

May 23 Lesson 12 (NIV)

PREACHING TO THE EXILES

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 147

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 18

EZEKIEL 18:1–9, 30–32

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² “What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

“ ‘The parents 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 everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.

⁵ “Suppose there is a righteous man
who does what is just and right.

⁶ He does not eat at the mountain shrines
or look to the idols of Israel.

He does not defile his neighbor’s wife
or have sexual relations with a woman during her period.

⁷ He does not oppress anyone,
but returns what he took in pledge for a loan.

He does not commit robbery
but gives his food to the hungry
and provides clothing for the naked.

⁸ He does not lend them at interest
or take a profit from them.

He withholds his hand from doing wrong
and judges fairly between two parties.

⁹ He follows my decrees
and faithfully keeps my laws.

That man is righteous;
he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

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³⁰ “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own 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, people of Israel? ³² For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”

KEY VERSE

“Everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.” —Ezekiel 18:4

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD’S COVENANT

Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change

LESSONS 9–13

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HOW TO SAY IT

Adonai (Hebrew)Ad-owe-nye.

CanaaniteKay-nun-ite.

Elohim (Hebrew)(Hebrew) El-o-*heem*.

JehoiachinJeh-*hoy*-uh-kin.

Kebar*Kee*-bar.

Yahweh (Hebrew)*Yaw*-way.

Introduction

A. Imagined Righteousness

The phrase *vicarious nostalgia* refers to a feeling of yearning for a past that one never actually lived. This term could describe a person born in the 1980s who loves a 1950s aesthetic and thinks of those years as simpler and better in many ways. It can describe a desire to return to “the good old days” that didn’t actually happen the way one imagines or even remembers.

For years, Garrison Keillor hosted a popular radio show in which he told touching and humorous stories about the citizens of a small fictional town in Minnesota. Each week he closed his program with the familiar sign-off, “Well, that’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” These descriptions are obviously caricatures, meant to capture a feeling of community pride more than an attainable reality. Yet, a place like Lake Wobegon can inspire vicarious nostalgia for all of us who live more complicated lives than the strong women, good-looking men, and brilliant children of that town.

An overstated self-assessment is dangerous enough in nostalgia. However, lacking a correct view of oneself is a devastating flaw. In this week’s lesson, the exiles didn’t understand their own role in the difficult situation the nation was facing. They assigned fault to their parents while claiming their own moral innocence.

B. Lesson Context

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, prophesied during and after the final chaotic years of the kingdom of Judah. He was called by God “in the fourth month on the fifth day ... the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin” (Ezekiel 1:1–2). Jehoiachin reigned only three months in 597 BC before the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took him, along with thousands of the most prominent and skilled people of Judah, to Babylon (2 Kings 24:14). This detail dates the beginning of Ezekiel’s book in 592 BC.

The group of deportees included the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1–3). The ruin of Jerusalem was devastating for the exiles. Jeremiah’s book of Lamentations captures the anguish that the destruction of the city and loss of human life caused (see lesson 8). Though some were left in Jerusalem and wider Judah, the survivors to whom Ezekiel spoke were those taken away to Babylon (see lesson 8 Lesson Context). They lived together by the river Kebar.

The Babylonian exile created great uncertainty about the people's relationship with God. Could God, who had allowed his holy city to be ravaged and his people carried into exile, still care for the people? And if he still cared, could he actually *take* care of them in a foreign nation?

I. A Proverb (EZEKIEL 18:1–4)

A. Repeated by the People (vv. 1–2)

1. The word of the LORD came to me:

The word of the Lord is a common phrase used in Ezekiel to emphasize that the Lord spoke to his prophet. This phrase occurs dozens of times in this book—far more often than in any other Bible book. Its frequent use in Ezekiel emphasizes that God communicated with his people even in exile. His continuing to speak to Ezekiel was meant in part to reassure the people that God was still with them in a foreign land.

2. “What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: ‘The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’?”

As the exiles wallowed in the misery of their situation, now in its sixth or seventh year (Ezekiel 8:1; 20:1), they naturally tried to come to grips with the reason for it. In so doing, they landed on a *proverb* that became popular. A proverb is a short, pithy statement used to express a general truth in a memorable way. The prophet Jeremiah was also confronted with this same proverb in his situation back in Judea (Jeremiah 31:29–30).

The Targum, a first-century AD Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible, gives the meaning of the proverb: “The fathers sin, the children suffer.” Therefore, *The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge* expresses the belief that those in exile (the children) are unjustly bearing the punishment for the sins of earlier generations (the parents). Claiming that their problem is inherited, the exiles deny responsibility or guilt on their part.

