

## John 8:48-59

There are three responses to the Gospel. We see one of them in our text for today. It seems pretty extreme. These particular Jews become so angry at Jesus that they pick up stones to throw at Him. Well, He must have offended them, right? He must have cut them apart with His words. Jesus does expose them by speaking the truth, but what makes them angry to the point of trying to kill Him is when He speaks the beautiful words, not of the Law, but of the Gospel: *"If anyone keeps My word,"* He promises, *"he will never see death."* This is what fires them up. They argue with Him. They take exception to His statement. And then when Jesus tells them why these words are true: *"Before Abraham was, I am,"* they reach down and grab stone to hurl at Him.

Well, if this is one reaction and response to the preaching of the Gospel of salvation, where do we see a response that is the opposite of this? Unfortunately, not in our text. But I do see that reaction right here among you. For when you hear the words of Jesus, the Gospel of your salvation, your response is not to seek stones to hurl. Rather, you believe what you hear. You come back, again and again, to keep hearing. You respond to the Gospel by singing your praises to God, by presenting your offerings to the Lord.

This is the response God is looking for, and it comes about not because you are better people than those Jews in our text. Your response to the Gospel is effected by the work of the Holy Spirit within you as you hear the words of Jesus.

Two responses to the Gospel. One, utter anger and contempt for it and the one who preaches it. The second, receiving the good news of Jesus in a heart of faith, and this faith expressing itself in works of love. But these two are not opposites. Not in this sense, that both are strong reactions to the Gospel. One hates Jesus and one loves Him.

There is a third response to the Gospel which may actually be the opposite of the first two: apathy, indifference, no reaction at all. This person hears Jesus' words and doesn't hate Him or love Him; he just doesn't care. He has no desire to hurl stones, but neither does he love Jesus' words, and believe them, and live them.

This person, says Jesus in Revelation 3, is lukewarm, and it makes Him want to vomit. *"I wish you were either hot or cold,"* He says, *"but because you are lukewarm, I will expel you from My mouth."* Had St. Paul been lukewarm before Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, He wouldn't have wasted His time with him. But Paul was one of those angry ones who hated Jesus. Paul's reaction to the Gospel was to pick up stones. But that's why Jesus wanted him for an apostle. The water faucet was running full blast with Paul; Jesus just had to turn it from cold to hot...and He did.

The Gospel in our text is Jesus' statement: *"If anyone keeps My word, he will never see death."* This is Jesus' word to anyone and everyone; it's His word to you. It is not a law to fulfill; it's invitation and promise.

Picture a family at Disneyworld: a father and mother with their children. The parents purchase tickets for their children, and then they kneel down and press those tickets into the hands of their little ones and they say: "Keep these tickets until we come to that gate over there." What are these small children going to do? Tear up their tickets in anger? Act indifferent, yawn, and say, "Whatever...I don't really care"? Of course not! They will clutch their tickets tightly as if they were a treasure, follow their mom and dad to the gate, and then hold up their ticket to be scanned as the gate opens to them.

This is the spirit in which Jesus says, “*If anyone keeps My word...*” It’s not just one more law for us to keep and obey. No, Jesus presses His word of life into our tiny hands when we are baptized. He walks with us toward the gate of heaven, all the while folding our hands around His word by preaching, catechizing, teaching, and the Sacrament. It’s not a burden of law to hear Him say, “*Keep My word...*” It’s a treasure. It’s what we want to do more than anything.

To keep His Word is to love His Word...to trust it, to believe it, to guard and treasure it...because it’s our ticket into something much greater than Disneyworld. It’s the ticket He purchased for us by His bloody death and resurrection. It’s what He presses into our hands by grace because we are His dear children.

Can you imagine how stunned and sad a mom and dad would be if their little children were to react in anger in giving them tickets to Disneyworld? And here in our text we see Jesus pressing the precious Gospel into the ears of these Jews, but they react in anger and violence. What God expects...what He wants is to see you clutching His ticket for you in your hand, holding it tightly and treasuring it, not because you have to, but because you want to.

The temptation for us here is not so much to become like the Jews in our text. We who have been raised on the words of Jesus are not suddenly going to turn from hot to cold and begin to hate Jesus and His words of life. The temptation for us is to become lukewarm. The enemy of love is not hate, but apathy, indifference, just not caring anymore. That’s where we are when it doesn’t bother us to miss church. We are lukewarm when we can sit through worship, hear the sermon, and even take the Sacrament, but leave with no thought to what happened and what we received.

That’s how children lose their tickets on their way to the gate at Disneyworld. Not by tearing them up in anger, but by simply becoming lukewarm; by not caring as much as they did when they were first given their ticket. And so, losing it by not holding it close anymore and treasuring it.

This is why church pews are not filled up, and by their own members. Not because their members go from hot to cold, but because they become lukewarm to the Gospel. They stop caring. They lose sight of the gate. They no longer treasure and guard the ticket given them in their Baptism. “*Keep My word...*” becomes, not a sweet invitation and promise, but a burden of the law, which it was never meant to be.

Jesus kept His Father’s word. This is what He tells the Jews in our text. He kept His eye on the gate...on the prize. That prize is you. Jesus guarded the word His Father gave Him - the word that led Him to the cross, but also to His resurrection. And so Jesus now owns *Disneyworld*. It is His to give to anyone and everyone who, as He puts it, “*keeps My word...*” Jesus can say, “*If (you) keep My word, (you) will never see death,*” because He is the gate, no, not to Disneyworld; the gate into life, eternal life. This ticket has your name on it. Into your hands Jesus presses His word. Into your ears He speaks His promises.

Mom and Dad know that their little children are easily distracted, and so they stay with them all the way to the gate. And so with Jesus. He doesn’t baptize you, giving you your ticket, and then say, “See ya... hope you make it!” He stays with you. He is here, now, in your midst preaching to you through the mouth of your pastor. He is in the bread and wine on the altar for you, to guard you and treasure you. He stays with you to lead you to the gate because He is the gate into heaven. And He stays with you to forgive you because you and I daily sin much. We would all become lukewarm, everyone of us, were it not that Jesus keeps coming to us to forgive us. And He does. Whether you’ve been lukewarm or even cold; not caring about Jesus or even hating Him, He forgives you. And through this Gospel of forgiveness, He produces in you the response He is looking for.

The gate is just ahead. We cannot see it, but we believe it. Friend, Jesus is your ticket. He holds on to you in love. That’s why you can keep holding on to Him. Amen.