

Sermon 1612

Matthew 16.13-20

September 10, 2017

“There’s one more angel in heaven, one more star in the sky.”

Genetic studies have shown the Bible is false—inhabitants of Beirut come from Canaanite lineage whom God told the Israelites to exterminate!

“Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

False interpretations of the Bible shouldn’t drive me crazy, but they do. I don’t like it when people talk smack about my loved ones. And I love Jesus.

And I don’t like it when Christians stop in their tracks. If the devil can’t kill us or persecute us, then he will try to get us to sit on our hands. The misinterpretation of this passage is one of the tools the devil loves using.

You’ve seen the picture. A little church on a wind-swept island with the waves crashing against it. How, oh how in the world will this little flock survive? Just hold on! Just. Hold. On. Makes you feel good just to keep your own faith in such a vicious world, doesn’t it?

Rubbish. Look at the Word of God we hold in our hand. Look at the faith in our heart and the confession on our lips.

It’s a Battering Ram, Not a Shield.

1. Forgiveness is given by Heaven (13-17).
2. Forgiveness is stronger than Hell (18-20).

One day Jesus asked a seemingly innocent question. “Who do people say I am?” He got varied responses from his disciples. They had heard a lot of people thinking he was John the Baptist (recently murdered by wicked King Herod Antipas) come back to life again. Others thought he was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other great Old Testament prophets come back to life again. “Hmm,” Jesus said. “But what do you say?”

Peter was Johnny-on-the-spot to speak for all the disciples, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (16).”

Right he was. Jesus wasn’t just another prophet, a holy man sent by God. He was the Promised Savior, the Son of God himself. God and Man, our Jesus the Messiah.

Now Jesus takes the disciples’ answer and lights a flame under them. This has not been an idle question. Jesus wanted them to see the weapon he was giving them, what it was, what it would do. It was a battering ram, not a shield. It was forgiveness given from heaven.

“I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (18).”

The confession of the Church, the confession Peter made, that’s the rock. That’s the foundation of the Church. You can have just a wonderful group of people meeting weekly who spur each other on in love and good deeds in the eyes of man,

but if they do not confess that Jesus is the Son of God, equal in every way to the Father and the Holy Spirit, they are not part of the holy, Christian Church.

But did you catch all of what Jesus said? Peter was blessed in his knowledge and faith in this confession because it was revealed to him by his Father in heaven. The confession of Jesus the Christ is revealed, not discovered.

There's a big difference. Every discovery of man carries some bad side effects. Some of us might celebrate Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492. Not the American Indians. Gerny Columbus and his crew unleashed an epidemic of smallpox and God knows what else upon the native populations so that the New World was more than half depopulated before the first wars were ever fought between the Indians and the undocumented European immigrants. Did you love the legislation of a previous administration, "Three strikes and you're out?" with mandatory jail sentences for three time offenders? Well, it gets kind of costly to build and staff all those prisons for the largest jail population in the world. Legalized marijuana will do the trick? Just wait and see.

Every discovery of man is imperfect, temporary and sooner or later causes a lot of headaches. Our wisdom is not wise enough. Our good is not good enough. And that's just trying to make this world a livable place. How can we hope to discover the way to eternal life in heaven? "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, what God has prepared for those who love him. But he has revealed it to us by the Spirit," the Apostle Paul wrote. True knowledge of God, true wisdom that directs us to eternal life, comes from God the Father. Our faith is very much a top-down thing. God reveals. We receive.

Since we've received this battering ram from heaven, it is going to work. But what is the impact of that confession? Again, it's not just idle knowledge. God is a pragmatist, not a theoretical physicist. He gives knowledge for a reason. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (19)." The confession of Jesus as the Christ, the son of the living God, is so important because in that confession we have forgiveness, a forgiveness for ourselves and a forgiveness to proclaim.

Forgiveness is a battering ram, not a shield. Forgiveness is stronger than hell.

"I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (18)."

That forgiveness is stronger than hell itself. Hell will not stand against that forgiveness.

Now what is the picture here? Is hell coming to fight against us, the Christian Church? Look closely. "The gates of hell will not overcome it." For the second week in a row, a lousy translation. The good old King James said "the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Hurricanes are very much on our mind right now.

Remember to add the people of Florida to your prayers and don't you dare forget about those who are suffering from Hurricane Harvey in Texas. But think of some of those pictures we have seen. A little house standing up against hurricane force winds and then, whoosh! The roof flies off or one wall sags and the house collapses. That's the picture. But the poor little house doesn't represent the Christian Church being torn apart by the forces of hell. The poor little house doomed to destruction is hell being buffeted and broken down by the confession of the holy, Christian Church, the confession that there is forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God. Every time another soul comes to faith in Jesus Christ, hell loses another citizen. Every time another baby is baptized, another cubic yard of hell's shoreline is lost to the storm surge.

