

"Whoever is of God hears the words of God." Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson for today that those who belong to God listen to him and listen to his Word. But along with that, Christians, comes a warning, a warning against sin. Because sin is something that is a deadly, deadly thing. It's not something to be trifled with. If we play around with sin, thinking that it's not such a big deal, we're going to find ourselves in a world of hurt. Because sin is one of those things that builds on itself bit by bit until it becomes something far more than we could ever have imagined.

We understand this in a worldly sense, of taking care of things ahead of time so they don't turn into worse things. Nip it in the bud. A stitch in time saves nine. We understand what it means to take care of a vehicle, for example, to change its oil, to change its tires, so that we don't have a major problem somewhere down the road. We even understand a dirt road, for example, the tracks that we form by going back and forth, forming ruts, ruts that get deeper and deeper until pretty soon you can't get out of them at all. But if we understand this in a worldly sense, why do we hesitate to understand this when it comes to sin? Sin is that thing that builds upon itself bit by bit, bit by bit, until it's finally something bigger than we could ever have imagined.

That's what happened to the Jews in our reading for today. Because we shouldn't think that they got to where they were--arguing with Jesus and calling him demon-possessed and a liar and a sinner--we shouldn't think that they got there overnight. This took a long time, bit by bit until they got to the point where they crucified God himself. Because think of it this way. Over the generations, that sin builds upon itself until it finally turned into what we see today. Because we saw in Abraham a great, amazing faith, a faith willing to sacrifice his own promised son just so that he would listen to God. But then with Isaac, he repeated all of his father's sins. Jacob treated his brother Esau very badly, and the sons of Jacob tried to kill their brother Joseph. Sin building upon sin building upon sin through the generations. And then we see Israel down in Egypt when they came out, fighting against God, not believing that he could take care of them, because that sin had built up over all that time. And then when they went into the promised land, they turned away to idolatry. They turned away from God and refused to listen to him. And then when God sent them away and brought them back again, they fell back into all the same sins, which was an even worse sin than before. And then in the days of Esther, we see the Jews out among the nations and not really caring whether they came home at all. They forgot the language of their fathers and fell into the sins of the nations. And then finally in the time between the Old Testament and the New, when the Greeks and then the Romans took over Israel, the Jews stopped trusting in God altogether. They started to trust in themselves above all. And then they were looking for a worldly kingdom, a worldly solution to their problems, so that when the promised son of David, Jesus Christ himself, finally appeared just as God said that he would, they didn't listen to him. They turned away from him and turned away from God. Sin upon sin upon sin down through the generations.

And it's not just a generational thing either, Christians. Sin is also deadly in our own personal lives. Because think of Pharaoh, for example. Old Pharaoh in Egypt who refused to listen to God. Pharaoh imagined that he himself was a god--that was his generational sin, the sin that had built up through all the years. But when God came to him and told him through Moses, "Let my people go," Pharaoh didn't listen. And so he hardened his heart against God. He stiffened himself. He stood up against God again and again and again until the Bible says that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh. It was too late to turn back, because that sin had built upon sin had built upon sin until it was too late.

And for ourselves, Christians, we should also pay attention to this warning. Because almost every warning against sin in the Bible is spoken to those who have faith, to those who believe in God. Because when we start to treat sin as if it was nothing, as if it was not really dangerous at all, we end up playing a very dangerous game. When God says things about how the world was created, for example,

or when he says things about what love is or what marriage is, and we refuse to listen because we think we know better, we're playing a very dangerous game. And when we think that our own sins are not really that big a deal, that we can dabble in them without consequence or that God will just forgive us anyway, so it doesn't matter what we do, we're playing a very dangerous game. Sin can build upon sin until finally, without even realizing how it happened, we end up so hardened against God that we no longer believe, just like the Jews didn't, and then we wouldn't even care. Sin is a deadly serious thing. If we do not hear the Word of God, eventually we won't hear God at all.

But Christians, if it was left up to us in this matter, we wouldn't have any hope either. Because the nature of our hearts is such that sin just keeps building. It just keeps growing and growing and growing, and if we had nothing else, our hearts would become hardened against God anyway. We need something from the outside, something else in order to help us fight against sin.

And that's why we have our Lord Jesus Christ. He who knew no sin, who died for us on the cross, has given us the strength to fight against sin, because he has taken that hardened, rocky heart that we once had, and he has replaced it with a new heart, a fleshly heart, one that can listen to God, because we have become of God. Jesus has set us free from the bondage to sin, and because of him and him alone, we are able to listen to God. And Jesus has also given us a mighty weapon in our war against sin, the living Word of the Spirit, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. The very Scriptures themselves help us in this fight, not only against Satan, but also against our own sinfulness, our own stubborn, rocky, hardening hearts. Jesus helps us to fight so that we are able to follow after him. And we are also the temples of the Spirit, Christians. God himself dwells within us, causing us to cry, "Abba, Father!" We have God himself fighting on our side so that we are able to listen to him. We are not alone in this struggle. We have Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit. We have the power of God in us working for us.

So Christians, cling to him. Cling to Jesus and listen to him. Listen to him who speaks to you the words of life, because Jesus has come to set us free. Jesus has come to give us that life. Jesus has come so that we can fight back against sin. Because we belong to God, we are able to listen to him in Jesus Christ. Do not harden your hearts as Israel did long ago in the wilderness, but listen to Jesus, because he is your life and your salvation.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.