

No One Shall Snatch Them from My Hand

Jude 15-25; 1 John 5:11-21

In the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel, a delegation of rabbi's and scholars approached Jesus and asked him to show them "*a sign from heaven*". Now this was likely within days after Jesus had fed the 4000 on the far side of Lake Gennesaret, but of course, the rabbi's weren't following Jesus out into any wilderness, so they were never there when Jesus needed to multiply food. The rabbi's wanted miracles in town on the same street where there were food shops. The point being that signs were usually given to people who went out of their way looking for a Savior.

But since the rabbi's had mentioned the heavens, Jesus looked up at the sky and started talking to them about weather. "*When it's evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red. And in the morning, you say, 'It will be stormy today for the sky is red and threatening.'*" Jesus went on, "*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you can't read the signs of the times.*"

Jesus called them blind to the "*times*" because he had repeatedly warned his countrymen in all the gospels that they were the last generation to arise in old Israel. Later in Matthew 24, Jesus would prophesy about the rise of an antichrist and the fall of the Jerusalem temple and the scattering of old Israel out into the world where they would be at the mercy of the mood of the places where they landed.

All this within a generation of the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension of Jesus! And in the meantime, in that one generation when old Israel and the new apostolic Christian fellowships both shared the same landscape, the Spirit had descended on the disciples of Jesus and in that generation they had spread like seeds from a dandelion puff all around the Mediterranean world. So that by the time Titus, the Roman antichrist, rose up to sweep old Israel away, there were Christian fellowships in virtually every port and crossroad town that a disciple of Jesus could reasonably reach.

Now that first Christian generation, and with it most of the apostles, began to pass on in the 60's of the first century. So it happened that at about the time that old Israel began to go up like a tinderbox and the Romans became virulent under Nero, the apostles warned in their last letters that a similar tide of confusion and lawlessness would arise within the Christian congregations. So Peter in his second letter and Paul in his last letter to Timothy both prophesied that the church would be challenged by teaching that would undermine the disciples' morals and their obedience to the commandments and their love for the brothers and sisters at church.

Now Peter and Paul were too prominent to survive the first wave of chaos and violence that Jesus had prophesied a generation before. Tradition has it that Peter and Paul went out early. But our Call to Worship was written by a man named Jude, who we think was one of the younger brothers of Jesus, and he appears to have outlived most of the apostles because he urges the young Christians to “*...remember the words spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

And then follow the very same warnings that Peter and Paul both had written about “*scoffers*” who turned up their noses at commandments that restrained sexual passion, false teachers, who divided the early disciples by leading gullible souls away from the gospel teaching and living that define us all as Christians. So Jude writes that the presence of scoffers at worship services and love feasts introduced an element of confusion and temptation at church that might shipwreck a gullible soul.

So in the passage I’ve just read this morning, old man John, likely the last apostle of all, takes up where Jude, the younger brother of Jesus, had left off a decade or so earlier. By this time, old Israel with its temple and priesthood and sacrifices was little but ashes and smoke. And so John, faced with a situation no Israelite had seen for 500 years, picks up his pen and reads the signs of his times, corkscrewing through all the issues all this change had sparked among the Christian churches. And the first stop on the corkscrew was the commandments. Aside from the Land and symbols and rituals, aside from stoning and scourging and physically punishing sinners, all the moral commandments Moses had brought down Mt. Sinai were still in play.

So in the kingdom that Jesus called his disciples to serve the commandments were still in effect. God would still be treated as God, spoken about as God, weekly worship was still mandatory, family and marriage were still sacred and binding, stealing and lying were still wrong, longing for what God forbids and what belongs to others was wrong as well. That’s what the commandments taught! And by his own account in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus didn’t come to change anything about what God defined as pure and holy, right and good and true. So John warns us that to love Jesus and leave off with the commandments is a logical impossibility. To love Jesus is to want and to seek what the commandments say is pure and right and good and true.

