

"Loving the Enemy Within"

Sept. 27, 2020

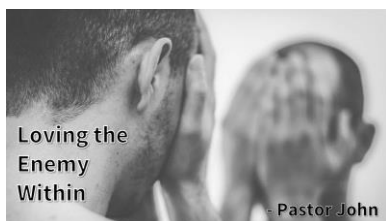
Ezekiel 18: 1-4 and 25-32

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? ³ As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴ Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die... ²⁵ Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? ²⁶ When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ²⁷ Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. ²⁸ Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²⁹ Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

³⁰ Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. ³¹ Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me and get 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, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

Philippians 2: 1-13

¹ If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.



As we begin this last message in our “Learning to Love Our Enemies” series, we deal with perhaps the toughest enemy – ourselves. In the opening passage, from

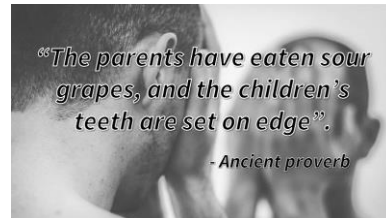
Ezekiel 18, we hear God basically calling out Israel’s sinful ways. Israel’s response is, “Not fair”! They want to be able to live their lives as they want - not

according to the Lord's ways. They do not think that it is fair that God is calling them to accountability. When we have been living in sin, this is often our initial response as well. Let's face it: we usually sin because we enjoy it. Earthly pleasures are, well, pleasurable. Up to that point of confession and repentance, we often do not mind living in our sin. The human side within is winning the battle. No matter where we are in our faith journey, we can struggle with this battle once in a while. Maybe the battle within is over something small like an extra cookie or that second glass of wine that we really do not need. But the battle can also be about our money or our time or our talents. Sometimes God wants more of it than we are really willing to give at that point. We begin to covet our "things" or our freedoms and we begin to turn selfish. Self begins to reign in our hearts. It is that enemy within that I can struggle with. When we are trying to live according to God's will and ways, the self that is inside of each of us can be hard to love. In the passage from Philippians 2, a continuation of last's Sunday's passage, Paul encourages us to "*do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit*". Paul goes on to give us a snapshot of the example that we should follow - Jesus Christ. Paul concludes by telling us that the only way we can ever win the battle within ourselves is to be in relationship with God, the one who is at work within us. As we prepare to begin, let us share in a word of prayer...

This morning's two passages really highlight one of the perceived differences between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. In the Ezekiel text, through his prophet, God is calling the people away from their sins and transgressions and back into a right relationship. This is very much a part of the message of the New Testament as well. But, in Ezekiel, there is the

"*you shall die*" and an "*I will judge you*" phrasing that is more typical of how many see the God of the Old Testament. This perception is not totally correct. As we heard last week in the Exodus text, we hear again this week. God desires his children to have a new heart, to turn from their evil ways – so that they can live. In Paul's writing we hear of the God who humbled himself and took on human form, of the God who became obedient to death on the cross. This is a personal and loving God that we typically connect to the personhood of Jesus. While it is not an easy road to walk, God calls us to recognize and deal with the enemy within and to come to love that part of ourselves, just as Christ first loved us.

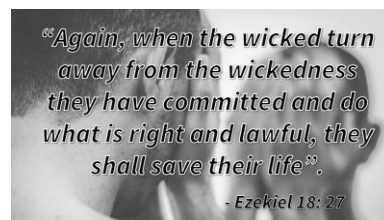
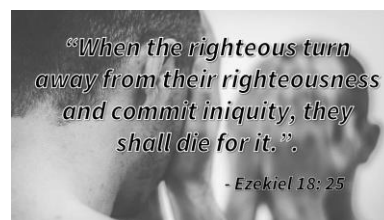
Turn with me to Ezekiel 18 this morning as we look at Israel's struggle to live in a right relationship with God. Our passage opens with a word of correction from God. The people living in exile have been quoting an old proverb. The proverb goes, "*The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge*".



