



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Feeling Trapped? Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Matthew 21:23-32

We all grew up hearing proverbial sayings that are passed from one generation to the next. My father would often wake us up by saying, “Rise and shine! It’s a beautiful day in Chicago!” Maybe it was, but it did not make me want to crawl out of bed on a cold and rainy South Carolina morning! He was also known to quote that familiar biblical proverb which is found in the book of Numbers, “Be sure your sin will find you out!” (Numbers 32:23) And it often did. His most famous saying, however, was one I still hear to this day: “In ten years, it won’t make a bit of difference.” Most of the time, that one is right on target, too.

Those of us who grew up in the South regularly heard folk wisdom: Two wrongs don’t make a right; People who live in glass houses should not throw stones; A watched pot never boils; Don’t count your chickens before they hatch; and one of my favorites—It is better to keep silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!

The Bible, of course, is the source of many of our familiar sayings: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6); “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1); “You reap what you sow” (Galatians 6:7); and another one I like—“He who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears” (Proverbs 26:17).

Ezekiel quotes one proverb which he must have heard over and over: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2). You might have to let the words settle in for a minute until the full weight of their meaning hits you. We all know our physical reaction to eating something really sour—we grit our teeth. The people who quoted this proverb over and over complained that they were reaping what their parents had sown. The sins of their parents had found them. In other words, they were suffering for the wrongdoing of someone else.

It is not that the people of Ezekiel’s day had nothing to complain about. He lived in Babylon as one of the thousands of people who were exiled from

Israel in the aftermath of ongoing conflict between Egypt and Babylon. Some of the exiles were separated from family. Very few were allowed to travel back home. Yet, it is doubtful that many of them quoted this proverb because, in general, the exiles lived fairly well. They had their own homes. They could pursue their careers. They lived much like their captors. The remnant left in Israel, however, did suffer greatly. Jerusalem was destroyed. The brightest and best of the people were deported to Babylon. Their king was nothing more than a puppet of the Babylonian ruler.

Somehow Ezekiel, as a priest, had correspondence with the folks back home. He may have even been allowed to visit there on occasion.¹ Nevertheless, he heard their complaints over and over until he had heard enough. Certainly their ancestors had sinned against God. To be certain their actions caused problems for their descendants. The Israelites interpreted the exile as punishment for their disobedience. But Ezekiel was tired of hearing complaints without any sense of personal responsibility. All Israelites were guilty of forsaking God in one way or another, so Ezekiel turned the tables on the complainers and reported that God, too, had tired of this proverb and would no longer allow it to be used.

Although we did not read it this morning, Ezekiel includes a brief parable of three generations in a Hebrew family. The first man was righteous toward God and in his personal dealings with other people. His son, however, chose a life of wrongdoing in which he dishonored God and hurt other people by his actions. The grandson, on the other hand, chose to live righteously again. The parable reminded the Israelites that righteousness results in life while wickedness yields death. Above all, it stressed the fact that each of us is held accountable for our actions but not for the actions of other people.

Ezekiel's method of using his people's own words to teach them something new is a clever device used by teachers, preachers, parents, and lawyers. We are all familiar with that old conundrum created when someone asks, "Have you stopped cheating on your taxes?" There is no good answer to that question or ones like it: "Are you still stealing from work? Have you sought help for your constant lying?" Phrased in just the right way, our own words can be used against us in a court of law or in the court of personal responsibility.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day discovered this truth all too often when they tried to trick Jesus. Time after time, they looked for opportunities

¹ Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., "Ezekiel: Introduction," in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, gen. eds., (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 674.

to trap Jesus in a way that would discredit him in the eyes of his followers. Time after time, they found themselves in a reverse trap brilliantly set by Jesus. Listen to one such instance told by Matthew:

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Matthew 21:23-32

The chief priests and elders thought they had found a vulnerable spot. "By what authority do you do these things?" they wanted to know. If Jesus claimed that he was acting on God's authority, they could have him stoned for blasphemy. If he claimed his own or another religious teacher's authority, he would be run out of town as a fraud. Jesus turned the tables on them, however, and said, "Let me ask you a question and, if you answer it, I will tell you by whose authority I do these things." They agreed—big mistake! He proceeded to ask them whether the baptism John practiced was of heavenly or human origin. He had them and they knew it. There was no good answer to the question because if they admitted the call to repentance was from God, he would ask why they did not believe John. If they suggested that they thought John had thought it all up himself, then the crowds would react

because they considered John to be a prophet of God. Trap set. Prey captured!

The religious leaders were so focused on ridding their world of sinful opponents that they could not see their own sin. Like many of us, they preferred to point out the obvious sins of other people instead of considering their own faults and foibles. How easy it is to notice that speck in someone else's eye, but difficult to see the log that blurs our own vision (Matthew 7:3). We charge others with causing our hardship and refuse to admit that we are responsible for our own misfortune.

Jesus was obviously familiar with the prophecy of Ezekiel because it was the message of the Gospel. His parable of the two sons echoes Ezekiel's parable of the father, son, and grandson. We choose how we will live and our choices have consequences. We are not bound by the choices and actions of our parents nor are our children bound by our choices and actions. God deals directly with each and every one of us and reminds us that righteousness brings us life while evil results in death.

Both Ezekiel and Jesus remind us that it is easy for us to blame others for our struggles, to deflect responsibility for our own poor choices, and to rationalize our mistreatment of one another and our rejection of God. Those attitudes, however, lead us toward death. They may not bring immediate physical death but will result in spiritual death where the consequences of our actions for others or for ourselves no longer matter. When we choose to live rightly, however, to honor God with our lives and to treat one another with dignity and respect, then life flourishes around us and we thrive.

None of us makes all the right choices all of the time. We understand the parable of the two sons because we are those children. We say we will do one thing and do not. We say we won't do something and then we think better of it and do what is right. Like the Apostle Paul we lament, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15).

Thank goodness both Ezekiel and Jesus offer us a message of hope and not condemnation. Each Sunday we confess our sin and seek God's forgiveness so that we remain focused on God's righteousness and make better choices. Day by day we have the opportunity to recognize that all options are not good choices. Our own pleasure and profit do not necessarily bring blessing to other people but there is a way to live rightly.

Haddon Robinson enjoys telling the story of "Wrong Way Riegels," a story of choices and second chances.

On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played the University of California in the Rose Bowl. During the first half of the game a player by the name of Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for California on [the Georgia Tech] thirty-five yard line. In evading some of the Georgia Tech tacklers, Riegels became confused. He started running sixty-five yards in the wrong direction. One of his teammates, [the quarterback] Benny Lom, outran him and tackled him on the one yard line just before Riegels was about to score for Georgia Tech. Then, on the next play, when California attempted to punt out of its end zone, Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, which was the ultimate margin of victory.

That strange play came near the end of the first half. Everyone watching the game was asking the same question: "What will coach Nibbs Price do with Roy Riegels in the second half?" The players filed off the field and trudged into the dressing room. They sat down on the benches and on the floor. All but Riegels. He pulled his blanket around his shoulders, and sat down in a corner, put his face in his hands, and wept like a baby.

A coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during half-time. That afternoon coach Price was quiet. No doubt he was trying to decide what to do with Riegels. Then the timekeeper came in and announced that there were three minutes before playing time. Coach Price looked at the team and said simply, "Men, the same team that started the first half will start the second."

The players got up and started out. All but Roy Riegels. He didn't budge. The coach looked back and called to him again. Still Riegels didn't move. Coach Price walked over to Riegels and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that started the first half will start the second." Roy Riegels looked up and his cheeks were wet with tears.

"Coach," he said, "I can't do it. I've disgraced you. I've disgraced the University of California. I've disgraced myself. I couldn't face that crowd to save my life."

Then Coach Nibbs Price put his hand on Riegels shoulder and said, "Roy, get up and go on back. The game is only half over." Roy Riegels did go back, and those Tech players testified that they had seldom seen a man play as Roy Riegels did in that second half.²

We have the choice to be one of the two children in Jesus' parable. We can be the one who always talks a good game and never follows through or we can be the one who, on occasion, refuses to do what is right and then has a change of heart. It is our choice. Writing to his friends in Philippi, Paul encouraged them:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you . . . I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Philippians 4:8-9, 13

Ezekiel had it right. While our parents and others can and will do things that will affect us for good or ill, in terms of our relationship with God, we are responsible for our own sin. Our sin originates with us, not someone else. But the Gospel is good news, even when it is announced by Old Testament prophets. It is a word of encouragement and hope because we are not on our own. We are not alone. God is with us to help us accept the consequences of our actions and to be strong against future temptation. In fact, the prophet's name "Ezekiel" means "God will strengthen."³

May we be like that first child who, initially refusing to follow the father's wishes, has a change of heart and gladly does what is right. There is wisdom in that. There is life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

²Haddon Robinson, "The God of the Second Chance," *30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club* (February 2, 1996); available online at: <http://www.csec.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/405-haddon-robinson-program-4017>.

³Drinkard, 673.

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Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

At some point or another, we have all looked for hope and help and a place to hide apart from you, O God. Call it shame or guilt or futility, but we have wondered if there is not some other answer for our personal ills and the wounds of the world. We affirm today, by our presence and our practice, that there is no other Lamb by whom we are saved from destruction and secured for life eternal. There is no other Lamb who loves us enough to die for us so that we might live forever. There is no other Lamb who longs to help us discover the wonder and delight of true life like the Lamb who is our Christ.

We offer our praise and thanksgiving for your patience with us and our devotion and commitment in response to your grace towards us. Continue to redeem our lives and draw us into the power of our salvation. We are yours, O God, and gladly claim our place in your family of faith.

We trust that you will provide what we need along this journey of faith. Some of us need direction so that we will not wander from your care. Others of us need wisdom so that we will choose wisely among the abundant possibilities of life. All of us need correction for we have not lived as we ought. Some of us need medical care that will bring healing of the body. Some of us need a safe place to live and an opportunity to work for a living. Some of us need help in getting our thoughts and emotions in order while others of us need to be reconciled with the people we love. We all need to know your presence, O God, and to be reminded that we are not alone.

Open our minds and hearts to the wonder of your Gospel that is being lived out all around us. Call to us and draw us nearer to you. Dwell within us so that we might be light and salt and hope to the world you came to save, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.