Next the turn of John’s corkscrew logic always led to love for the brothers and sisters. Not the temporary sentimentality where warm and nice and soft is all you need, but covenant love, the love that sent Jesus to the cross to stand between us and judgment, the love that does and says what people need done and said to bring them closer to Christ and family and church, the love that makes and keeps commitments to the point of sacrifice, the love that tells the truth in the face of our own and each other’s sins without giving up and losing hope in the grace that God

promised all of us together. Real love, God's love has to exist in church and it isn't found among people content to remain strangers with God or with each other.

Which leads us to the next turn, the anointing of the Spirit. We talked about this a lot last week so I won't dwell on it except to say that neither the commandments nor the love we practice between us will come within our reach unless and until we open our hearts to God's Spirit and start over, giving the Spirit the time and place he needs to work through the nonsense would prevent us from loving each other and seeking God if his Spirit weren't in play.

And the point of the corkscrew, the Person who holds together all the features that define us as Christians is Jesus himself. And that is where John begins with us this morning, he writes, "*And this is the testimony - that God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has the life, he who does not have the Son does not have the life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know you have eternal life.*"

In Matthew 13, Jesus told a pair of stories about fortune seekers who were astonished, one to find a priceless pearl among the costume jewelry, and the other a buried treasure in a vacant lot. The pearl and the treasure are the kingdom and both fortune seekers know exactly what to do. They sell whatever they have to get the money to make the pearl and the treasure their own. And the parable is not about what we have to pay to get Jesus. The point of the parable is what Jesus is worth. He's worth everything because to belong to him is to live forever.

"...He who has the Son has the life, he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." The ancient world was ruled by royal families, so to believe in someone's family name was to take that person as your king and to devote your life to the building of his kingdom. So what Jesus wants from us is not some special exploit, not some extraordinary quality.

He wants us. Our hearts. He wants us to love him more than our own thoughts and ideas and wants and needs and to trust him to sort through the changes that taking him as Lord and King will require, to tell the truth about ourselves and to learn the truth from him about God and life and ourselves and each other. Which starts with the Spirit's anointing, and, if it's real, it leads to respect for the commandments and love for the brothers and sisters who live in the same kingdom and serve the same king.

And John teaches that as we grow in respect for the commandments and in love for the people around us in church, we gain a degree of comfort and boldness with God that gives us confidence and stability when we need help. John writes, "...*this is the confidence we have toward him, that*

if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask him, we know that we have the requests we have from him." Now just like in the Lord's Prayer, the binding clause in the promise John makes here is "...according to his will..."

The point here is that prayer is not some sort of talisman where we tame the Almighty to give us the circumstances we want, rather it's a dynamic relationship in which we begin to see life God's way and learn to ask for the help that will get us closer to him and further down the straight and narrow toward a life and an outlook that will work in eternity. Jesus put it this way, he said, "*If you abide in me, and [if] my word abides in you, ask whatever you wish and it shall be done for you.*"

Jesus' little brother James was more succinct, he wrote, "*You have not because you ask not.*" As often as not, we're too busy fending for ourselves to pray! But James went on, "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*" The point being that we all start this game thinking about ourselves, and only over time through hard experience do we learn to pray for things that really help and heal and guide us and our loved ones through the challenges and temptations that abound in a fallen world. Because neither Jesus nor James nor John saw prayer as any sort of abstract exercise unrelated to the dangers that threaten to lead us all astray.

John goes on, "*If anyone sees his brother or sister committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God shall give life to him, that is to those who do not commit sins leading to death.* *There is a sin that leads to death and I do not say that anyone should pray for that.*" The crisis this whole letter was written to address was that the fall of old Israel and the dawning of the last days had opened a panorama of sin and confusion and upset that was actively threatening the souls of that second generation of believers who had to believe in Jesus voice unheard and sight unseen.

