

## “Turn and Live”

Liturgical Date: Proper 21 A

Primary Text: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, is the Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel Chapter 18. The title of the sermon is “Turn and Live.” THE LORD MAKES IT CLEAR THAT WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR SIN SO THAT WE ALL HEAR THE CALL TO REPENTANCE AND LIFE.

The 18th Chapter of Ezekiel is one of the key theological chapters of the book. Several key themes of the prophet’s call to speak to Israel are seen and brought together here. Being a prophet, this means that Ezekiel spoke the very word of the Lord and verse 1 says just that. Then in verse 2 a proverb is repeated, *“The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”* This had to be a well-known proverb of the time because Ezekiel speaks it as in he is repeating something that he hears regularly. This same proverb was also quoted by the prophet Jeremiah. But does it mean?

It reflects a key theme we see here and in other places in Scripture. The people of Israel, and many others have done this as well, are trying to shift the blame for their sin. In verses 25 and 29 they even try to pin the blame on God Himself, as we will hear more about later. But with this proverb, who are they blaming their sins and troubles on?

They are blaming their disobedience and current situation on their parents, their forefathers who have come before them. Basically, what do you expect to get from sour grapes? The Lord God directly rebukes this in verse 3, *“As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.”* But

is there not at least a grain of truth in this saying? Yes, actually there is—even biblically speaking. If you remember the close of the 10 Commandments from Exodus and quoted in the Small Catechism says, “*visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations of them that hate me.*” Your own common sense and experience will tell you that when people are raised in a family where a particular sin or rebellious attitude against God is present, then the children of such households are likely to follow down the same path. Sociology tells us that many problems like drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, low levels of education, out of wedlock births, and we could go on are generational in that the next generation also often does the things that their parents and our communities see as normative.

So what’s God’s problem with them saying it here and why does He so clearly condemn their use of this proverbial saying? It is because they are using it as an excuse. They are trying to pass the buck. They are trying to wiggle out of any personal responsibility for their sin. We can’t just throw up our hands and say, “that’s just how I was raised” when confronted about a negative characteristic or behavior that we have. I asked someone who professed to follow Christ one time why it seemed that every other word out of their mouth seemed to be a “cuss” word. His response was, “Yeah, I probably should say all those things but that is how my dad talked so I guess I just learned it from him.” It’s pretty easy to fall back on blaming our parents or the general morals of society. Yes, our upbringing and environment have a lot to do with shaping our outlook on things—but we don’t have to retain all of those things. We all can willfully resist and work to change bad patterns of thinking and behavior. Our past does not have to define us. While the law of averages may be against people growing up in certain situations and societies, there are plenty of examples of people who broke the mold. Who realized they didn’t have to be like everyone else. Who realized that they did not

have to go down the same road as their parents. In the late 1800s a boy was born in London to a woman who was most likely a prostitute. His father abandoned the family when he was two. He ended up bouncing around orphanages, at times homeless, and working for pennies as a child laborer-all by age 12. This lad had a tough go as a kid, but you may know his name today: one of the first movie stars, Charlie Chaplin.

In verse 4 God puts it this way, *“the soul who sins shall die.”* You can’t blame your sin on society, on your daddy or Mama, or anyone else. We are all going to be accountable individually before God. And if blaming your sinfulness on your parents isn’t bad enough, now they are blaming it on God. Fast forward to verse 25, *“Yet you say, The way of the Lord is not just?”* Now it’s all God’s fault. You made us this way God. I was born this way. I can’t help it. God set up a system where I am doomed to fail, so you can’t blame me. Things haven’t changed all that much, have they? Pretty rich isn’t it. People are claiming that God isn’t fair (which the KJV translates just as), he is arbitrary, and unpredictable-which in fact this is accurately describing us rather than God.

