

There is very little that anyone takes seriously anymore. It's just the way that western civilization has turned. For the United States, it seems that things started turning that way a little over fifty years ago. It seems to have been a strong reaction on the part of young people to the attitudes of parents who had experienced World War II. The sternness of those who had been a part of a global conflict in which the very fate of the world literally hung in the balance seemed odd and out of place to those who grew up in an age of unprecedented ease and prosperity.

And with each successive generation the irreverence has only increased, making those who take anything seriously seem more and more out of place. Even the ultimate in sobering realities, the death of a loved one, has become an opportunity for levity, and funerals aren't really considered good anymore unless they are filled with jokes, funny stories and laughter.

I have noticed, however, that the legal system still seems to take itself pretty seriously, even more so when someone's life is quite literally on the line. When there's the possibility that someone might receive a sentence of life in prison, it's usually not too hard to get people to take things seriously.

Thinking about that, then, might help some people to take the text before us more seriously, because it really is about a courtroom and a life sentence—an eternal life sentence, that is. And it is about a judge that is fully prepared to hand out an eternal sentence, which we ourselves must be fully prepared to accept. We must be fully prepared to **Receive His Life Sentence**, because **1. Contempt for our Final Judge means eternal death**, but **2. Honoring our brother is the gift of eternal life**.

If the people around Jesus that day had only understood his role as judge of all mankind, they would have reacted very differently toward him. They would have treated him with the highest honor. But they obviously didn't get it. They were apparently too upset about the fact that Jesus was "*calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God*," according to John 5:18, which is the verse that comes immediately before our text. So instead of treating him with great honor, they treated him with contempt.

Now, imagine doing that if you were actually on trial! Imagine showing contempt for the judge of an earthly court when the way that you treat that judge in court can make the difference between going home a free person and going to jail for the rest of your life! That would be crazy, wouldn't it? That wouldn't make any sense at all! When that judge literally holds your life in their hands, you address them with "Your honor," and when they bang the gavel looking for order, you quiet yourself down. Even if you know the guy on the bench personally and don't particularly like him, you still treat him with some respect. Why? Because, as I said, that person still holds your life in their hands. You have got to respect that.

But they did not respect Jesus. They treated him with contempt. They treated him with contempt, even though he warned them: "*Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.*" And, of course, if you refuse to show honor to the judge in court, you are held in contempt of court—in this case, in contempt of the court that decides your eternal fate.

Now, how do you avoid being held in contempt of this court and losing your freedom from sin, death and the devil for all eternity? Perhaps that's a bit of a silly question to ask you. We just had Reformation Sunday, so you know that we are saved by faith alone. So all you need is to believe in Jesus as your Savior, and you are not held in contempt or condemned to eternal death, right?

This is true, but I want you to pay special attention to how Jesus describes what it means to honor the Son of God: "*I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*" To honor the Son of God is to listen to his Word and to believe what it says.

I stress that because I don't want anyone here to miss it. "*I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned.*" I stress that be-

cause I think that most of us don't even hear the warning that is there for us. We assume that because we gather here in this Lutheran church that our gathering is all about faith, faith that saves.

But genuine faith, saving faith, is more than saying that God truly exists and that Jesus is his Son. Saving faith is an attitude of the heart toward God that can be recognized by one particular outward action more than any other: Responding to the Shepherd's voice, hearing and being changed by the Word of God. "*I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned.*" The one who listens to the voice of Jesus "*has crossed over from death to life.*" Those who do not listen dishonor the Eternal Judge and will be justly condemned for clinging to their evil practices on the Last Day.

These are hard words to share, but I would be a fool not to share them since I would then not be responding to the Word of the Eternal Judge. It's just hard because I have written many sermons on texts that encourage us to make the hearing of the Word the most important thing in our lives, yet Sunday School attendance has not noticeably improved—not even among those who for various reasons are unable to make use of our day school.

And have we stopped talking about the sins of others when they are not around and cannot be helped by it? Have those engaged in activities condemned by God as sexually immoral put it all behind them? Are we all the more fighting hatred and the urge to hold grudges? Has the taking of the Lord's name in vain ceased?

These are all crimes for which our Final Judge promises a sentence of eternal death! Yet I myself would be a faithless teacher who does not listen properly to the Word of Christ if I did not respond to that eternal threat within us with the promise of eternal life.

The Word of Christ is this: not that God has decided to ignore his own Law and Word just because we all failed to listen, but that he carried out the eternal death sentence that the Law of God promises to all sinners by condemning his own Son as the one

guilty of all sin. Though under no obligation, he condemned his own Son to the fires of hell—and his Son willingly and, according to Hebrews 12:2, even joyfully went—so that you could receive a sentence of eternal life on the Last Day and be finally delivered from sin, death and the devil. He received your eternal death sentence, and you are receiving his eternal life sentence.

In fact, that more than anything else is the "life sentence" that this sermon is all about. A *sentence* will be spoken on the Last Day. By that I mean an actual sentence made up of words, not necessarily the kind of sentence a condemned criminal receives in court. A sentence will be spoken on the Last Day of this earth. I don't know exactly what the words in it are, but I know the effect it will have when it is spoken: "*I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.*"

Jesus commanded the crowd, "*Do not be amazed at this*"—I mean, after all, they had already seen Jesus call back the dead with his voice, hadn't they? "*For a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out.*" I don't know just what it is he is going to say, but I properly call it a "life sentence." Just as at the creation of the world, he will speak, and it will be so. Billions of people long since crumbled into dust will be reconstituted, and those who fell asleep in Christ will be glorified to eternal life. "Life sentence," indeed!

But even in this End Time season, I don't want you to lose sight of the significance of this truth for the here and now. Do you know what I'm saying? There is so much comfort in this plan to pronounce a sentence of life over us!

I mean, look at how he says that the time for this life sentence has already come. We have heard it, haven't we? And it has given us new life in the Spirit of God, right? Of course! There is power in the message that our Final Judge is the Son of Man, one of us, our brother. Our brother's life sentence is our own. Amen.