

**Singing:** Ps. 29:1

**Prayer**

**Reading:** Matthew 18:15-20; John 3:16-21; 2 Thess. 3:6-14

**Singing:** Ps. 36:2,3

**Text:** Lord' Day 31

**Sermon**

**Through the preaching and discipline of the Church we learn whether we are saved or not.**

We see this by considering

1. Preaching
2. Discipline

**Singing:** Ps. 122

**Profession of Faith:** Hy. 1

**Prayer**

**Offertory**

**Singing:** Ps. 32:1,5

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ:

As we have been working our way through the main points of Christian doctrine as summed up in the Catechism, we have done so with the image of walking through a Garden. Taking our cue from the opening Lord's Day, we have called it the Comfort Garden. At times it has been mentioned that the role of a minister is like that of a tour guide.

Now the task of a tour guide is not only to highlight all sorts of interesting details of what is being looked at. It also involves continually reminding those on the tour of the bigger picture. This is important, for only by keeping in mind the bigger picture do the details really stand out. We might also say that the tour guide from time to time has to remind everyone of the context.

In the case of the matter before us this afternoon, namely, the preaching of the gospel and church discipline, we need to keep in mind that it is part of the large section in the Comfort Garden with the heading, "Our Deliverance." In fact, it is the concluding part of this section. This suggests it might even be the climax.

We are not disappointed. For, it is through preaching and discipline that the LORD tells us where it is at personally with each of us in terms of our deliverance. You could even say that through the preaching and discipline the LORD gives us a way of knowing whether we are saved or not. To work this all out, I proclaim to you this afternoon,

**Through the preaching and discipline of the Church we learn whether we are saved or not.**

We see this by considering

1. Preaching
2. Discipline

It may seem like a rather bold statement to say that we can know whether we are saved or not. Ultimately, is this not something only the LORD knows? One could get into a big theological discussion and indeed come to the conclusion, “Yes, only the LORD knows.” That conclusion, however, is enough to send a chill down your spine. If only the LORD knows, does that not rob us of all comfort? How can you even speak of gospel, good news? When we listen to the Scriptures, however, we learn that we can know whether we are saved or not through the preaching of the gospel. We will understand how we can say this when we consider both the nature and content of preaching.

First there is the nature of preaching. Our English word “preaching” is a translation of a Greek word that means “heralding.” The children may have learned about heralds. They were special servants of the king. He would send them to the towns of his empire, perhaps to announce new laws or to announce that the king was coming for a visit. Often the herald would read from a document signed by the king. Note this aspect of announcing. Further, note the authority of these words of the herald. In the end, he was simply the mouthpiece for the king. Anyone who would ignore the words of the herald was ignoring the words of the king. In short, preaching is authoritative proclamation.

This aspect of authoritative proclamation comes out also in other words used to describe those who preached the gospel. We can think of the word “apostle.” This means, “One who is sent.” In 2 Cor. 5, Paul describes himself as an ambassador of God. From the word of international relations, we know that an ambassador is the official representative of a foreign government.

When we take all these words together, we see that preachers of the gospel are those who simply pass on the message they have been given. Their authority lies not in themselves but in the one who sent them.

Being clear on the nature of preaching, we turn now to the content of preaching. You will understand that we have to limit ourselves to the very core of their message. The message is this, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36). This believing in the Son, of course, includes believing that he is the Son of God come into our human flesh who, by his atoning death on the cross, has paid for our sins. Further, it should be noted that believing in him means trusting in his atoning sacrifice. This believing will also be shown in a humble and godly lifestyle. Just the same, it can be summed up in terms of believing in the Son.

What we see then is that in the preaching, we in essence hear the voice of God. He says: believe in the Son and you have life. The kingdom is open. He also says: if you don’t believe, you are under condemnation. In this respect, a preacher is like a judge passing on God’s sentence. To use terms from Psalm 122, he sits on a throne of judgment.

We can see there is tremendous comfort and warning in this. If someone would ask us, “How do you know you are saved?” we can answer, “God told me.” If the person

would say, “prove it to me,” all we would have to say, “Come along on Sunday. Listen to the preacher, God’s ambassador. He tells me every Sunday again, in one way or another, that those who believe in the Son have eternal life. I believe. So, I have eternal life. That’s God’s promise.” There is no need for some quiet inner voice. There is the loud voice of God through his servants.

At the same time, don’t forget the flip side, namely, that unbelievers are under condemnation. There is no need to wait till one appears at heaven’s gate for that information. If one does not believe or is a hypocrite, one should not expect to get to heaven’s gate and be let into the kingdom. The message is clear now already: the wrath of God rests on those who do not believe.

Let us take this to heart. For one who believes, here is comfort. A believer can say: I know I am saved! I heard the preacher say that in the name of God. For one who does not believe, here is warning. You are under condemnation. The preacher says that in the name of God. There is nothing mysterious or secretive about it. It is all plain and simple. To know what God thinks about you, to know your salvation status, listen to what you hear through the preaching.

As we can know through the preaching whether or not we are saved, we can also know through discipline. That is our second point.

