

October 1, 2023  
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH  
Pastor Joel Sutton

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 (Philippians 2:1-4, 14-18; Matthew 21:23-27)

## REPENT AND LIVE

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

When we want to express the idea that a person resembles his or her parents in one way or another, we often say: *“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”* Be it physical features, habits, or natural skills and abilities, we commonly attribute those traits to the ones from whom the individual has descended.

Unfortunately, there are times when inheriting traits and habits from your ancestors is not a good thing. Lazy parents seem to beget lazy children. Dishonest parents beget dishonest children. Children who are abused and neglected often grow up to abuse and neglect others. When giving the Ten Commandments at Mt Sinai, God told the children of Israel:

***“... I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.”***  
(Exodus 20:5)

Holy Scripture makes it clear that God does ***not*** punish innocent children for the sins of their fathers. When He speaks of the generations of ***“those who hate me,”*** He is simply implying that when it comes to sinfulness and despising God, the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree. Because of the sin inherited from our ancestor Adam, all children and their succeeding generations likewise by nature despise God and His commands. We see this in the prophesy of Ezekiel.

The Lord God called His prophet Ezekiel to preach to His chosen covenant people, the ***house of Israel***, who has rebellion in their genes. Thirteen times Ezekiel calls them a ***rebellious house***. (cf: Ezekiel 2:5) The fathers and their sons had rebelled against God and have been unfaithful time and time again, generation after generation, and continued to rebel in Ezekiel’s day.

It demonstrates to you and me the reality of both ***original sin***, inherited from Adam through the generations, and the ***actual sin*** committed by the fathers and mothers and their children. Like you and me, Israel is a people that ***cannot not*** sin. They continually rebelled against the Lord, rejecting the One true God who had created and redeemed them. And just like you and I sometimes do, when this ***rebellious house*** thought they received unfair punishment from God, they would blame God. They would cite the proverb we heard in our first reading this morning, saying:

***“The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”***  
(Ezekiel 18:2)

In the proverb, when they say that their teeth are set on edge, they mean that they are suffering judgment because of the sour grapes of sin that their forefathers chose to eat. They're not questioning the fact that sin deserves punishment. They're accusing God of injustice, complaining that He is punishing the wrong people, as if saying: *"My ancestors sinned but I'm the one being punished for it."*

In our text, the **rebellious house** of Israel is sitting in their Babylonian Captivity believing they are being unfairly punished – but each of them is guilty of their own sin. They had descended into all sorts of depravity, sexual sins, spiritual unions with false gods, and even child sacrifice to the false god, Molech. (cf: Ezekiel 16:15-29) To illustrate the wickedness of the people, Ezekiel says that Jerusalem **"played the whore"** eleven different times in his prophesy, referring to the entire nation and the extent of their apostasy and estrangement from God. They'd sinned against the One who had protected them, who had been faithful to them, and who had sustained them. They thought they could do better without God, but now, they were reaping the harvest from the seed which they had sown in rebellion and unbelief.

When we Christians read or hear of Israel's selfish degeneracy, you and I are tempted to think that they were more evil or more susceptible to the temptations of the world, the devil, and the sinful flesh. But the truth is – they are like you and me. We are people that **cannot not** sin. No one is immune to the temptation and allure of power, wealth, and selfishness which drags the natural man into rebellion and unbelief. We see this in our Gospel text this morning.

Our Gospel takes place two days after Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The chief priests and the elders had witnessed the celebration. They heard the shouts of:

***"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"*** (Matthew 21:9)

The next day, Jesus goes to the temple which is the sacrificial center of Judaism. Upon entering He found merchants selling animals and coins to those traveling to offer sacrifice at the upcoming Passover. Seeing that the temple had been made into a place of offensive commercialism, Jesus cleanses the temple, which angers the temple leaders who likely profit from the temple commerce. (cf: Matthew 21:12) So, on the following day when Jesus returns to the temple to teach:

***"... the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to [Him] ...and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'"*** (Matthew 21:23)

It's a trap! The chief priests and the elders are the elite members of both the community and religious life of Judaism. But these authorities had been seeking to kill Jesus. Perhaps this is an opportunity have Him arrested. If He says He's doing these things by human authority, the chief priests can accuse Him of rebelling against their authority. But if He claims He has divine authority, they'll find Him guilty of blasphemy. But they asked the wrong question, for by asking their question, they were admitting that they knew exactly who Jesus was and by whose authority He came.