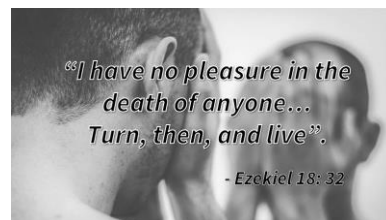
There are two possible explanations for why the people tried to use this proverb as an excuse for their sins. One explanation is that the people are trying to imply that the sins that have led to the time in exile were committed by their forefathers, while they are the ones paying the price – ones with "*teeth on edge*". The other reason for using this proverb may be to imply that they were born this way, taught to sin by their parents, therefore they are not responsible for their behavior. God will have none of either of these arguments – whichever was their rationale. God is very direct in his response. God denies that the proverb fits the current situation. Through Ezekiel, God clearly states, "*it is only the person who sins that shall die*".

God is telling the people that they are responsible for their current situation and they are the ones accountable for their current poor choices and actions. While we know this to be true – that we are responsible for our own actions - we have all been guilty at times of trying to blame others or to rationalize our sinful or wrong behaviors and actions. "It was his idea", "I didn't know what I was getting into", "I didn't know that was wrong", and the like are all excuses that we have tried to use to avoid paying the price for our transgressions.

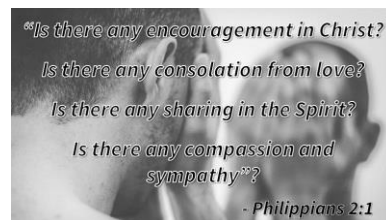
Picking up our passage again in verse 25, that is what we hear the people trying to get away with. The people of Israel have been saying, *"The way of the Lord is unfair"*. God is expecting too much. God's standard is too high. God counters these falsehoods as well. In verse 25 God asks, *"Is it not your ways that are unfair?"* This is like last week, when God asked Jonah if it was right for him to be angry about Nineveh or about the bush, right? It is a rhetorical question. Without pausing for an answer, God continues, *"When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it"*. It is pretty cut and dried. Sin leads to death. But it is not a closed case. God is a God of mercy and grace. In verse 27, we hear the other option, the better choice. Here God says, *"Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life"*. God desires to see the people make a better choice, to choose to live in righteousness.



We hear God's plea in verse 31: *"Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!"* The passage concludes with the heart of God being fully revealed. In the last verse God says, *"I have no pleasure in the death of anyone... Turn, then, and live"*. You can hear the tender heart of God, breaking at the disobedience of his children, longing for them to repent and return to a right relationship. It is hard to hear this plea when I think of the times that I have sinned. I can imagine the heart of God breaking each time as he longs for me to turn, then, to confess and repent, to be made new again, to live.



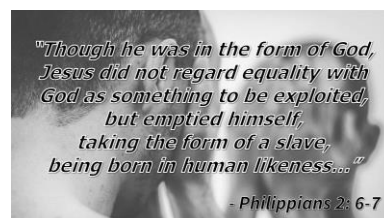
As we turn to our passage from Philippians 2, Paul reveals the tender heart of God, as demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. These verses this morning were written as words of encouragement, as a call to unity, and as a call to live a humble life like Christ – even in the midst of persecution. Paul opens chapter two with a set of questions. Here they are: *"Is there is any encouragement in Christ? Is there any consolation from love? Is there any sharing in the Spirit? Is there any compassion and sympathy?"* As you look at these questions, take a few seconds to reflect on them. How would you answer each of these?... These are meant as rhetorical questions, meant to remind those in the church in Philippi and those hearing these words today, that as followers of Jesus we are called to live in harmony and love, to be encouraged, to share life together. As we continue into verses three and four, we see that the ability to live in harmony and love rests upon having the proper frame of mind and heart.



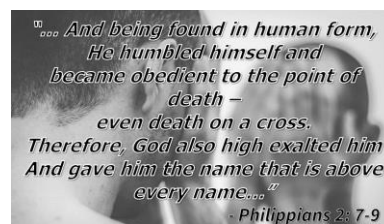
In verse three Paul calls us to not be conceited or selfish, but instead to be humble. In verse four he explains that this means looking out for the interests of others more than looking out for our own interests. To accomplish this, to align our minds and hearts with a humble servant's attitude, Paul invites us to *"let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus"*. Jesus is the ultimate humble servant. So, Paul says, be like Jesus! Have the heart and mind of Christ!

