

“Turn, Turn, Turn!”
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Do you have a favorite expression, or maybe two or three that you like to use? By favorite expression I mean some phrase that delivers up a bit of popular wisdom. The English language has plenty of them, like:

- “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Which means, what you’ve got right now is more than what you might acquire later on.
- This one is almost biblical: “Actions speak louder than words.” What you do is far more important than what you say. Another way we might say this is, “You need to walk the walk, if you’re going to talk the talk.”
- Here’s one that IS biblical: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Shouldn’t need any further explanation but, basically, treat everybody fairly.
- How about this one: “It’s the best thing since sliced bread.” This one refers to a really great invention. And, just to add to your knowledge today, you might be interested in knowing the first bread slicing machine was introduced in 1928 by the Chillicothe Baking Company of Chillicothe, Missouri, for their “Kleen Maid Sliced Bread.”¹

I could go on but “I’ve got bigger fish to fry” in today’s message, and I want to move on before you think I’m “not playing with a full deck.”

Popular expressions, words of wisdom, some of the words to live by. Every culture in every time and place on earth has them. Here’s an expression from our lesson today that you may or may not have heard before. It comes from the people of Israel living in exile in Babylon some 2,600 years ago.

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

What on earth does this mean?

To find out, let’s look at how Ezekiel used it in the first four verses of today’s reading:

“The word of the Lord came to me: 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?’ As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 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 (Ezekiel 18:1-4).

The key to understanding the phrase is the question of who sinned and who deserves punishment. People in ancient Israel believed that the consequences of sin could be passed on from one generation to the next.

We find this idea expressed in The Book of Exodus where God is proclaimed as a God who is:

“...merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation...yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7).

The idea here is that people who suffered or fell into trouble could be paying the price for the sins of their fathers (or mothers); it’s as if sin were passed on from one generation to the next, operating as some form of collective punishment. This idea was still around when Jesus came on the scene, and we hear it when Jesus responds to questions from his followers about who is responsible for sin.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters a man who was born blind. His disciples ask him who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born this way. