

Men's Bible Study – Wednesday, September 23, 2014 (11am) – Pentecost 17

TEXT: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 – “The soul who sins shall die” “Sour Grapes, Anyone?”

1. Ezekiel was a prophet at the time of the **Exile in Babylon (586-539 B.C.)**, when the people of Judah had been conquered and carried off to the land of Babylonia, far from their homeland. Dejected and feeling sorry for themselves, **the people cried out that God was not being fair**. They began to repeat an old proverb that they thought explained their misery: **“The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”** The people believed that they were suffering for their parent’s sin when in fact they were suffering for their own disobedience and idolatry. • Why is it so easy to blame others for the suffering that is caused by the sins we commit? Why couldn’t (or wouldn’t) the Israelites in Exile see their own culpability? **In response, the Lord says it is the people of Israel who are the ones not being fair and just**. God insists that he has not only been just, but that he has also been gracious and merciful to those who are his own. Those who are righteous shall live, says the Lord, but those who turn away from righteousness will die. **SO CHOOSE!** • In these verses, how does God express both **his justice and his mercy (fairness and grace)**? Instead of complaining and blaming past generations and even the Lord himself, what did God want the people to do? Why is this so hard? It’s time for us to **own our sin(s)** and acknowledge that “I am responsible.”
2. "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." We may never have eaten a **sour grape** or know exactly what it means to have our **teeth set on edge**, but we get the gist of the **proverb**: children suffer the consequences of their parents' actions. The proverb was probably used by the exiles to **exonerate themselves** of responsibility for their situation. They claim that they are not in exile through any fault of their own, but rather are suffering for the sins of their ancestors. **There will be Individual Accountability**.
3. Through a long legal disputation that challenges Israelite conceptions of **intergenerational guilt and punishment**, Ezekiel argues that righteous children **do not suffer for** their parents' wickedness; nor do wicked children **benefit from** their parent's righteousness. Ancient Israel embedded its own communal experience of intergenerational guilt and punishment in its understanding of God's justice, which "visits the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (**Exodus 34:7**). God proposes an alternative understanding of the nature of justice by grounding it in his identity as the sovereign creator of life: "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" (18:4).
4. **Although 18:5-24 are omitted** from the lectionary reading, these verses are an important stage in the argument leading to the **final appeal of 18:25-32**. In a series of legal rulings describing the deeds of a righteous father, his wicked son, and the righteous grandson, Ezekiel breaks the basic premise of the proverb. A wicked son does not benefit from his father's righteousness, nor does he jeopardize his son's chance at life. Even the wicked may turn from their wickedness, change course, and live. Because all life belongs to God, even the lives of the wicked, **the future remains open**, not only for children of bad men, but also for the bad men themselves. The **exiles protest**: "The way of the Lord doesn't **add up**!" (18:25). God's reaction to the exiles' remark shows that it was the wrong thing to say. God throws it back at them: is it not your ways that don't **measure up**? Would we prefer a fixed destiny of suffering to the

freedom of being able to repent, to change course, and thereby to gain life? Exiles are given the **opportunity to acknowledge their (our) own culpability and complicity...and repent!** The chapter closes with God's own voice: I do not take pleasure in the death of anyone! "Turn, then, and live!"

TEXT: Psalm 25:1-10 – “Teach Me Your Paths”

TEXT: Philippians 2:1-18 – “Have This Mind; Already Yours!”

TEXT: Matthew 21:23-32 – “Answering a Question with a Question...and a parable!”

1. **Rolf Jacobson – QUESTIONS:** All sorts of folks **ask Jesus questions in Matthew's Gospel**, and both their questions and Jesus' answers are striking. There are many different kinds of questions asked of Jesus. Both the Baptizer and Pilate ask questions about Jesus' identity; John asks if he is in fact the one they have been waiting for (11:2-3), and Pilate asks if he is the King of the Jews (27:11). The Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, chief priests and elders asked questions to try to trap Jesus: Such as...why His disciples break "the traditions of the elders" (15:1-2), for signs or proofs (12:38; 16:1), about divorce (19:2), taxes (22:15-17), resurrection (22:23-28), and the role of the commandments (22:24-26), by whose authority do you do the things you do (21:23). The disciples asked Jesus questions: Who is the greatest among us (18:1), what good deed do we have to do to receive eternal life (19:16), for a sign concerning Jesus' coming at the end of the age (24:3). Peter would ask: "How often must I forgive?" (18:21), "We left everything for you, what do we get?" (19:27). The questions are revealing. With the exception of John and perhaps (ironically) Pilate, the questions are all self-serving. Those who ask Jesus questions want to trap him, or impress him, or get something from him. And to every pointed question Jesus offers an equally pointed answer, which reveals the truth about the Kingdom, the King, & the Kingdom's subjects. **Here in Matthew 21 Jesus responds to the question put to him with a question of his own, and a parable to illustrate it.** The chief priests and elders ask Jesus where his authority comes from. His return-question is about **John the Baptizer**. He asks them if John's baptism came from Heaven, or from Man? His question **reverses the trap** which the chief priests and elders are trying to set for Jesus. His accusers take the fifth, refusing to answer Jesus lest it incriminate them in the eyes of the crowds. So Jesus, in turn, doesn't answer their question about his authority either, but he does tell them a parable.
2. Jesus draws the distinction between those who claim to obey God and those who actually do obey him. • What evidence of faith does Jesus want to see in us? What sort of “change” does he want to happen? In the end, by whose authority does faith happen in our lives? **Which son are we?** Say Yes, and do NO, or Say No and do YES. Maybe the **Father needs a third son**, one who says YES and does YES—Confession and Obedience—believing and behaving. Jesus tells the parable and then **returns to John the Baptist**. Prostitutes and Tax Collectors are entering the Kingdom **before you; not instead of you**. Remember the last will be first and the first will be last. **The indictment:** You did not change your mind and believe. Note: “MIND OF CHRIST” in Philippians 2. “Have this mind among you which is already yours in Christ Jesus.” Do we change our mind, and repent? The Baptism of John was one of repentance—Matthew 3:1-12.
3. Is God the One who doesn't play fair, or is it us? We want CHOICE, but with choice comes Responsibility. There is still time for us to “turn and live”. Sour Grapes or Mind of Christ?