Verses six through eleven were the core of an early Christian hymn. These verses are a wonderful description of what Jesus' heart and mind were. The early church sung this hymn as a way to remind themselves of their call to follow Jesus, to walk in his footsteps, to live life as Jesus lived it. Please join me as we read these verses aloud, as our spoken hymn to God:

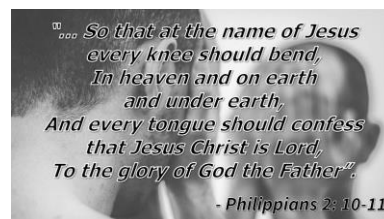
"Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness..."



And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

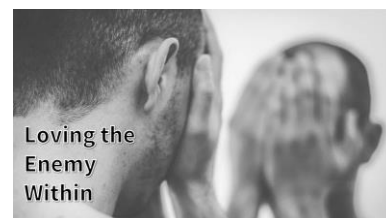


So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".



These words are a great reminder of the love of God for you and me. The idea of God giving up his divine privileges, of taking on a human body, of becoming a slave to all is powerful. It is humbling and leads us to begin thinking less of ourselves and to think more of others, as Paul calls us to do at the beginning of the passage. But the humility and obedience extended beyond these things. Jesus was obedient much further. He was obedient to the point of death – to death on the cross. Paul goes on to encourage us to *"work out our own salvation with fear and trembling"*. This is a call to live obediently ourselves, obeying God in all we do and say and think, being willing to die to self.

When I consider this invitation to *"work out my salvation"*, I am encouraged but I am also cognizant, at times, of how far I am from who Jesus was. Yes, in the day to day living, most of the time I can think of others more than myself and I can be a humble servant. On most days I feel as if I were working out my salvation with a good sense of awe and reverence for the Lord our God. I would guess most of you feel this way too most of the time. But then there are those moments – those moments when I have failed or when I have sinned against God and/or against others. I know that God loves me and will forgive me. And most of the time I feel that others are truly forgiving as well. Where I struggle most with forgiveness is within myself. The guilt and the shame over what I have done or left undone are sometimes hard for me to get past. At those times it is hard for me to love the enemy within – that part of me that struggles to be like Christ. It can be hard to forgive myself. When I am stuck in that spot, the guilt and shame can manifest itself in unhealthy ways.



My words that slip out in unguarded moments can reveal the anger within as my lack of inner peace negatively affects my relationships with God and others. If I have failed to do something well enough or if I have failed to act when I sense that I should have, I can beat myself up over and over again about it. My inner drive for perfection can wreak havoc within my soul. I play and replay the opportunity or incident and go round and round in my mind over how I can be better or meet the call the next time. Do any of you get caught in these cycles, in this place of self-judgment? When I do, it is hard to love the enemy within.

But there is good news for me. And for you too if you ever struggle with the enemy within. As we heard in Ezekiel 18, God does not desire to punish us for our sins but desires to see a new heart and a new spirit created within each of us. If we allow God access to our hearts, God will work within us to create that new being. In the Philippians text, Paul painted a picture for us that shows us what the heart and mind of Christ look like and what it looks like for us to live with a humble and obedient servant's heart. Taken together, the truths found in these two passages will help us to learn to love the enemy within. We do not need to be afraid to look in the mirror. We do not need to cover our eyes to hide from the guilt and shame we feel. When we trust into God's grace and allow God to create in us a new heart and spirit, we can free ourselves from the guilt and the shame. When we allow God to take that away from us, we can look into the mirror and see the new creation that God is shaping within us. And when we accept the Lord's forgiveness and we allow his love to cleanse our souls, leading us to love the enemy within, then we begin to freely live in the grace and love of God. May this be so for you and for me today and every day. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you reflect on the condition of your soul, where do you need to "*turn, then, and live*"? How can you begin to make this change?
- 2) *Pray*. What is the difference between practicing humility and being a 'doormat'? Pray for Holy Spirit guidance in the living out of your faith.
- 3) *Study*. Read Philippians 2: 14-18. Considering the state of our world and nation, how can you be "*shining stars*" instead of complaining or arguing?