

SERMON

Confirmation Address

Gustaf Wingren

1 Peter 3:13 · 1940

Eve of Pentecost, 11 May 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: 1 Peter 3:13

Hymns: 525:1–4; 22; 228; 174

“Who is there to harm you, if you are eager for what is good?”

To be on earth is to run the risk of being exposed to evil. For wherever we may want to go on this earth, evil follows us. Envy, slander, and injustice live here, openly or hidden away, and no one escapes their attack. The person who is born here and begins the journey toward the grave has set out on an adventure. That is true even if he stays in his home parish all his life, and even if he is allowed to live out his days in outward peace. The enemies of life hang over his way: sickness, misfortune, poverty, together with all the human evil we just mentioned — which is truly no easier to deal with than sickness and accidents. When we see a young person with a clear face, untouched by the storms of life, we are often seized with dread at the coarseness of life, and we ask: “What will it be that wipes out the purity in that girl’s features? What will it be that sweeps away the confidence in that young man’s eyes? What will break and defile this fragile human life?” And experience often seems to confirm the bitter words of a Swedish poet who himself was finally broken in his struggle with life: “What dreams most fair and what looks most mild shall most brutally and most wildly be broken against the ground and soiled with earth.”

All this we know, and so we also know what fear is. No one escapes feeling the fear of life in his soul at some time. How many of our actions are not aimed at making ourselves safe, at guarding ourselves against evil? We want to win our life, and we make plans to win it.

Now our word today says: “Who is there to harm you, if you are eager for what is good?” The one who wills the good would then be on the safe side. Is that true? Reality seems unwilling to

confirm the truth of this word. In a time like this one especially, it is often the good will that is exposed to the grossest outrages. The good will seldom prepares for violence, and so it makes all the better a victim for the ruthless and the strong. In a time like this one can almost feel inclined to turn our Bible saying completely upside down and say instead: "Beware of being good and true and unselfish. It never goes well. These are wolf times, and the only one who escapes evil is the one who in earnest makes himself a wolf, uses his elbows, and holds on to what is his."

It may well happen that such a self-asserting person manages his outward life quite well. But he has not, for all that, managed to keep evil at a distance. On the contrary, evil has taken possession of him and gained a foothold in his heart. And it shows itself in one quite definite way: he can never be truly glad. That morning-bright gladness that lives in the breast of an upright and merciful person has left him. He never gets that gladness back as long as he wants only to assert himself.

In the one who is "eager for the good," on the other hand, gladness can never die. Whatever happens, however things go, a wonderful peace lives deep in the heart — the peace that a good conscience gives, and that not even the bitterest fate can take from him. But in a time like this it should perhaps be added that the one who is "eager for the good" is not some meek person who lets violence and injustice run riot without resistance. The father who lets the bandit rob the bread from his hungry children unhindered is not eager for what is good. Neither is the one who hears a lie without seeking mercilessly to kill it. Neither is the one who is willing to hand over his home district and his fatherland to invaders without trying to defend it, according to the measure of his strength and in the place where God has set him. The one who is eager for the good is not minded to let any real values of life be lost — except one single value, namely his own purely private success and welfare. That he can let go, if the good cause should require it. Such a person cannot be defeated. Who is there to harm such a person?

The one who knows something of the gladness in such an attitude to life also knows that such a person fears nothing so much as he fears sin: injustice in his own heart, the inclination to slip away from the truth, the desire to be selfish. This is the enemy that is truly dangerous, the one real enemy. For if I tumble down into this cowardly and selfish attitude to life, then my peace is gone, my gladness is gone, my strength is gone. Then "I am no longer eager for what is good." And in that same moment I am defenseless in life. Then the truly paralyzing fear begins to take hold of me: fear of misfortune, sickness, punishment, fear of death. And if

things go so far downhill with a person that he no longer even struggles against the power of sin but resigns himself to it, and begins instead to be eager for what is evil, then — but only then — has real misfortune struck him. Then one can say to him: “Who is there to do you any good, if you are eager for what is evil?” Gifts, kindness, forbearance — all the good in the world is wasted if it is handed to an outright evil person. Whatever he receives, he uses only to increase the evil in the world. The only truly good deed that can be done for such a person is to re-create his heart, so that he begins again to be eager for what is good. But such a renewal of a human heart is not in human power. It is in God’s power.

You who are confirmed today stand ready to begin the adventure that life is. In fact you have already begun it. The fundamental powers of existence make themselves known earlier in a young person’s life than older people usually believe. You know a good deal about the devastating work of lying, cowardice, and selfishness in the heart. You also know a good deal about the indescribable gladness of defending a good cause, speaking the truth, and doing what is right. Never let go of the good. Be assured that the one who is eager for what is good is, at bottom, invulnerable, for he has eternity on his side. The one who seeks evil, meanwhile, grasps at one perishable and rotten support after another.

If you fight that fight, the fight for the good, honestly and uprightly, you will gradually make a discovery. Now perhaps you see evil mostly as something outside you, in others — in dishonest, petty people whom you look down on for their wretchedness. The longer you live, the more you notice that the chief seat of evil, the place that must be guarded above all, is inside one’s own heart, which is full of evil thoughts and desires. Every honest Christian makes that discovery. But then, when one sees this, when I notice how much evil there is within me, a figure begins to grow before my eyes. A light I had never sensed before begins to shine around that figure. I see a man who calmly, without wavering, went forward on his way, eager without a break for what is good. At last, with a prayer for his enemies, he went into the agony of the cross rather than betray the truth the Father had set him to proclaim in word and deed. He is the only one who can say of himself that he has never done anything but be eager for the good. He is also the guarantee of the truth of our Bible saying. For what could evil kill in that man? The enemy broke his body in the night of Golgotha, but his work was secured forever through that very sacrificial death. He broke the seal of the grave on Easter morning, and he is near us always, to the end of time. “Who was there to harm him, when he was eager for what is good?”

With him before our eyes we go into the battle for all that is good. With him before our eyes there is hope, even when we discover the evil of our own heart. For all others only drive us on and make demands on us. But he has something more to say, something more to give. His power is strongest just when we are weakest. He brings the message of forgiveness to us. If we go astray, he strikes out our sin and lets us begin again, without the old being counted and laid on us. The one who makes him King may remain, to the end of life, a child who has just begun his struggle — and that is the highest thing that can be said of a human being.

And now: may God bless you on the journey through this wonderful life. You are growing up in a time when hatred is gathering strength in the world. But at the same time, love and the will to sacrifice are stronger in our people than at any time we can remember. Many may want to pity those who are young now. The question is whether it is not rather a grace to grow up in such a time — a time when the power of evil and the power of good are both growing at once, a time that can teach us what struggle is, a time when flabby slackness, enemy number one of all healthy youth, lies in its death throes. May you go into the fight for the good without fear or timidity. “Who is there to harm you, if you are eager for what is good?” Amen.

Translator's notes. “Nitälska för det goda” is rendered “be eager for what is good” throughout, so that Wingren’s repetitions of the verse, and his reversal of it (“Who is there to do you any good, if you are eager for what is evil?”), can be heard as the same words. Where Swedish uses “hon” for “människa,” the English uses “he,” as our other translations do. A hymn number given as “22:–” in the typescript means the whole hymn. The Swedish poet is not named in the sermon, and the lines are translated for sense. In the sentence on “den dag, vi minnas,” the comparison is read as “at any time we can remember.”

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·