Sadly, John never explains what is the "*sin that leads to death*" and I think there's two directions we can go here, probably both of them reasonably correct. The first thing to say is that there was a list of sins under the Old Covenant for which Moses prescribed the death penalty. And that list moves right down the first seven of the Ten Commandments, so I'll list them: first, idolatry, the worship of anything other than the one true God, then, failure to observe the Sabbath, scoffing at the command to worship, then, disrespect for parents and family, then, the wanton taking of human life, then, finally, infidelity in marriage . All these sins evoked the death penalty in the Law of Moses and could be described as sins "*leading to death*".

Nowhere are sins like these committed in the pages of the Bible without incurring the severest judgment and discipline from God and from God's people. Yet, strangely, in certain instances , God shows mercy to believers implicated in this kind of sin. Moses had used the name of God in vain in an outburst of anger and lost his right to enter the Promised Land, yet still he is counted as a faithful and true servant of God in the rest of Scripture.

David was guilty of murder and adultery and spent the rest of his life sorting through the wreckage he'd caused in his kingdom and family, yet he retained his place among the faithful. Solomon was enticed to adultery by his foreign wives and set Israel on a course toward the exile, yet he too was redeemed and is spoken of as faithful and wise in the rest of Scripture. All these sins can and usually do lead to physical death and spiritual condemnation when they're recorded in Scripture. But there is a grace to be found in Christ that allows believers like Moses and David and Solomon, who were caught in sins like these to find forgiveness and redemption from God if forgiveness and redemption is what they want.

So the question remains what is that "*sin that leads to death*" about which John tells us we need not pray? I think Jesus referred to it when he warned the Pharisees in Matthew 12 that to disbelieve in the signs he performed and the gospel he taught was to commit what Jesus called "*the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.*" The rabbi's and scholars were so determined not to be subject to Jesus that they had ascribed his miracles to demonic powers. So the point here is that all sin is dangerous, and some sins more dangerous than others. Sins against worship and sins against marriage and family corrode the soul so as to fundamentally undermine our confidence and faith in God's grace.

But the one sin that can move us beyond God's grace and beyond the reach of one another's prayers is to see Christ, to hear his gospel, to be confronted by his commandments and to scoff. To say to one's self, " That's not for me!", "I don't believe that!", "I'm not going to do that!" To see God's people in action and decide they're not good enough for us, to hear God's word and decide that it's wrong or harmful or it doesn't apply without bothering to learn what it means or to handle it knowledgeably is the sin that, once it is finally taken, moves us to a place beyond God's grace and beyond one another's prayers.

And that phrase, once it is finally taken, is critical here. Because all of us at one point or another have rebelled against some gospel necessity or fact. All of us have struggled with sins from which we can't untangle first, second, or however many tries we've made. And the point is not that some momentary lurch, or even some long term struggle, can move us beyond God's grace. The point is that all sin is dangerous, any sin can cost us our souls if it leads to finally and totally to scoff at God's commands and to turn from God's grace.

But John concludes that none of that is necessary, he writes, “*We know that everyone who has been born of God does not sin, but [Christ] who has been born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.*” Moses and David and Solomon and a whole host of others have proven that one can lurch into and struggle some time with sin and still not move beyond God’s grace, if he is willing to reach for the commandments and trust in God’s forgiveness and help to get back to the straight and narrow. Jesus himself promised, “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them from my hand.*”

So the question we need to ask ourselves is, “What happen in my heart when I hear the commands and promises of the word of God? Do I believe them and want them?” Because if e do, we belong to Christ and he will ultimately, finally shepherd us to safety, no matter how much trouble we’re in now. But if we scoff and tell ourselves that commandment isn’t true and that promise isn’t for me. Then we need to be afraid, and pray that God will open our hearts to what we are tempted to reject. When in doubt, I keep hoping and keep praying for myself and for others, that God will reach us and change us while grace and the Spirit are still in play.