



A movie came out a few years ago titled “End of the Spear.” It is based on true events which took place in Ecuador in the mid 1950’s. Christian missionaries were attempting to reach an isolated tribe. The tribe was dying as they fought with loggers and miners working moving onto their land. Yet their problem was even worse. They were killing each other. One scene in the film depicts the terrible cycle of killing. A man named Mincaye is on a revenge raid through a rival village. They are running through the huts and the jungle as they hurl spears at each other. Then you realize that the mayhem is about to hit the children. For a brief moment you see Mincaye realize how awful things have gotten. “Not the children,” he says just as some little children are about to be killed. I’m sure you’ve seen pictures of children injured, killed, or orphaned from war and its aftermath. It breaks your heart. And it moves people to wake up and take action because children can’t rescue themselves. How about God? How concerned is he about the defenseless and weak in this world? Today we continue our sermon series on “Family Values” as we look at God’s response to all the harm done to little ones. As members of the household of God our family protects children.

Unfortunately, the disciples had been caught up in a little tribal warfare. They had been arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus had to correct them and instructs them to serve even the very least -including small children. You’d like to think the problem was solved. But instead the disciples just find a new way to put themselves on top. They began to tear others down.

Their target was a man they labeled as “not one of us.” This man had been driving out demons in Jesus’ name. And he was apparently successful at it! Nine of the disciples had recently failed to drive out a demon. They were supposed to be the best at this. They had attended Jesus’ “advance academy for demon control.” Meanwhile this man had not. John reports to his teacher, “We found a man driving out demons in your name. But we stopped him because he was not one of us.”

Jealousy and pride can cause a lot of damage. That man apparently had no desire other than to bring glory to Jesus’ name. Meanwhile, the disciples desire to bring glory to their own name. Did you catch it? “He was not one of us, so we stopped him.” Their goal had become making themselves great by tearing others down. Keep in mind that there is no mention of this man teaching false doctrine. They stopped him simply because he didn’t have the right credentials. His only crime was not being under their control. In the disciples’ mind he was one upping them in the game. So, they silenced a fellow believer.

We could spend a lot of time today talking about the damage caused by of jealousy and pride in the church. We could spend years examining how throughout history it has hindered the work of God’s kingdom. We could even talk about how jealousy and pride within a church body can hinder work as people make enemies out of friends and tear others down. It’s a horrible and destructive force. But this morning we are going to focus especially on the lesson Jesus teaches after this incident. He goes on to speak about the seriousness of any sin which causes another to stumble in faith. “If anyone causes one of these little ones— those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.”

The concern is for “little ones – those who believe in Jesus.” This phrase may have included that man driving out demons. He may have been a believer who was new to the faith. He was trampled over by the disciples. It can also refer to any believer who has a faith which needs to mature and grow. Jesus’ concern is that the sins of his disciples would harm those who are weak or new in the faith. “Little ones who believe” most certainly includes every Christian child. Little children who believe in Jesus will be our focus this morning.

Firstly, little children can have faith. Scripture leaves no doubt about that truth. Jesus affirms here and elsewhere that little ones can have faith. The promise of baptism is “for you and your children.” (Acts 2) The gift of faith is something God gave to Timothy, a young pastor. Paul says that Timothy had saving faith from infancy. When Jesus says, “little ones” he includes all small and helpless children who believe in him no matter how old or little. Faith is a gift of God given to all ages.

Just as little ones are helpless and defenseless against physical dangers, they are helpless and defenseless when it comes to spiritual dangers. This word “stumble” can refer to someone being hindered in their faith or even losing their faith. And it is a serious concern. If you cause a little believer to sin or fall away from faith, you are committing a horrible sin. Jesus is so serious about this he tells us it would be better that a person drowns in the sea than cause a little one to stumble.

You and I might not be going around spearing little children. You and I might not be like the disciples stopping someone new in faith from pointing to Jesus. And who among us would drive children away from Jesus as the disciples were guilty of on another occasion? But might we ever be guilty of failing to protect the helpless and defenseless from spiritual dangers?

There are so many things that can cause a little one to stumble in faith. A man once shared with me his struggles as a child. His father had a temper problem and would blow up and yell at his children in outburst of anger. His anger greatly hindered the faith of the children he brought to church every Sunday. What sinful habits might you or I occasionally display which could harm the faith of a child? What actions or words can harm the faith of a child?