The proverb has some truth to it in that the sins of one generation can have lasting effects on the next. We may think of how children suffer today when a breadwinning parent is sent to jail for a crime. Ezekiel himself pointed out that the exile was the result of covenant unfaithfulness by many generations of Israelites (Ezekiel 16). God had revealed himself as the one “punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 20:5). The exiles’ ancestors were indeed guilty (example: 2 Kings 21:1–16). But this generation had been expelled from the promised land because of their own sin.

B. Refuted by God (vv. 3–4)

3. “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel.

The fact that the sins of one generation have consequences for another is not the same as saying that God punishes an innocent group for the sins of a guilty group. Although there are times when the all-knowing and sovereign God deems this to be fitting, it is rare and certainly

not the norm. The problem in today's text is that the exiles specifically apply their *proverb* to disavow any culpability for their situation. In so doing, they can claim that God is unjust in his dealings with them (Ezekiel 18:25–29; 33:17–20).

4. “For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.

Everyone belongs to God since he is the sovereign Creator. This included his chosen people as well as their Babylonian oppressors. His justice was not and is not limited by national borders (see Ezekiel 25–32). Therefore he has the right to declare that *the one who sins is the one who will die*. Each person is responsible to God for his or her own sin, and God will deal with each person individually. In giving the Israelites his law, God commanded that “parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16).

This principle applied to how God dealt with his exiled people. His judgments are fair and true. It was pointless for the exiles to insist on their innocence (Romans 3:23). The apostle Paul echoed Ezekiel's words by stating that “the wages of sin is death” (6:23).

II. A Case Study

(EZEKIEL 18:5–9)

A. A Man's Actions (vv. 5–9a)

5. “Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right.

This verse sets up the first of three case studies. The second and third, in Ezekiel 18:10–17, are not part of today's lesson text. For the hypothetical *man* introduced here to be *just* is another, parallel way of saying that he does *what is just and right*. It's interesting to note how rare it is for the Hebrew words translated “righteous,” “just,” and “right” to occur in the same verse; the only other place is Jeremiah 23:5. Specifics follow.

6a. “He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of Israel.

Eating *at the mountain shrines* refers to participation in idolatrous cult practices that were common in the mountain regions (compare 2 Kings 23:1–8; contrast 21:1–3). These high places featured altars, often dedicated to the worship of Canaanite deities such as Baal. To *look to the idols of Israel* was to worship and seek help from false gods or to make an image of the true God for worship.

Proper love for God begins with worshipping no other gods (compare Exodus 20:3–6). The righteous person didn't turn to false gods for assistance. He or she remained dependent on God alone for health and protection.

The exiles were hundreds of miles away from the high places of their fathers' idols. But the exiles were surrounded by the countless deities of the Babylonians. The temptation of straying to other gods remained real, especially when the exiles considered their uncertainty regarding God's continuing care.

6b. “He does not defile his neighbor's wife or have sexual relations with a woman during her period.

The just man also was careful to stay morally pure. The Law of Moses prohibited not only adultery (Exodus 20:14) but also intercourse during a woman's menstrual *period* (Leviticus 15:19–33; 18:19). The penalty for violation of the latter was that “both of them are to be cut off from their people” (20:18). Some suggest that the reason for this restriction was because of the special role of blood in atoning for sins, respecting certain rights of women, or to maintain ceremonial purity. Whatever the reason, the righteous man observed this statute as well.

7. “He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked.”

The righteous man also exhibits godly love toward others. Righteousness consists of more than merely doing no harm. A righteous or just person uses his or her resources to provide for the material needs of others (James 2:15–16). These examples are all forms of economic righteousness shown to the debtor and *the hungry* and *the naked*. These are representative of other needy neighbors as well.

We note that all the positive and negative actions addressed here are covered in the Law of Moses (see Exodus 20:15; 21:2; 22:21, 26–27; Deuteronomy 15:7–11; 23:19–20). The righteous man never lies about or wrongs a neighbor for any reason, in careful obedience to Deuteronomy 5:20–21. Rather, he keeps his distance from evil and all forms of judicial corruption (16:19). In short, such a man puts God's law above any opportunity to gain at the expense of another.

8. “He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between two parties.”

The economically vulnerable often found themselves (and still do today) in positions where they had no choice but to accept the terms of predatory lenders. God viewed the practice as evidence that his people had forgotten him (Ezekiel 22:12). He is the protector of the downtrodden, and he expected his people to be the same (Psalm 82:3; Proverbs 14:31).

While the wicked people took advantage of the poor in various ways, the righteous person in Israel did not charge *interest* on loans to fellow Israelites. And while interest could be charged to a foreigner, it still had to be restrained (Deuteronomy 23:19–20).

9a. “He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws.”

Here we have a sparkling example of the parallelism that is a hallmark of Hebrew poetry: *follows* is another way of saying *keeps*. Likewise, God's *decrees* are the same as his *laws*. These same two sets of parallels of the underlying Hebrew terms are also found in Ezekiel 11:20; 18:9; 20:19, 21; 37:24. Comprehensively, the righteous person does not follow the selfish, sinful ways of others in any respect.