Through Ezekiel God proclaims that the issue here is righteousness and wickedness. When one turns from righteousness to wickedness they die. But if the wicked person turns from wickedness they live. This isn’t really about your parents. Turn and live. Got it? No, they didn’t (make signs of frustration). Verse 29 has the charge repeated that God is not just. But once again God rhetorically responds, *“Is it not your ways that are not just?”* Now it’s time to lower the boom. They needed to hear it-and we do too when we start pointing fingers in every direction except back at ourselves. Verse 30, *“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.”*

In the old days it was more common to have what are known as “fire and brimstone preachers” who would preach sermons that were basically “turn or burn.” Well, give me that anyday over some watered-down moralizing sprinkled atop with a postmodern twist of whipped cream and feelgoodism. God is not going to play “whack a mole” to their dodges of blame shifting any longer. Turn or let your iniquity be your ruin-sound a little like “turn or burn” doesn’t it? But there can certainly be a flaw in the stereotypical “turn or burn” sermon. It is if it stops there. Because then the only motivation for repentance is self-preservation, which is also selfish at root. True Bible preaching must make it very clear the road that unrepentant wickedness leads to but it is not primarily “turn or burn”, but “turn and live.”

This is the glorious Gospel. The good news that rather than setting us up for failure, God has done everything to set us up for life-eternal life, eternal relationship with Him. That is how He created man and woman after all, is it not? But they blew it. We messed it up, royally. It is because of transgression, sin, that there is death in the first place. But God in His mercy was not done yet. He promised right there in a Garden of Eden a Savior. He sent prophet after prophet, including Ezekiel to speak His words of life. And He sent Jesus, God Himself in the flesh, to deliver. And God the Holy Spirit is willing and able to deliver the goods. See verses 31-32 that close our reading, *“Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live.”*

And the thing is that God does all this for us. We need to repent, turn from our wickedness and all that He has done is delivered in faith. That is what repentance is: a turning. It’s a 180, not a 360 because then we just end up where we were before. The truly repentant does so without excuses, without blaming

others, in humility you cry out just like the tax collector in St. Luke 18:13, *“Lord be merciful to me, a sinner.”* In this turning we live. And God is happy about it. Just like verse 32 said God does not have pleasure in death, and the Bible repeats this in several places. His desire is life-eternal life.

Martin Chemnitz, the great Lutheran theologian wrote, *“Just as there is an old and a new man, so the Law exercises control over the old man or his nature, coerces, crushes, and mortifies it by outward discipline, punishments, and threats; but the consolation of the Gospel pertains to the new man and indeed produces the new man. For it is the ministration of renewal through which, when the man is outside he is brought low and when he is inside he is renewed from day to day.”*

But how is this possible? My sins are so great. I know I have tried to blame others, even God. Is there any hope? The Law demands justice. Consider this. Suppose you traveled back in time just 150 years and could somehow bring a jumbo jet with you. You showed it to the people of the late 1800s and if you said you can get in this thing and fly, they would tell you were crazy. *“We old-timers are not as dumb as you think, they may say. You see, our scientists have discovered this thing called gravity where a heavier object will drop through the air. It’s a law of science don’t you know?”* In the same way the devil will come and whisper his lies. *“Oh, now you have finally figured out you are a sinner. Well, God says in his Bible that the soul that sins will die. It’s a Law, don’t you know. You mine as well give up. Or just keep living like you are, continue to serve me for the little time you have left.”* Back to our illustration as there is another law those people in the late 1800s didn’t understand yet: the Law of Aerodynamics. This says that when an object, even a large and heavy object, moves at a certain speed it can actually supersede the law of gravity. Thus that long metal tube can actually fly. Just try to get them to believe that: you probably will end up feeling a lot like Ezekiel!

And the Law that says the soul that sins must die can also be superseded. Not by a law of science, but by a move of God. The Gospel. Jesus came and lived a perfect life-He didn't cancel the law, but He fulfilled it. And then He went to the cross, bled, and died. And that wood and those nails drove a stake through the devil's schemes and nailed that old serpent down. So when the devil comes with His discouraging lies, we turn the ears of our hearts to God: to His Word, to His promise. Turn and live. In the end it doesn't matter how you started: easy street or skid row-it's where you finish. And when you turn from sin in repentance, you live, you are forgiven, you are in the hands of the just God of the universe. We have a new heart and a new spirit. Turn and live, thanks be to God.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.