Jesus wants us to take it to the devil. Gates don't attack anyone. Remember that funny email which listed all these crazy reasons for car accidents? One was, "I was driving along and then this tree came up in front of me and hit me." Trees don't move to attack anyone. Gates don't move to attack anyone. The battle is taken to the gates. Think of those epic battles we have seen on TV and in the movies, with hordes of attackers at the city gates all in unison banging on the wooden gates with their battering ram. Arrows are flying, scaling ladders are in place against the walls of the besieged city, but the attack will succeed or fail depending on whether the attackers can burst through the city gate.

And then the wood splinters. A hole appears. It becomes larger. The hinges start to go. One side sags. Then the other side dangles. Finally both doors fall backwards as the advancing army pours into the city to take and plunder it. And those formerly mighty gates have become a gnarled welcome mat for the attackers.

That's the confession of the holy, Christian church. Forgiveness of sins is the battering ram. Hell can't stand up against it.

But it seems like such a wimpy weapon—forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness of sins is the difference between life and death. Judas, the disciple who betrayed our Lord for thirty pieces of silver didn't have that forgiveness and couldn't live with his guilt. He hung himself and went to hell. The Peter of our text, the disciple who denied Jesus while Jesus was on trial, believed in that forgiveness and became the leader of the early Christian Church after Jesus ascended into heaven.

Forgiveness of sins is the difference between a life of fear and a life of love. When the brothers of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob in the Old Testament, discovered that the powerful Egyptian official they had been dealing with was actually their brother whom they had sold into slavery and faked his death to keep their aged father from finding out about it, when they discovered this man was Joseph, they thought their lives were over. He would kill them for sure. But he forgave them, broke down in tears and comforted each one of them. All was

forgiven and forgotten in daddy Jacob's haste to move the family to Egypt to see Joseph.

Forgiveness of sins is the difference between a life of joy and a life of bitterness. Look at the devil in the opening verses of the book of Job. Even though he is in heaven, he is bitter and challenges God. Filthy rich Job only loves you so much because you are so good to him. The devil found out that was not true. Though Job's faith would be shaken its core, he knew that his Redeemer lived and that in the end he would stand upon the earth. And because of that, Job would rise from death and live in heaven. The embittered devil knows no such hope. The embittered devil knows no such forgiveness.

Now look at someone who was filthy poor, the Virgin Mary. The angel Gabriel tells her her hard life is going to get a lot harder because she will be the mother of the Savior. Her reaction? "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior." There's a girl who knew forgiveness.

Hell has nothing that can stand up to God's forgiveness and the comfort and healing it brings. Pretending the offense doesn't exist so the grudge festers over the years? Yeah, that's the way to a happy life! Take matters into your own hands and get revenge? That will make the neighbors happy! Do so much better next time it will make up for what you've already done? Isn't it be hard to see yourself in the mirror through all that self-deception? Just move away from those people you've hurt? You do realize, don't you, that solitary confinement is the harshest penalty that can be handed out to a human being?

Listen to our Lord. Jesus says hell has nothing to stand up to God's forgiveness. "The gates of hell will not prevail against it."

OK, now we see what we've been given. We know there's a spiritual war going on out there. That's what the sinful world is trying to intimidate and threaten us with so we stay bottled up. But what does a military man at war do with an unsurpassed weapon? He uses it at the earliest possible moment. He uses it and keeps using it to bring the enemy to its knees and gain victory as soon as possible.

So use it. This church isn't a sanctuary. It's a staging area to send each of us out into the world with the battering ram of God's forgiveness. Focused on this forgiveness, we aren't going to be picked off by the world; we are going to infect the world. Spread that message of God's forgiveness to us through faith in Jesus Christ. Nobody else will do it. Your charter schools won't do it. Your elected officials won't do it. Your business community won't do it. You and I, the holy, Christian Church, is the only one that has been given that job. "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, teaching them."

Spread that message of God's forgiveness to all through faith in Jesus Christ. Nobody else even knows it exists. All that can happen is that people will use pat objections to false impressions of what you are saying to them. Forgiveness isn't

for sale. Sorry, you can't use the money-grubbing angle. Forgiveness isn't personal, it's interpersonal starting with God's actions towards you. Sorry, you can't use the "I have my own beliefs about this" angle. God's beliefs are what matters. Forgiveness is color blind and shows no regard for anybody's social standing. Sorry, you can't use the "I want to associate with a better bunch of people," line. Yes, it is noble bunch at the nightclubs, especially when they pour out onto the streets at 4 am accompanied by gun shots and fatal car accidents. And what can be more charming than seeing that special someone in his morning underwear, scratching his belly as he watches the early NFL game at home at ten o'clock?

It's time. It's time to take it to the devil. It's time to hit the world hard. It's time to stare down that sinful human nature we all carry which would want us to wait for the world to change. It's time. God has just the thing for us.

It's a Battering Ram, Not a Shield.

1. Forgiveness is given by Heaven (13-17).
2. Forgiveness is stronger than Hell (18-20).

We just can't stand our Lord's saving name to be blasphemed any longer and the only way to shut them up is to convert them.