When we speak of discipline, we should see it in the narrow sense of correction, even punishment. We are speaking about it just like when parents have to discipline their children. Children know that means being told off, admonished and punished in one way or another.

This sense comes out clearly in the passages listed under this answer. The key passage, which is also reflected most extensively in the Catechism answer, is Mat. 18:15-20. When you look carefully at that passage you will realize that it is more restricted in its talk of discipline than answer 85, for it speaks of dealing with someone who has sinned against you personally. Perhaps someone has dealt dishonestly with another in business, or has spread lies about another. The Catechism takes it a step further, applying it to any kind of wrong someone may have done. Keeping in mind the whole Scripture as it speaks about the believers being members of one body, with the need to look after each other and help each other, this is a proper deduction.

Our Lord’s words in this passage do impress on us the obligation to speak to one another when we see a brother or sister denying the faith by their doctrine or lifestyle. We cannot brush it off and say, “That’s not my business.” It is our business. We are called to be our brother’s keeper. Concretely, this means that if you work with fellow believers and you know a brother or sister lives an unchristian life by, for example, the language they use, you must say something. As this is true in work settings, this is true in play settings too. If there is behaviour that is inappropriate for a Christian, that will dishonour God and his Church, there is a need to speak up. If we think it through, many of the lifestyle issues that rear their head in the church community, like drunkenness or premarital sex, happen

not because no one knows but because those in the know remain silent. A preacher can warn against these sins in general, but as members we can warn each other specifically.

At the same time, this obligation to address sin is not limited to those we know personally and have seen others doing what is wrong. As members of the body of Christ, there is a mutual obligation. If, for example, we have not seen someone in church for a while, there is no reason we cannot call up that person. Perhaps we discover there is illness. Then we can visit to encourage. We may also find there is another problem that will lead us to visit out of brotherly concern to admonish. Christ wants us to have our eyes open so we can look after each other and help each other.

We should note, furthermore, that not only unchristian life needs to be addressed but also unchristian doctrine. It is not the case that you can believe what you want as long as your life is OK. Neither is the case that you can do what you want as long as your doctrine is OK. They go hand in hand. False doctrine will lead to ungodly life. Ungodly life will lead to false doctrine, as people turn the truth inside out to justify their action.

As we speak about this mutual responsibility, it is important, of course, to remember our Lord's words about the beam in your own eye and the speck in the eye of someone else. These words, however, do not cancel his call to mutual admonition. They only point out we should not be hypocritical. Further, we can think of Paul's words in Gal. 6 to be gentle in our admonition. Otherwise we easily fall into the sin of pride.

Our Lord's words in Matthew 18 show that the aim of his instructions was to win the brother or sister by nipping sin in the bud at this early stage. Should this not prove successful, it becomes an official church matter. When the admonitions of the elders prove to be unsuccessful, the eventual conclusion will be excommunication. That is, the church will make an official judgment, declaring that someone who used to be a brother or sister, a fellow member of Christ and his church, is no longer to be considered a Christian. The church may have to say: at one point you belonged, but you belong no longer.

Brs and srs, take note of how the Lord Jesus gave the church the authority to tell someone: you don't belong anymore. You have lost your share in Christ. Considering that the Lord Jesus gave this authority to the church, we know that we must take it seriously. If the church has to tell us: because of your unchristian doctrine or life you are now out of the kingdom, that is exactly how it is! What is bound on earth is bound in heaven. Of course, there is also the flip side. When the church says to the repentant sinner, "your sins are forgiven, you are again a member of Christ and his church," then that is exactly how it is. What it comes down to is that our Lord Jesus has basically made the church the administration center of his kingdom.

We live in a time which has little understanding and appreciation of this role of the church. People like to talk of the invisible church. That church has no address. That church has nothing to say in your life. That is nice and convenient. You can do what you want. So, they will brush off anything the local church says through the preaching and

especially in terms of discipline by saying, “But I belong to the invisible church. I don’t care what the elders say about me.” Anyone who reasons that way should have another look at Matthew 18:15-20 or 1 Cor. 5:3-5. Those passages, for one thing, make short work of this idea of an invisible church. Paul wrote to very concrete churches. Discipline is exercised by very concrete churches. Further, a person who ignores the discipline of the church will come up against a big surprise at heaven’s gate when he will hear Christ say: You don’t belong, and I told you so every time the elders came to your place and called you to repentance. You made a big mistake, an eternal mistake. When you ignored them you ignored me for I sent them and I was with them.

Now keep in mind that this discipline is in the section on our deliverance. Discipline, while painful, has as goal repentance, restoration, indeed, the salvation of the sinner. Discipline shows the care of the Good Shepherd who is not just ready to push away but who goes out of his way to find the lost sheep and bring them back. He does this through his church.

Brothers and sisters, note well then the role preaching and discipline play in your salvation. Through preaching and discipline the Lord enables us to know exactly where it’s at with our eternal salvation. For the unbelievers and hypocrites, the message is clear: don’t fool yourself into thinking you can ignore the church’s preaching and discipline. One word sums up what God calls you to do: Repent. For the believers, the message is also clear: accept what you hear as God’s unfailing word. Go home in peace. Amen.