



CWRm

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“Are Jesus’ warnings to be taken as threats?”

Question: I’m nearly finished reading *A More Christlike God*. I appreciate your insights. I’ve been on a journey away from the angry, vengeful, bloodthirsty God over the past year. But now I feel like I’m in one of those valleys where I wonder if we’re creating a version of God who doesn’t exist?

I’m curious about Jesus’ interaction in John 5 with the man at the pool on the Sabbath. Jesus tells him, “*See you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.*” Are Jesus’ warnings to be taken as threats? Is Jesus warning him about what the Jewish council might do to him? Is he using the word “sin” in a cheeky way, since he obviously doesn’t believe carrying a mat on the Sabbath is a sin? It seems like a stretch but that’s all I can think of.

Response: A very good question! First, let’s begin by acknowledging that when we see our loving Father issuing warnings about the effects of sin, we need not regard loving warnings as threats.

It’s similar for me as a 12-step recovery sponsor. If someone finds sobriety from self-destructive cycles of addiction and is enjoying their new life in recovery, I may say, “Now that you are clean, you need to live in daily surrender to the grace and loving care of God, because apart from that, relapse is inevitable. Since addiction, by nature, is progressive and destructive, your next slip is normally going to be worse for you and/or your loved ones. This stuff can kill you. No, *I’m not threatening you.* I’m urging you to say “no” to self-will and instead, depend on the love and strength of your heavenly Father.”

Hopefully, you can see that I would only give such dire warnings to addicts flirting with going their own way rather than following the Jesus Way. I never do this to threaten them or heap guilt and shame on them, but only because I want them to live.

A slightly more mundane illustration comes from the world of traffic. Think about speed limit signs. If we view them through the eyes of a legalist or a lawbreaker, we will mistake the signs for threats of punishment: *the speed limit is 30. If you go 60 around this corner, you will get a ticket.*

But are speed limits imposed with the intent of threatening punishment? No. Speed limits and their signs are warnings intended to save lives. *The speed limit is 30. If you go 60 around this corner, you could harm yourself or someone else. Indeed, you could die! So slow down!*

No, the traffic cop won’t kill you for speeding. But gravity, a tree or the ditch make speeding a life and death issue. The same sign speaks differently to two mindsets—law or love.

In the case of the paralytic in John 5, we are not privy to the original cause of his disability. Nor are we told what sins Jesus imagined the newly healed man might be tempted to commit. But a love mindset starts with the assumption that God is love, revealed in Christ, so we don’t read about Jesus the threatener or Jesus the punisher in this passage. Rather, this is Jesus the infallible Guide, offering loving directions as the man’s new legs give him freedom to either follow Christ’s way or to careen along some other more perilous path.

As a dad, I connect with Jesus’ concern for the man’s first steps—just as I felt concern for my children when they took their first steps outside our house. Will they run to Daddy or make a break for the busy road? I wasn’t prepared to keep them locked in the house forever, so I expressed parental love in both encouragement (“*Go for it, boys!*”) and warnings, (“*Stay away from the road!*”). I can’t say how good my parenting was, but I know that when we see Jesus, he reflects the love of our perfect heavenly Father. □

Brad Jersak was a pastor and church-planter for 20 years prior to his teaching career and signing on with CWRm.