B. God's Verdict (v. 9b)

9b. “That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

God will not judge or punish the *righteous* person for the sins of others—period. We may note in passing that the capitalization in the phrase *the Sovereign LORD* indicates different Hebrew words than does that in the phrase “the LORD ... God” as the latter occurs in, for example, Ezekiel 20:5b. There are three single-word Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament: Yahweh,

Adonai, and Elohim. The phrases “the Sovereign LORD” and “the LORD ... God” indicate different combinations of these names.

III. A Call (EZEKIEL 18:30–32)

A. To Repent (vv. 30–31)

30–31a. “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed,

What follows recalls Solomon’s prayer that God would forgive the people of their sins and heal their land when they repented (2 Chronicles 6:36–39). Israel’s sense of national connectedness had diminished following the division into two kingdoms after Solomon’s death in 930 BC. A sense of moral responsibility for the sins of the community followed. However, the Scriptures insist that both guilt and salvation have a corporate aspect (example: 1 Corinthians 5:6–11). Sinful characteristics are transmitted from generation to generation. But God affirmed that he would also judge each person individually, according to his or her walk before God.

This is important enough to restate in a slightly different way. God said that he would judge the *Israelites* [plural, corporate aspect], *each of you according to your own ways* [individual aspect]. Although each person was responsible for his or her own guilt before the Lord, individual decisions affected the community as a whole. The collective singular *house of* shows that the covenant God had with Israel was corporate; it included the whole of Israel. The singular *each of you* shows that the overall moral tone of the community was formed on the collective choices of individuals. The Israelites were to look not at the conduct of their ancestors but to their own. The people were to rid themselves of any and all personal sin. To repent is to avoid the judgment of death that sin brings. God would be gracious and forgive all who turned to him in repentance.

31b. “and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel?”

Those in the generation experiencing exile were worthy of the judgment that also could have fallen on the prior generation. However, God was equally clear that condemnation wasn’t inevitable. He defined repentance as the rejection of one’s past sinful ways, and he appealed to the *people of Israel* to accept *a new heart and a new spirit*. God had already promised to do this (Ezekiel 11:19).

God’s rhetorical question *Why will you die?* meant that the sentence of death was not inevitable since God extended an offer of forgiveness through repentance. Each individual had the freedom to choose life or death. If the people did not have free will, then they would not have been responsible. People are capable of knowing right from wrong, and God deals with us on that basis. The blame for one’s sin and judgment cannot be shifted to God, Satan, nature, nurture, parents, or circumstances.

B. To Live (v. 32)

32. “For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”

God takes *no pleasure* in the destruction of his creation (Ezekiel 33:11). He wants to deliver people from their unfaithfulness and *the death* that it brings. He judges, but he also provides all people with the means of salvation, so they can avoid that judgment. God issues an invitation to repent and live, as he has done so many times before. He demonstrates love by his willingness to set people free from their sinful past and the punishment they deserve (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Yet he demonstrates his holiness by not allowing sin to continue indefinitely.

Conclusion

A. Actual Righteousness

The exiles imagined themselves to be the victims of a cosmic injustice. They viewed themselves as serving a sentence intended for the prior generation. The history of God’s people reveals that they had always been incapable of keeping the covenant. Before Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, Aaron had already constructed the gold calf and led the people into idolatry. The book of Judges outlines the nation’s checkered history of obeying God.

The exiles were not unique in their ability to view themselves as morally superior to the prior generation. Jesus called out similar duplicity in the Pharisees, who insisted that if they had been alive at the time of the prophets, they would not have murdered them (Matthew 23:30). Indeed, they had already plotted to kill Jesus (12:14). The apostle Paul’s words “Let God be true, and every human being a liar” (Romans 3:4) fit well in Ezekiel’s defense of God’s justice.

The hearts of the people were always incapable of obeying God fully. So God promised a new creative act: he would give the people new hearts, ones capable of being sensitive and obedient to God’s Word.

This truth was intended to prevent Ezekiel’s audience from slipping into the despair or apathy that came with believing they were the victims of their parents’ decisions. Each person was charged with the responsibility of turning from his or her sinful ways and returning to God, in order that they would avoid being destroyed by the consequences of their own sins. This is ultimately fulfilled through following Jesus in the plan of salvation. Those who do so receive the Holy Spirit, who daily recreates our hearts and minds to be like Christ.

B. Prayer

God, we see moral goodness in ourselves, but you see your image marred with sin. We confess that your assessment of our situation is correct. We thank you for providing mercy and renewal. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

If we cannot acknowledge God's judgment, we will see no need to receive his forgiveness.¹
