



Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32 *The word of the LORD came to me: ² "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? ³ As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴ Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die. ²⁵ "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? ²⁶ When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. ²⁷ Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. ²⁸ Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²⁹ Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? 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. ³¹ 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? ³² For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live."*

I'm guessing that most of you haven't heard of a "Michigan Left Turn." Up in the state of Michigan, if you're driving on any road divided by a median, it is illegal to make a regular left turn at an intersection. So you'll pull up to a stoplight, you'll be in the far left lane, and you're trying to get into the Walmart parking lot directly to your left—but what you do is drive a half-mile down the road and use a special U-Turn lane, head back down the road again to where you already were and then turn right into the parking lot. Welcome to the "Michigan Left Turn."

Whenever we visit my wife's family in Michigan, I'm always reminded again of this peculiar traffic maneuver, and it's always slightly annoying to me. Not because it doesn't make sense—I think based on traffic flow and accident data, it actually makes very good sense. But it's the feeling of overshooting your destination and being forced to turn back around—I really never enjoy that part. Even if you haven't been to Michigan before, you can probably understand that feeling. We've all experienced it before. You're driving down the road and not paying much attention, and half-a-mile down the road you realize you missed your turn, and, kicking yourself, you make a U-Turn.

Turning around on the road is one thing, turning around in your life is often much more difficult and painful. Let's face it, when those times come that you have to turn your life back around, there's always only one reason for it: you had been headed in the wrong direction. And that can be hard to recognize.

This is exactly what was happening to the people of Israel in our text this morning. God's people were headed in the wrong direction. So God came to them with a simple message: "Turn around!" In fact, it's the same message He has for all sinners, including you and me. Our theme for today is:

The LORD Declares, "Make a U-Turn!"

- I. Turn from blaming others and repent
- II. Turn back to God and live

In 597 BC the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city of Jerusalem and exiled the majority of the Hebrews to captivity within his own kingdom. The Prophet Ezekiel was one of those exiles. This deportation to a foreign land *was* God's judgment on them for their idolatrous ways. For hundreds of years He'd been sending the prophets to his people telling them to turn back to Him and live; but now the time had come. God responded to their sin by allowing a foreign king to conquer His special people. But even in Babylon under this judgment, God still did not abandon them. Rather, during this wake-up call, He sent prophets like Ezekiel who would continue to preach the law condemning their faithlessness and then comfort them with God's promises of salvation and deliverance.

That's the context of our sermon text this morning, which begins with Ezekiel quoting from a Proverb that had apparently become a refrain of the exiled people of Israel. That proverb went like this: ***"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."*** Not the catchiest saying, but I'm sure it sounded better in Hebrew. In our text Ezekiel echoes those words back to them and also reports what God has to say about it, ***"What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel."*** Well, what they meant was that they were being forced to deal with the bitter aftertaste of their ancestors' sin. If you eat a sour grape, it takes a moment before the tartness hits the back of your tongue which then makes you clench your jaw. They were saying, "Our fathers ate the sour grapes, and we get the bitter aftertaste. They sinned, and we are paying the consequences!" They were simply complaining about their current status in life. Their contention was that it wasn't their fault they were in captivity in Babylon, it was EVERYONE else's fault.

Of course, we're not in any sort of captivity. Maybe if we were in a concentration camp in China like other Christians are actually facing today, then we'd have reason to complain like the Israelites. But in reality, it doesn't take circumstances anywhere close to that bad for us to start airing our grievances. Very often, in fact, when things in life just aren't going our way, it's easy to start overturning every rock trying to figure out who we can blame—every rock other than the one we're stuck under, that is.

The sinful world around us is training us to do this exact thing. Turn on the news, if you can stomach it, and you'll find all the finger pointing you can handle. Republicans blaming democrats for all our problems, democrats blaming republicans, the religiously unaffiliated blaming Christians for much of the America's problems, and well, we often point the finger right back as if really none of the blame belongs to us. When we feel unfairly treated by an employer or a friend or a spouse, we can be tempted to quickly play the victim card. "What did I do to deserve this?!" "This isn't fair!" "Woe is me, poor me. You have eaten the sour grapes, and my teeth are set on edge."

This was the attitude the exiled Israelites had adopted. And really, it wasn't just that they were blaming their ancestors; they were actually blaming God. As we find in our text, ***"You say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.'"*** They were saying, "God doesn't know what He's doing! He's got the wrong people! I'm being punished for someone else's sin!" And God responds, ***"As I live, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel."*** "No more excuses!" God says. Stop blaming everyone else. For, as God then explains, ***"Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die."***

There's two important points in that short verse. First of all, every soul belongs to the Lord. There's no such reality as God mistakenly disciplining the wrong person. God very personally knows every single soul that has ever lived, and He knows exactly what that soul needs to find salvation in Him. God doesn't hand out discipline haphazardly or without discretion but rather surveys the thoughts and intents of

every heart and knows exactly what that person needs to be woken up. Second, God says, ***“The soul who sins shall die.”*** Everyone on earth understands that all people will eventually die. That’s a reality that we’ve all come to grips with. Here God tells us that’s not random either, but death is the direct result of sin. Any loved one that has died or our eventual death, it’s directly tied to our sin.

