable of heeding.

Here, in light of the magnitude of the calamitous, unparalleled evil that Pilate was contemplating, Pilate was given one last warning. It is hard, in fact, to imagine any greater or more effective warning that he could have been given. It wasn't an ambiguous *"be careful how you proceed."* It didn't come from what he might have considered to be an unreliable or duplicitous source – it came from his own wife. It even offered justification that Pilate himself knew to be true and valid – *the man is righteous*. Pilate ignored the warning and will therefore forever be known as the man who sentenced the Son of God to death by crucifixion.

That's what happened. It's history. The question is, *"What does it mean for us, over 2000 years later? What is the lesson we are supposed to learn from all of this?"*

The first and most serious warning for us still today is Jesus himself, his entry into our world. The fact that Jesus left heaven to be born in human flesh serves as a constant warning

concerning the seriousness of sin. Not just the world's sin, *our* sin. It may be easy to miss this implicit warning at Christmas time. It ought to be obvious to us during Lent. Jesus didn't save us by entering into our world. He saved us by offering his innocent life as payment for the debt we owed because of our sins. Seeing the very Son of God nailed to a Roman cross serves as an unmistakable warning of both the danger and consequences of sin. Our society, perhaps more than any other in mankind's sordid history, trivializes sin. It has become a nothing in their eyes. They promote sin. They actually glory in its shame. They try everything in their power to draw others into what God has condemned. The only "sin" the world around us now acknowledges is the "sin" of feeling bad about anything that you do.

The cross itself represents God's warning as to just how serious sin truly is. The satisfactory payment required the death of God's own Son. How could any honest person ever come to any other conclusion? The hymn writer put it perfectly:

*"Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great,  
Here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.  
Mark the sacrifice appointed! See who bears the awful load:  
'Tis the WORD, the LORD'S ANOINTED, Son of Man and Son of God."*

So it is that, especially during the Season of Lent, God's Children recognize the inherent warning in the crucified Jesus, struggle to heed the warning by identifying sin in our lives, and then engage in a never-ending struggle to driving that sin from our lives.

Obviously that is not God's only warning that we ignore to our peril. He has warned us to be humble, which only makes sense in that recognizing sin requires abject humility. It is pride, humility's opposite, that seduces us into believing that we get to decide what is right and what is wrong. It is pride that tells us that we are the little gods that get to determine good and bad, just and unjust, light and darkness. It is only the humble heart that cries out, "**Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.**"

The list of God's warnings is indeed long. He warns us against greed, love of the things of this world, lust, coveting, making friends with the immoral, tolerating error, distancing ourselves from his Word. All have one thing in common: they are all demonstrations of God's perfect love for his children. If he didn't love us, he wouldn't care. If he didn't care, he wouldn't warn. The fact that he does warn us, the children that he loves, means that the danger is real and that we ignore him to our own eternal peril.

In a world filled to capacity with warnings of almost every imaginable sort, God grant that we never ignore the warnings that come from him – in whatever form he sends them. It can come in a secular book that inadvertently communicates a Biblical truth. God's own warning can come from a little child who asks his busy dad, "*Why don't you play with me anymore?*" From a friend who asks why you've changed. From a husband or wife who asks if you even care that your marriage is in trouble. From a complete stranger that notices no difference in how the two of you speak and act. All can have their origin in God. Don't dismiss the warning because of the source. Focus instead on the message. The important thing is not how the warning gets to us but whether or not we will actually listen. Amen.