

Matthew 10:28-31

The mother of an eight-year old girl was terminally ill. But her daughter was not aware of how serious her sickness was. One day she overheard the doctor telling her mother, “Before the last leaves fall from the trees, you will die.” The next morning her father couldn’t find his daughter anywhere in the house. Looking out the window, he saw her gathering all the leaves that had fallen. She was using thread to hang the leaves back on the trees.

But we can no more prevent death from coming than we can stop the leaves from falling. As our Epistle for today tells us, “Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and since all have sinned, all die.” (Romans 5) A job that is even more secure than the tax man is the mortician. There are not all that many guarantees in our world, but this one is certain: With life comes death. The sin of Adam spread to all men, and with sin came death to all. When you thank Dad today for being a wonderful father, don’t forget to thank him also for passing on to you both sin and death.

But Jesus’ words are clear, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Perhaps you know how courageous Martin Luther was in proclaiming the truth of Christ even when confronted with death. When asked about it, he described a nightmare which gave him motivation to stand strong before his enemies: It was Judgment Day, and God demanded of Luther, “Why were you more afraid of them, than Me!”

I think, for us, Luther’s nightmare is quite often “day-to-day real life.” Our fears are out of place. We fear what others may think of us, and so we become poor witnesses to our faith—we’re afraid to speak, even to our straying family members, about Jesus. We fear economic hardship and so we do what the boss says, even though it may be wrong; even though it may compromise what we believe as Christians. We’re afraid of growing old; afraid of being alone; afraid of being hooked up to a life-support machine. But while we wrestle and struggle with these and other fears in life, the fear of God is often nowhere to be seen.

I was chatting with a member just last week who claimed to be a strong Christian. And yet, in looking at her life, it’s hard to tell a difference between her and the common, everyday non-Christian. How often isn’t this true for all of us. I’m amazed at how often at funeral services, when confronted with the harsh reality of death and the grave, how many sit in the pew stone-faced—and as we sing comforting hymns which speak of the resurrection, they don’t even crack open their hymnal.

What has happened to our fear of God? Can we not truthfully say that we are often more afraid of those who can kill the body than of Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell? When we say the words, “I, a poor, miserable sinner,” have we become so calloused to our own sin that we think nothing of it?

Where is our fear of God? Not fear, as in Adam and Eve hiding from God in the Garden, but fear as in the Prodigal Son returning home, full of sin, but returning to a forgiving father. Not fear, as in the jailer at Philippi, who in despair was about to end his life with a

sword, but fear as in the publican in the temple who prayed in sorrow: God, be merciful to me, the sinner.

Fear can be a healthy thing. It will drive us to the doctor when we have pain in our chest. And it will drive us to our knees before God so that He can give us the cure for what is killing our soul. Godly fear in us is His work, not ours. He allows our conscience to terrify us on account of our sins, so that He may reveal to us His love and care, His forgiveness and salvation in the Word of Christ.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny,” Jesus says, “And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Even the death of a sparrow is known to God. And this God, who loves you, counts you at a much higher value than many sparrows. Not a billion pennies, but the blood of His own Son is what your value is to your God. Jesus had no fear of those who could kill His body. He allowed them to inflict upon Him every torment known to man. He had no fear of death and the grave. He bowed His head and died of His own free will. And because of His death, we do not fear those who kill the body. We do not fear the grave. Our Savior has sanctified the graves of His saints.

The professor at a Lutheran seminary tells of how his father worked in the coal mines of Pennsylvania many years ago. He was the safety inspector. He would check the mines for methane gas. Early each morning his father would go down alone into the mine carrying a safety light into each tunnel. If the light began to flicker he would run as fast as he could, for it meant that methane gas was present. When he came back up out of the mine, the workers knew that it was safe to go in.

Christ came up out of the grave, and so it is safe for us to enter. It may be true that with life comes death, but with Christ's death comes life for us. He who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell, went Himself into that dark prison, and He destroyed the power of hell over us. He made the grave a place of safety, for it is where our body awaits the resurrection in Christ.

Death cannot separate you from He who even knows the number of hairs on your head. He will not allow the grave to keep you. He will not allow hell to destroy your soul and body. For He values you at the highest price. Jesus died for you. You are forgiven of your many sins. We can bury our loved ones, who die trusting in Jesus, with joy and confidence as we await with them the resurrection and a happy reunion in heaven. We can approach our own death with a heart full of comfort and peace, for God will not let us fall as a dying sparrow into hell. For Jesus' sake He will receive us into His hands and carry us to our home with Christ.

Adam may have brought sin and death into our world, but Jesus brings forgiveness and life. And He is the One in whom we place all our trust and hope. Amen.