So no, when God hands out discipline from His discerning hand, it is a wake-up call that we really need. God declares, ***“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD.”*** What a relief, huh? God says, “You’re not going to be blamed for anyone else’s evil. You won’t be disciplined for something anyone else has done. You’re only going to be held accountable for *your own* sin.” Finally, we can rest assured that God promises to be fair. I’m only going to reap what I sow, so I don’t need to blame anyone else for any so-called wrong in my life. I only need to blame myself! Well, clearly that’s still not very happy news. No, I don’t want to be punished for anyone else’s sin, but I also don’t want to be punished for my sin. When God declared, ***“When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die,”***—that was describing me and how I live every single day. He’s describing you too.

And so God invites you today, ***“Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.”*** You know those times when some appliance or perhaps a vehicle starts making strange noises, and part of you wants to just try to ignore the noises and hope the problem goes away? We all know what happens next—the noises get louder and appliance dies or the car breaks down. Ignoring the problem is never a solution. And the same can be said for our sin. If we go through life blaming others rather than stopping to look at our own sinful contributions, God tells us what will happen next. ***“Your iniquity [will] be your ruin,”*** He says, ***“The soul that sins shall die.”*** Ignoring our sin for the sake of casting the blame—that will only lead us to death in hell. Rather than ignoring them, let’s turn to God for the real solution for sin. The soul that sins shall die, so make a U-Turn to God and live!

Let’s read the last command that God has for us in our text: ***“Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”*** Before our morning confirmation class the other day, one of the students was asking about how to do a three point turn. Her grandma is teaching her how to drive, and I think she was feeling a little overwhelmed by all the different driving maneuvers. Two-point turns, three-point turns, using roundabouts—there are a lot of complex maneuvers that you have to learn when you’re first driving. But of all these different types of turns, the U-Turn has to be the simplest. Simply turn the wheel and go in the opposite direction. That’s what God’s telling us to do here, ***“Turn, and live. . . Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”***

Well, that’s actually not so simple, is it? Where could I possibly cast my transgressions so that they were actually removed from myself? And how could I even begin to do that? Make a new heart? My heart is dying, already dead. ***“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”*** (Romans 7:19) Can a heart surgeon perform open heart surgery on himself? Neither can I create a new heart or a new spirit within myself.

But in this command, God is providing you with a blessed promise as well. He will do for you what you cannot do for yourself. That’s why He declares, ***“Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone . . . so turn, and live.”*** Only God can create in me a clean heart. Only God can renew a right spirit within me. (cf. Psalm 51:10). And He does so. He invites you to turn, to stop on your wayward paths, and repent. For when you turn back to Him, you will find that you still have life

in Him. Confess your sins to God, and hear His promise, ***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*** (1 John 1:9)

Faithful and just. That’s a far cry from the accusation in our text, ***“The way of the Lord is not just!”*** God shows us just how just He is. He demanded justice for our sins, and He demanded it of His Son. Rightful justice should have demanded that we suffer for our own sins, but that’s not what God chose. In one of the great Lenten hymns we sing, *“Tell me, ye who hear Him groaning, was there grief like His? Friends through fear His cause disowning, foes insulting His distress; many hands were raised to wound Him, none would intervene to save; but the deepest stroke that pierced Him was the stroke that justice gave.”*

On the cross, Christ received our justice in our place. God the Father turned His back on His Son, and now we can turn back to God and live. We can stop in our sinful tracks, recognize just how wrong we’ve been, turn and see the faithful and just God hanging on the cross for our waywardness. ***“For our sake, God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:21) In Jesus Christ, you live. In Him, you have received a new heart and a new spirit. God had no pleasure in your death, so He gave you life instead.

Now, there’s probably been many times when you were driving that you wanted to make a U-Turn, but as you got into the turn lane, you looked and saw that little sign with a red slash over the U-Turn symbol. No U-Turns allowed at this intersection. Not the case in the Kingdom of God. There’s never a bad time to turn around and look to God for forgiveness. There’s never going to be a time when God will say, “Nope. No U-Turns allowed now, not for you anyway.” Instead, God invites us daily to give a good look at our lives, to turn back to Him in repentance, and by His grace He promises that we will find forgiveness. And just like there are going to be many times in your lives when you’re driving and you miss your turn and have to turn it back around, there’s going to be a lot of moments when you need to make a spiritual U-Turn as well. So make that turn and make it frequently. Turn back to God every single day, so that daily you may be reassured that in Him you have life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

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