

October 19, 2014
Pentecost 19

"Repent and Live"

EZEKIEL 18:1-4, 25-32

The word of the LORD came to me: ² "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? ³ "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴ For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son-- both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

²⁵ "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? ²⁶ If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. ²⁷ But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. ²⁸ Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. ²⁹ Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? ³⁰ "Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. ³¹ Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

An elderly man was in the hospital recovering from surgery. He reached for a cup of water on the tray beside him accidentally knocking it over and spilling the water on the floor. Afraid someone might slip on the water he asked the nurses' aid if she might mop it up. The hospital rules said the nurses' aid was to clean up small spills but housekeeping was responsible for larger spills. The nurses' aid decided it was a large enough spill to call in housekeeping. The housekeeper arrive and declared the spill was a small one. The nurses' aid insisted it was a large spill. And so they went back and forth in the presence of this man who was not feeling too well after surgery. The exasperated man listened for a while, then reach for the plastic pitcher of water and pushed it off the tray, spilling the contents on the floor. Now there was enough water on the floor to end the foolish argument.

As silly as this story is, it illustrates how people are reluctant to accept responsibility not just for the jobs assigned to them, but also for their mistakes and failures and sinful behavior. There was a comedian in the 1970's named Flip Wilson who had a ready answer for anyone who caught himself doing something wrong. It was always the same excuse. With an impish grin he defended his action with the words, "The devil made me do it." The child who did not get his homework finished says with great feigned sadness in his voice, "My dog ate my homework paper." Or how about this one. "I don't go to church because when I was younger my parents forced me to go to church." How easy it is to blame someone else for our failings and shortcomings and even our sinful behavior.

So it was with God's people living as captives in the land of Babylon. Oh how they cried out that God was being unfair to them for putting them into captivity because of the sins their parents and grandparents. They worshipped false gods such as Baal and even sacrificed their children to their false gods, and now their children were being punished for their sins.

Our God does not want us to join these Old Testament people in the "blame game." He wants us to accept responsibility for the sinful actions in our lives. He wants us to turn to him for forgiveness. This morning we listen to our God speak to us as he tells us here in his Word to "Repent and live."

Stop evading responsibility

To repent and live we need to stop evading responsibility for our actions. God used prophets such as Ezekiel to turn the hearts of people away from their blaming others to accepting responsibility for their own actions and seeking help from God. Notice how the Lord spoke through the prophets. Ezekiel says, "The word of the Lord came to me." Read the book of Ezekiel and notice how many times the prophet says, "The word of the Lord came to me." God actually spoke important messages for his Old Testament people and for us through these prophets. 2 Peter 1:21 says, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Ezekiel calls out these people for passing the blame on others instead of accepting responsibility for their own actions. "What do your people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?" Bite into a sour grape or sour lemon and it will set your teeth on edge. It will pucker your lips. If I suck on a sour lemon I am responsible for setting my own teeth on edge. If I do this I do not cause the teeth of my children who live in Santa Barbara, Denver and San Diego to have their teeth set on edge. Yet, these people were saying that God was making their teeth hurt because their parents and grandparents did awful things against the Lord. They are blaming God for punishing them for the sins of their parents, instead of examining their own rebellion against God and seeking his forgiveness.

When the Lord God came to Adam in the Garden of Eden and asked him, "Have you eaten from the tree that I have commanded you not to eat from?" His immediate response was not to accept responsibility for his rebellion against God. His immediate response was to blame his wife Eve and even God for giving him such a terrible woman whom he was called bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. Adam thinks he is evading responsibility for his action when he says with sanctimonious piety, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

If you could get into the personal files of every person on the face of this earth you will discover multiple levels and layers of blaming others and even God to avoid accepting responsibility for sin. A young man who grew up with a religious mother almost dies in surgery. He spends the rest of his life blaming God and using this as excuse to not come to worship or read the Bible or get close to God and the salvation he has for him. A twelve year old named Jennifer tells her pastor that she no longer wants to come to Sunday School and church because she prayed for a horse and God did not give her horse. In her view she has good reason to turn against God and not believe in his plan to rescue her

from her sin.

Notice what the Lord says to these people as he encourages them to not blame others for their problems but accept responsibility for their own lives. "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel, for every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son. The soul that sins is the one who will die." What really counts in life is not finding people I can blame for my problems and troubles, but accepting responsibility for my own life and my own sinful actions. The Lord says, "Every living soul belongs to me." God created all people. Scriptures says, "In him we live and move and have our being." "Yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight." The Lord also says, "The soul who sins will die." Lord wants people to recognize their own personal problem with sin. He wants people to come back to him and be part of his plan to rescue them regardless of who they are and what problems they may have had in their families or the generations that went before them.

One of the most amazing stories or accounts in the Bible is that of Joseph who was sorely mistreated by his brothers. Remember how they conspired to kill him. Because of the oldest brother Reuben, they threw him into a dry cistern and sold him into slavery in the land of Egypt. If ever there was a man who had good reason to spend his whole life blaming his family for his own problems and troubles in life it was Joseph. Instead, it says, "The Lord was with Joseph." The Lord did so much more for him than develop superb managerial skills in the home of a wealthy Egyptian, or in the prison or for the mighty Pharaoh of Egypt. The Lord was with Joseph and gave him a new heart that repented of his own sins of arrogance and pride, turned to the Lord for forgiveness and then even forgave his brothers.

"The soul that sins is the one who will die." The Lord does not wants us to get so wrapped up in this blame game problem that we lose sight of what he wants for us and that is to repent and live.

Start accepting responsibility and the Lord's forgiveness

Notice now how the Lord proceeds to give new hearts to these people who were listening to the prophet Ezekiel. First the Lord points out that he is just and fair contrary to what they were saying. "Hear O house of Israel; Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it." Look at that righteous person over there. He goes to church every Sunday. He sings in the choir. He teaches Sunday school. If that person opens himself up to sin is he not responsible for what he has done? He cannot blame God for his sinful behavior. He may even die and perish eternally, if he continues in such an unrepentant condition.

Now look at the wicked person. The Lord says, "But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life." Take the man who died next to Jesus as example. He turned from his life of wickedness in the eleventh hour of his life. He turned to Jesus and said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." What did Jesus say to him? "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

The Lord defends himself with these words, "Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that our unjust?" You cannot satisfy God's system of justice and perfection and holiness

by blaming other people for your problems. The only way to satisfy God's justice is to believe in his system of justice. God is not like a judge who lets people off the hook. He must by his very nature as God maintain justice and righteousness by punishing all sin. He says in verse 30, "I will judge each of you. This same God of justice is a God of love who developed a plan to satisfy his own system. He took our sin and put it all on Jesus and had him punished in our place. That is not fair according to our system of justice, but that is what God carefully planned and executed to satisfy his system of justice and allow us to go free. If my whole life is spent always blaming others for hurting me, or not helping me, or not being as kind to me as they should be, I could miss out the greatest blessing in the world, the mercy and kindness and goodness of God that provided a Savior for me.

This morning the Lord tells us, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked." The Lord does not want to see you or me living in the dark dungeon of the blame game. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. The nurses' aid and the housekeeper did not want to take responsibility for the spill on the hospital floor. Each could argue, "I am not responsible for that mess." When it comes to huge spill of sin in my life, a real gusher if you will, I am responsible for that sin. I know I have no resources in myself to take care of the problem, but I do have Jesus and through him I have life to the full. Romans 5 says, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more. Amen.