

Jesus says to us, "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it." And what he means by that is that we should listen to God in everything, to hold on to every one of his words, because they are truth and life. And Christians, that's a really easy thing to do when it's easy to listen to what God is saying. Take, for example, what Jesus says in Matthew chapter 11, where he promises us, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." That's really easy to listen to, because Jesus is promising us that no matter what we're struggling with, no matter what we're going through, no matter what we have to put up with in our life, we can find in him peace and comfort beyond anything that this world has to offer. Or take what Paul says in Romans chapter 8 when he says that "there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That's also a really easy thing for us to hear, because it tells us that there is nothing in heaven, on earth, or under the earth, that will ever be able to take us away from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That no matter how much the world rages, that no matter how much Satan tries, they cannot take us away from God. That's a truth that we should hold on to, that we should cherish in our hearts. Or think even what Jesus says when he says that we will find rest in him, or even the famous verse, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That's also a very easy thing for us to listen to, because it tells us the Gospel in a nutshell, that whoever believes in Jesus will find forgiveness for their sins. That we will find peace in him, that we will find life in our Lord and Savior. These things are easy for us to hear, because they are God's promises, because they are the things which God intends for our comfort.

But there are many things, Christians, in God's word that are not so easy to hear, things which are much more difficult. Think of what Jesus says when he says, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." That can be a difficult thing to hear. Because Jesus is telling us in no uncertain terms that we should be prepared to leave everything in this world behind, even our own families, for the sake of the kingdom of God. Are you prepared to do that? Or we hear also Jesus saying that "whoever would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me." That can also be a very difficult thing for us to hear, because Jesus is telling us that becoming a Christian is not going to make your life easy. If anything, it will make it harder. Are we prepared to listen to that as well? Or we think of what Paul warns us about in Galatians or even in Ephesians, where he says that those who persist in the works of the flesh, in sin, "will not inherit the kingdom of God." That can also be a hard thing for us to hear, because it shows us in no uncertain terms the danger of sin. That that sin which we fall into time and time again is not a neutral thing, but if we persist in it, it will lead us to our destruction. Those are all difficult things for us to hear. But what makes them so difficult, Christians, is that they are warning us not to go down the wide and the easy way, the way that doesn't have struggle, the way that doesn't have pain, the way that doesn't have suffering. Because that way leads only to destruction. But it calls for us to repent, to turn away from our sins, and turn towards the narrow and the hard way, the way which will lead to life. So the question I ask you today, Christians, is this: are you prepared to listen to the Word of God, both when it is easy to do so and also when it is hard? Are you willing to follow after God even when that will mean suffering on your part?

Because Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading for today brought to the people of Israel a very hard word. So hard, in fact, that God tells him right away, "Don't hold back when you're telling this to the people! Don't hold back a word. You're going to be tempted to cut off a thing here or there, to make it a little easier to listen to. Don't do it! Tell them everything that I want them to

hear. And that message is this: 'Thus says the Lord, "If you will not listen to me to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to listen to the words of my servants, the prophets, whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.'" He was saying to them, in essence, Jerusalem will become like Shiloh unless you repent and turn back towards the Lord your God to do what is right in his sight, because he relents over disaster.

But to understand why that was such a hard word, Christians, you have to understand what he's talking about when he means that Jerusalem will become like Shiloh. Because Shiloh was the first place that the ark of the covenant sat in the land of Israel. If you remember from the second half of the book of Exodus, the ark of the covenant was that golden box that God put the tablets of the Ten Commandments into, along with some other things. And on top of that box was a golden lid with two angels spread out over top of it. And that box was where God promised to be. That was his throne. That's where he was sitting. If Israel wanted to find God, they went there where he had promised that they would find him. And when Israel first came into the land after leaving Egypt, they brought the ark and it settled at Shiloh. And that's where it stayed for a very long time. But the sin of Israel, and especially the sin of the high priest Eli and of his two sons, led to the ark being captured by the Philistines. The ark left Israel, left Shiloh behind. And the glory, as it says there in 1 Samuel, had departed Israel. God had left his people because of their sins. But when the ark came back, it didn't go back to Shiloh. It went instead to the house of Abinadab. And then later David would bring it to Jerusalem, and his son Solomon would later put it into the temple. So, in other words, the ark never went back to Shiloh. God had abandoned that place forever. And by the time of Jeremiah, the city of Shiloh had long been destroyed. It was no more. There was nothing left.

And so this was the threat that God was setting before his people: Jerusalem will also become like Shiloh. I will leave it behind. I will abandon this city. And you will no longer be my people, the way that I once abandoned Shiloh. That was something they needed to pay attention to, something that they needed to listen to. Repent! he said. Turn away from your sins, and this will not come upon you.

