



Does He Mean That Literally?

Recently in our study on angels, right before we read a verse that gives us the impression that we may have specific angels assigned to guard us - "guardian angels" - we read this:

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

Matthew 18:8-9 (NIV)

The question above came after reading those two verses. Was Jesus really meaning that we should cut off hands and feet and pluck out eyes?

I don't think so. He's simply using a literary device we all use when we talk with friends. It's called "hyperbole" - exaggeration to make a point.

For example, if I told you "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," would you go out and immediately contact the authorities to come and take me away? Would you call the folks across the road from church and tell them to get their horses in from the yard real quick-like? Of course not. You would know that I'm not really intending on going horse hunting in order to get a meal. I've made an exaggerated statement to drive home the fact that I'm REALLY hungry - maybe in a more memorable way than simply stating "I'm really hungry."

Jesus wants His disciples (that includes us) to recognize just how deadly sin can be, so instead of making a statement they may not remember like, "Sin is very dangerous, guys," He puts it in terms they will likely never forget.

How do we know that's what Jesus is doing and that He's not being literal? Well, if Jesus was being literal with that statement we would expect many Bible accounts of things like: "... and Peter went around blind for the last thirty years of his life, having plucked out his eyes to keep from sinning." We have no such stories. Nor should we expect any, because Jesus was simply driving home the point in a very vivid and memorable way, that sin is to be avoided at all costs. I'm guessing those are a couple verses, graphic though they may be, that we would all do well to commit to memory.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net