They'd already witnessed Jesus' proof of His authority throughout His earthly ministry. If they didn't believe His Word and teaching, they could look at His miracles: healing the sick, lame, and blind, casting out demons, and raising the dead. These are **not** your everyday good works. These are the works of **God** that only **God** can do, accomplished by the One whom God had authorized – and the chief priests and elders knew it. But by admitting that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, they would be giving up their earthly power and influence. Like the Israelites in our Old Testament lesson, they had turned their backs on God and were whoring after the false gods of self-righteousness, pride, and power. And you and I are no different.

You and God alone know your preferred sinful depravity, be it lust and sexual sins, spiritual unions with false gods of our culture: narcissism, materialism, and all the other “isms,” even child sacrifice to the false gods of convenience, finance, and selfishness. You sin against the God who has given you life, who has been faithful to you, who daily sustains you. When you suffer from sickness, trials, and tribulations, you accuse God of injustice... you complain that your burden is too heavy... you grumble that there are worse sinners than you. You and I are the equivalent to the **rebellious house of Israel**, you and I are chief priests and elders of our day. We refuse to open our ears to God's Word, even though Scripture is crystal clear that apart from Christ, everyone will get what they deserve. Those who:

**“... sow the wind, ... shall reap the whirlwind.”** (Hosea 8:7)

As God says through Ezekiel in our text:

**“... the soul who sins shall die.”** (Ezekiel 18:4)

But don't think God is some old tyrant and ogre, who pleasures in squishing sinners like bugs with the heal of His foot. In God's hidden wisdom, He allows trials and tribulations, suffering and sickness. He allows it not as a means of punishment, but as a call to repentance. Baptized brothers and sisters in Christ, hear the Word of the Lord from the prophet Ezekiel:

**“For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.”** (Ezekiel 18:32)

He says:

**“Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. <sup>31</sup> Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”** (Ezekiel 18:30–31)

Because of the sin inherited from our ancestor Adam, you and I and all mankind despise God and His commands. It's not only that you and I **cannot not** sin, you and I **cannot** by our own reason or strength repent and turn from our sin. We cannot make ourselves a new heart and a new spirit. The good news is, God alone can – and God alone has done so.

In the holy waters of Baptism God chose you as His covenant people. At the font He gave you the gifts of faith and the Holy Spirit. St Paul writes to his Gentile convert and friend, Titus, saying:

**“[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”** (Titus 3:5–7)

The Holy Spirit works through God's Word of the Law to convict you of your sin so that you grieve your sin and cry out to God in repentance. When you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive you your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. (cf: 1 John 1:9) He forgives you of all your sinful depravity, your desires of the flesh, false gods, narcissism, materialism, and every other "ism."

The same Holy Spirit creates faith within you, creating a new heart and renewing a right spirit within you, empowering you to turn from your wickedness and sin so that you live a life as a child of the covenant, one whom has died to sin and now can walk in the newness of life. (cf: Romans 6:2-4) As St Paul says:

***"... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*** (2 Corinthians 5:17)

This new person in you continues to grow and thrives as it is fed by the hearing of the Gospel and eating and drinking of Jesus body and blood in His Holy Supper. God knew your wretched state before the foundation of the world. He promised the way of salvation and He is faithful to His promise. He gave His only begotten Son over to be crucified for you, so that the blood of Christ might wash away all your unrighteousness. By His blood you are made clean. You are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. (cf: Revelation 7:14)

In this new creation with your God given new heart and new spirit, you no longer have to try to hide your problems, your weaknesses, and your sins. You no longer have to depend on yourself to get through this life. You have a true and reliable source of life in Jesus Christ. Through Him, you now have the ability to:

***"... count others more significant than yourselves. [You can] ... look not only to [your] own interests, but also to the interests of others."*** (Philippians 2:3-4)

You can quit blaming God and others for your trials and tribulations, and you can love your neighbor as yourself.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Many are afflicted by the sins of their parents, but there's plenty of guilt to go around. We're all by nature sinful. Although you were conceived in sin:

***"... as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."*** (Romans 5:18-19)

You are righteous through Christ and your sin is gone. Christ Jesus, God's Son, in perfect obedience to His Father has taken it away and gives you the hope of eternal life.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.