

THE OVERWHELMING WEIGHT OF GOD, PART 10: ZEAL

Matthew 18:7-20 (NASB)

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John Metz went down his basement to clean the heat exchanger on his furnace and ended up in a life and death ordeal. He got his arm deep into the metal fins of the exchanger and was scraping off the accumulated debris when he realized that he could not extract his arm. In a moment of panic, he yanked his arm hard, hoping to pull it free with minor injuries, but instead sharp metal parts of the furnace embedded themselves in his flesh like giant fish hooks. Moving from panic to terror, he yanked and yanked again, each time digging the sharp metal tangs deeper into his arm.

He thought this would be a quick job and had gone downstairs in gym shorts without his cell phone. He began to cry out for help, but no one heard him. His fiancé was far away in another state. Hour after hour passed with no response to his desperate cries. Then a day passed. As the second day passed he recognized the terrible smell of decaying flesh—his arm was dying. And so he began to scream a new appeal: I'm dying down here! But no one heard him.

And then the awareness of his peril began to grow. No one would be coming. When the arm died and turned gangrenous, it would kill him. And so, in the face of this unavoidable logic, he began to think an unthinkable thought: *I have to cut off my arm.* He contemplated this option for some six hours. Apparently, he had cutting tools within reach in his basement workshop. And then, on the third day, as the smell of death was all around him, he did the thing no one can do. He removed his arm without access to any pain killers, and set himself free.

ZEAL BORN OF PERIL

How much zeal do you think you could generate for saving your own life, to the point that you would endure the excruciating pain of amputating your own arm? As a pastor, I often wonder how to increase my own zeal for the Lord, and that of my church. Have you ever asked yourself: *Why do I seem to be so apathetic about things which I know are vitally important?*

The Lord Jesus presents us with a simple paradigm for the birth of zeal in our hearts. If we might become zealous enough to amputate a limb to preserve our lives, what might we be willing to do to save ourselves and others from a fate far worse than death? Matthew 18:7-9 records the following saying of Jesus: **"Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell."**

The key term "**stumbling block**" is also translated "offenses," "things which cause people to sin," and "temptations to sin." Unless we understand the true meaning of this key term we will misunderstand the entire passage. This is not a mere interpersonal insult, or a fleeting temptation. This

is the sort of stumbling stone you might encounter on the rim of an active volcano where you trip over it and fall into the lava flow. Commentator R. C. H. Lenski argues that this word (*skandalizo*, Gk.) should be translated "death trap."

And it is not merely physical death which is in view, but the judgment of God which is the end result of spiritual death. Please observe the unfashionable terms Jesus Christ himself uses to describe the peril of this kind of temptation: "**eternal fire,**" "**fiery hell,**" or we might combine the terms and just say "eternal fiery hell." Let me ask you a piercing question: Can the God who designed atoms and the forces which hold them together, who raised the mountains and filled the oceans, who spun the stars out into the sky and calls them all by name, who made human beings—can he say what he wants to say? If you think he cannot, then you have a defective concept of a God who cannot save you either.

What God says is at stake in the matter of sin and temptation is unending excruciating suffering in a place which is metaphorically called *gehenna* in the Greek. The *gehenna* was the trash pile outside every city where fresh garbage mixed with the ashes from fires which never ceased to burn. We translate this word as "hell." And in spite of a fresh book by a cool, emergent leader which says that the love of God will cause God to retrieve every last person from this place, hell is unending excruciating suffering. Who gets to explain the peril of sin and temptation which faces every person: cool emergent church leaders or the God who made those leaders?

Although sin feels to every human being like the pleasure of personal autonomy, God says that it is a spiritual gangrene which releases toxins into our souls. Sin kills, God says, in a way which is worse than mere physical death. There are some sufferings short of death which make people beg for death as a release. The judgment of hell--an eternity away from God--is one of those sufferings.

And thus we discover the birth of zeal for God and the holy things of God. If we, like John Metz, would gladly accept and even perform the amputation of a body part to avoid physical death, how much more should we be full of zeal to cut off anything which threatens to cast us into the eternal fiery hell! **"If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell."**

Until we get a true sense of what is at stake in the war against sin, we will never have the zeal we need to do what is necessary to escape the peril which is before us. What if John Metz, instead of facing the logic of his desperate situation, were simply to relax with his lacerated arm impaled on metal tangs in his furnace with the mistaken thought: *I won't die of this*. He undoubtedly would have been found as a rotting corpse weeks later by his fiancé when she came to visit from another state.

This is how zeal arises in the soul of a believer. A proper understanding of our spiritual peril should make us avoid temptation like the plague. And we should take every care to avoid placing a temptation in the path of a "little one," meaning any one of God's beloved children.

But Jesus is being a clever teacher here. Can you really shut down sin in your life by cutting off body parts? No. Sin is not in the hand, or the eye, or the foot. If you gouged out one eye you would sin with the other one, because sin is in the heart. So Jesus kept proclaiming: **"Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the**

heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders"

(Matthew 15:17-19). The only cure for the human heart is found in our redemption by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the proper focus of zeal for God. And the engine of true zeal for God is fueled by our awareness of the true consequences of sin: eternal fiery hell.

GOD'S ZEAL FOR US

This same awareness fuels God's zeal for us as well. No one understands the consequences of sin better than God. In the next few verses he tells us a story to help us understand how motivated he is to help us get our arm out of the furnace: **"See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish"** (Matthew 18:10-14).

