

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The sermon text is the Old Testament Lesson we've just heard. We pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

The Old Testament lesson today raises some very interesting issues. God appointed Ezekiel, a prophet, as a watchman and gave him the responsibility of seeing that God's message of warning to sinners was delivered properly. God would hold him, Ezekiel, accountable for delivering that message. Surely, that message wasn't fun to deliver: "Sinner, if you keep that up, you will die". Nobody wants to receive a message like that, and for that reason, nobody wants to deliver it, either. And yet how important it was that Ezekiel speak those words of warning.

How important it is, too, that those words of warning are heard—even by us. God has appointed "watchmen" like that for us, too. Some people call them "pastors". One of their tasks is to preach the Law of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ impartially—to everyone in their congregation. Trust me: That's not always easy to do, for a variety of reasons. And yet it is so important that it is done. By means of those words God himself is reaching out to us with his own message—yes, a message of warning at times, but also of grace and comfort. He desires to be active in our life. So, first of all, this text would encourage us to listen carefully to the sermons preached here and to be open not only to the uplifting, comforting and positive sides of the sermon, but also to the admonishing, warning and condemning sides. God is involved in our lives, and he has something to say—even in these very words.

In a much wider sense, though, we are all watchmen and watchwomen for one another, called not to be silent but to speak out—yes, even to speak words of warning, if need be. Certainly, when the message we deliver is motivated by and conformed to God’s word, then God is ultimately the one trying to get through when we speak up. Now, all of that sounds just fine in theory, and we may nod our heads in agreement—until we get very concrete and are in a situation in which we have to actually speak that word of warning to someone else. There are fairly obvious, black-and-white situations in which we should speak up, that don’t require much thought or courage at all: Someone you know is rip-roaring drunk and wants to drive home. Your colleague is embezzling money from work, or has his fingers in the till. Your friend calls and says that she finally has a date with cute guy from work, and that she hopes her husband doesn’t find out about it. I was making a hospital call once, to a member of the German congregation, when a young doctor walked in and starting talking to the other person in the room, an elderly woman who was a little bit confused. The doctor was trying to convince her to take some medicine, and the poor old woman simply didn’t want to have anything to do with that. After several new attempts the doctor finally blew his cool and said: “If you don’t take this medicine, you’ll die!” and marched out of the room. That, too, was a pretty clear-cut case. But then there are the less well-defined situations. For example: Standing in line for lunch, you see someone from our congregation who hasn’t been in church for a while. Or: People in a group have started talking bad about someone and would disapprove greatly of your telling them to mind their own business. Or: You find

yourself in a situation where a testimony to Christ would be just the right thing. We could continue this list forever. Especially when you imagine yourself in a situation like that, you begin to feel the friction inside and become painfully aware again of how unpleasant opening your mouth and speaking a word of warning can be. In light of those misgivings, it's important to remember a few things. 1) God does not call us and hold us accountable for bringing about the desired results, but rather for delivering the message. We can't insure what the other person does, but we can help speak up to warn them. 2) Speaking words of warning is and must be done as a form of help—as a show of Christian love. For that reason, it's very important to remember that we are sinners just as they are, so that we don't give the words of warning as if we were self-righteous people who've never fallen themselves or who were morally superior to them in some way. Remembering that will help guard us from being condescending and it will also help us find words that are truly loving and understanding. And 3) Having fallen yourself doesn't disqualify you from warning in this way. Instead, it helps you to speak from experience. In other words: It makes you uniquely qualified to say something. You know better than most what can happen.

This sermon is obviously all about encouraging us to speak words of warning when they are needed. But I need to speak a word of comfort at this point, too. God told Ezekiel in this passage that a wicked man might fall and die in his sin, but that Ezekiel would save his own skin by conveying God's message to him. You won't save yourself by giving words of warning. The good news is, that you *don't need* to

save yourself by doing *anything*. Christ has saved you by dying for you on the cross and rising from the dead. Any words you speak are spoken because he calls an already saved “you” to be his loudspeaker, and they are spoken not to get any brownie points with God, but rather in love towards those around you, with their interest in mind.

Let me close with a quotation from Dr. Martin Luther King. He wrote: History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people. Certainly, we have been loved and saved and called not to prolong this appalling silence, but to break it by speaking—words of comfort and grace, but also words of warning where needed. Please think about the persons or the situations this coming week where your words are needed, pray for courage and wisdom, and then love those people with your words.

And now may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.