But think about how the people of Israel reacted to that. They said: "How dare you say such a thing! How dare you suggest that God would abandon Jerusalem, that he would make this place like Shiloh! How dare you say that this place where God has promised his name to be, where he has been for all of these many years, would be left behind and abandoned! How can you say such a thing? And how dare you suggest that we would not be his people! Because he promised our fathers that he would be with us always. We are the sons of Abraham! And we have always been his children. How can you say that he will abandon this place? For that reason, you must die!" The people of Israel were only listening to the easy stuff, to the stuff that was comfortable, to the promises of God. Saying effectively God had promised to be, and he had promised Solomon that he'd always be there, so that must mean that it doesn't matter what else we do! We don't have to listen to anything else God says, because he made these promises to us. We don't have to listen to the hard stuff, because we know that we will always be his people. They had turned God's promises into a lie, taking what was easy and ignoring what was hard.

And Christians, that's such an easy temptation to fall into, to only want to listen to the easy stuff, to only want to listen to the comfortable stuff, and not to pay attention to what is more difficult. Because then we become wrapped up in these promises that God has made and think that they're going to apply to us no matter what, that it doesn't matter what we do, even the sins that we have committed. This can happen in multiple ways. For example, when we think that we can continue in sin while at the same time saying "I love God." To think that a love of sin and a love of God can exist in the same heart. It can't be done. Because as John tells us in 1 John chapter 4 verse 20, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." That's a hard word, but a necessary one, because it shows us that the love of sin and the love of God cannot be in us at the same time. We are called to leave that sin behind, to leave behind that which keeps us from God so that we may love him fully.

This can also happen whenever we regard sin as something that is not very serious, as something that is not very dangerous. I can continue in my sins because God's going to forgive me anyway. God is a God of love! He'll just overlook it. He won't look at these little sins which I commit, so I can say that I love God, because I know he's going to forgive me anyway. And so it doesn't matter if I cheat my neighbor. It doesn't matter if I steal from my boss, because these are just little tiny sins! They're not going to hurt anything. God will forgive me anyway. That's also a dangerous thing, because it treats sin as something less than what it is.

This can also happen whenever we let the world rule our thinking about sin, when we let the world try to dictate to us what is and isn't wrong. It would be like if someone said it doesn't matter that I'm homosexual, because God made me this way! And if God made me this way, it must not be a sin, right? Because he wouldn't have created me this way if he didn't intend it. But that's ignoring what God has to say in his Word. Or when we might say with the world too, it's not very loving to talk about sin. You should just kind of ignore it. You should just brush it aside, because it's easier and we might bring more people in if we never mention a word about sin! But that ignores what God has to say, say in Ezekiel, when he says, "If you don't warn the wicked from their wicked way, you also will be subject to the same judgment." We have to take God's Word seriously.

This can also happen whenever we resist the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Because God does not love us just like we are. God loves us in order to change us, in order to transform us, to make us into something different than what we were before. And whenever we fight against that because we think it's too hard or it's too difficult, we are resisting the work of the Holy Spirit. Maybe we would say, "It's too hard to give up this sin that I've been doing for so many years, because I keep trying and I keep failing. So God's just going to overlook it anyway." That's to resist the Holy Spirit. Or we might say, "It's too difficult to do something he wants me to do: to pray regularly, to go to church regularly, to read the Word regularly, because these things are too difficult. It takes too much time. I have other things to do." But that is to resist the work of the Spirit within us.

Or above all, Christians, and maybe the most serious, is when we don't take God's warnings against sin seriously. When we think that they don't apply to me. They apply to somebody else. God's talking about someone other than me, because I'm not actually that bad. It's as if someone who is struggling with anger hears what Jesus has to say about anger--that whoever calls your

brother "you fool" will be subject to hellfire--and says, "Well, that's not talking about me, because my anger is always justified. I always have a good reason to do this. It's talking about someone else. That's someone else's problem."

Or whenever the Word says about drunkenness that it is something that leads to condemnation, and we say something like, "Well, that's not me, because I'm never that bad. I don't get drunk that often. I'm not struggling with that. That must be talking about someone else. There's people who are far worse than I am." Or someone who's struggling with lust, for example, and hears what Jesus has to say--that if you even look at a woman with lust in your heart, you've already committed adultery with her--and we say something like, "Well, that's not me, because it was just a look. It didn't mean anything. I don't even remember what she looked like. That was just so long ago. It doesn't matter. That's not talking about me." But when we do that, Christians, we end up not listening to what God has to say. Because God does not tell us these hard things just because or for someone else's benefit. He tells us these things also for us.

Because Christians, as Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it. Blessed are those who listen to everything that God has to say, both the easy stuff and the hard stuff too." Because Jesus has made you a new creation. Jesus has transformed you through the work of the Holy Spirit. You are now a new people, one who can follow after God, one who can listen to everything that he has to say. And all of these words which he speaks to you today, Christians, are not meant to crush us or to destroy us. They are meant for our life. They are meant for our salvation. God tells us these things to make us new, so that no matter how much we struggle or suffer as Christians, we will end up with him in everlasting life. These things are truth and life in everything.

So listen to him, Christians. Call on Jesus who speaks the words of life and truth to you today. Listen to even the stuff that's hard, because no matter how hard it may seem to us, no matter how hard it seems to us as we still struggle with sin, it will give way to something far greater. And we will truly be blessed in him forever. As Jesus himself says, "Be steadfast unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have spoken to us the words of life and truth. Help us always to trust in you and to follow after you in everything, knowing that you mean all things for our good; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.