The discussion of **"little ones"** began at the start of this chapter with literal children and quickly became a discussion of God's children, meaning all those who believe. How is it that **"their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven"**? B. B. Warfield suggested that although this would be an unusual use of the word for angel, it may simply mean that we must not despise any believer because his or her destiny is to spend eternity in the presence of God. There are other views, but this one makes good sense in the context. In other words, as C. S. Lewis famously wrote, you have never met a mere mortal.

And certainly the negative possibility of eternal destruction is in view, motivating God to go seek the wandering ones. The term for wandering is *planao* (Gk.) from which we get our word "planet." It does not simply refer to movement like a planet, but to wandering because of self-deception (middle voice). That is the daily reality of every person apart from Christ. In this context it is the reality of a believer in Christ who is in danger from some tempting death trap.

God is in the business of finding lost sheep precisely because eternal destruction is at stake! That is why he never says: "Oh, I can let that one wander off and be destroyed since it is only one per cent of my flock." There can be no such irresponsible, uncaring calculus of souls. His love for the one is not measured by the one, but by his own capacity to love. And so God is determined to pursue the lost one even at great sacrifice. He is ecstatically happy when the lost one is found and restored. That is one less immortal soul who will miss the joys of God's love in heaven, and one less who will face the unspeakable judgment of the fiery hell.

THE PRACTICE OF ZEAL

So if we were to genuinely appreciate the reality of the judgment of hell, what would our practice of zeal look like? Jesus immediately gives us exactly what we need to know in the next verses: **"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. If he refuses to listen to**

them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17, caps in orig.). Some translations say "If your brother sins against you," but this does not limit our responsibility to seek out those who are wandering spiritually. We cannot say: "Oh, that person is caught in a death trap, but he or she did not sin against me, so I am off the hook." Many other Scriptures tell us to go to anyone whose soul is imperiled.

This is the most referenced passage of Scripture on the practice of church discipline in the Bible. But I fear that we often read it simply to get the procedure clarified in our minds. Yes, the procedure is important so that things can be done decently and in order, but we must not take these verses out of context and so miss the passionate heart of God for the retrieval of wandering sheep. Wandering from the fold is not just an annoyance to church leadership, but a five-alarm emergency upon which eternal destinies rest.

This procedure sounds so difficult that the church today often gives up on it entirely. We hate the conflict, and we hate the idea that we are going to have to man up or girl up and decide that someone is excluded from the church. But what are we saying about the two possible eternal destinies of all people if we confer the status of church membership on those who are not following Christ and are, in fact, caught in various death traps? We are saying that the earthly gathering of the church is more important than the unavoidable consequences of judgment in the eternal fiery hell. We are saying that the heart of God for his children does not matter to us very much. And those who most need to realize that they are caught in a death trap will read this mistake from us and draw a false conclusion about the seriousness of their situation.

The following verses, which are usually taken very much out of context, tell us just what God is willing to do to make sure that we practice the zeal which is in his heart for wandering sheep. First, he is willing to grant us his own authority to deal with people who are caught in death traps: "**Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven**" (Matthew 18:18). Why would God, who knows better than us just how fallible we are, grant us divine authority to bind and loose? Because God also knows better than us the meaning of the judgment of the eternal fiery hell.

Secondly, God grants us divine power to recover and restore his wandering children: "**Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven**" (Matthew 18:19). Some say this verse is about the power of God being released through the agreement of believers in prayer. Others say that it is about the power of God being released as those who seek restoration of broken relationships in the body of Christ come to a meeting of the minds. Either way, divine power is granted to the same people who are in danger of wandering. Why? Because so much is at stake!

Thirdly, God grants to those who are willing to share his zeal for the recovery of lost sheep his special mediatorial presence: "**For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst**" (Matthew 18:20). This is not merely a local reflection of the doctrine of omnipresence. This is God's special attention and personal presence for the sake of the recovery of lost sheep.

Authority, power, presence--that list should give us a clear idea of the zeal of God for finding

lost sheep. He will hold nothing back for their redemption—not even his Son. If they are found, their angels will look into his face forever in joy and bliss. If they are not found, their destiny is the eternal judgment for sin in the fiery hell. Once we appreciate the coming judgment we will find the zeal to do even the difficult job of church discipline.

That zeal for God and the things of God will then spill over into every area of our walk with Christ. Our devotion to God and his word will take on critical importance for us, since that is the main way we avoid death traps ourselves and it supplies us with the wisdom to help others. This zeal will pour over into evangelism as we see the great peril of those who have not yet trusted Christ. Holy living will make more sense, because we will see every sin as a death trap. Understanding the immensity of the sorrows of divine judgment will also generate within us a singular hope in Christ and his gospel, and a humble dependence on him alone.

If you have not yet received Christ, your left arm is stuck in the furnace heat exchanger. You will not be able to pull it out. You will die that way, and then comes the judgment. I advise you to receive the forgiveness of Christ for your sins and to begin to follow him. He is your only hope.

And if you are a professing Christian dallying with some intensely sweet sin, I have a question for you. How do you know that you will be able to stick your arm into it and successfully withdraw? It's a death trap. Beware the consequences!

But what joy is in store for us as we see men, women, and children come to know Christ! What satisfaction to see people released from one death trap after another. It is a privilege to walk in the authority, power, and presence of God to see this come to pass. May we use our privilege wisely.

[clip: Today Show interview of John Metz by Matt Lauer, Man_who_cut_off_arm.avi, 3:08 min.]