And it’s not easy to examine these habits when so many carelessly harm children. Sure, once a child escapes the horrific possibility of abortion, our society works to keep them physically safe. We have laws against abuse. Child services protect

children from those that might harm them. But do we strive to keep little children spiritually protected? Or does our society sometimes tell us children are supposed to be able to spiritually fend for themselves against the spiritual forces of evil? I was in line at the movie theater a while back and I experienced this sort of failed parenting. I'm not sure the three-year-old who was in line in front of us had enough discernment to face the film his father was taking him to see. His father got to the counter and it became clear he didn't come to see a movie for a three-year-old. "I'll take two tickets" he said, and he named the movie. It was something like "Fifty Shades of the Alien Predator Vengeful Killers Squad." No three-year-old child is ready to face that type of movie. I'm not sure most adults can get through the film they went to without some sort of fright. How many let their children simply watch random entertainment and expect it to not influence their child's worldview? How many parents of small and older children simply let the sitcoms play and figure the immorality is good for entertainment? And how many parents foolishly hand their children unsupervised access to the internet without first preparing them for the dangers of pornography?

Sadly, many children are the victims of sexual sins. Many parents today think they can avoid the topic. They may try, but some surveys point out that the average age children see graphic pornography online can be as young as six or seven. Parents may wait until their child is older, but in doing so they fail to prepare their children for the dangers of pornography addiction. By the time the average child reaches ten, it's already too late to prepare them. They've had to face it. And according to some recent surveys by content filtering companies 50% of adult Christian men will struggle with that destructive and sinful addiction and 25% of Christian women. Failing to prepare and protect children from these dangers is to be guilty of leaving them helpless against it. Where does it all end? Whether it be by our actions, or our failure to take actions, children can be left stumbling in their faith or even stumbling away from faith in Jesus. A little child is spiritually defenseless unless someone steps in to help them. Do we take care to protect children or sometimes send them to face the devil on their own and allow them to be devored?

Jesus goes on to warn every believer of the danger of sin. *"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell."*⁴⁷ *And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,*⁴⁸ *where "the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched."* Sin, left unchecked, will eventually destroy faith. It will destroy the young faith of innocent children, and it will destroy your own faith.

And the dangers are real. Hell is not a myth. Jesus quotes from Isaiah to describe the horrible fate of those who are cut off from God because they chose not to cut out the sin that had a hold on their hearts. To allow children to fend for themselves is a most foolish thing. To fail to protect children from the destructive forces of sin is to leave them doomed to hell. The word used to picture hell here is a place where false gods had been worshipped in ancient Israel as they offered their children on an altar of fire. It is a place known for a garbage heap and pile of refuse. That's the horrible unending fate of those in hell. And if we stand by while little children stumble in faith, or if we harm their faith by holding onto sin, we are even more guilty than the godless man who speared children of a rival tribe. We stand guilty as those who knew the dangers but let our children get burned.

Jesus makes it very clear: our God does have great concern for the weak and defenseless. He is a God who cares very seriously about our spiritual well-being. He cares so much that he had to put a stop to the evil he saw. He did far more than just warn of its danger. He faced sin's destruction for us. Though we deserve to be thrown into hell for every careless sin and every time we caused another to sin, Jesus came to protect and to save. He saw us all as helpless and doomed to hell. We're all like defenseless children in the battle against sin. Without God stepping in we all would perish. But in order to save us he was cut off from the love of the Father. Jesus faced the torments of hell on the cross. He cried out in agony, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" In the darkness he was tossed into the curse of sin which we deserved. He did this as he willingly took our place. He did this for us all not because we deserved it. But he did it in mercy for the helpless.

His concern now is that all who believe -especially the little ones who believe in him-- continue to hold onto him in faith. He rose to life in victory over sin, death, and even hell. By faith we hold to the promise of his love and everlasting life. We know we will not be thrown into hell because he calls us his children. We belong to his family. Through faith in him we stand forgiven and secure from all danger. And the little child who has faith in him will be forever safe from the danger of hell if they remain in faith.

God calls on us to wake up to more than the devastation of war on children. He calls us to wake up to the real destruction that comes from a careless spiritual warfare. Now he calls on us to wake up from spiritual slumber and be alert to the real dangers around us. He calls on us to most earnestly protect little ones who believe in him. We put aside pride, sinful ambition, fits of rage, and all things which would harm. We live as the "salt of the earth" as we love and protect the weak, the little, and the defenseless. We live as the salt of the earth as live a new life of faith and build up the faith of the weak.

Mincaye ended up killing the missionaries who first peacefully tried to reach him. He speared them to death. But can you imagine his surprise when he saw the widow, the sister, and the son of one of the men he had killed? How would he treat them when they helplessly approached his tribe? They came to bring him the gospel. He heard of the man who was pierced with a spear on his cross so that his children -all believers- would escape from hell. His life was changed so that he became a Christian and is now a preacher and church elder. His family life was changed as they stopped killing each other and children were more than physically safe, but brought to know Jesus. His tribe identity changed. So has ours. We belong to the family of God. We belong to a family that protects the weak, defends the helpless, and takes seriously any danger they face. Our family recognizes danger and recognizes what God has done to rescue us from all evil. Our family protects children.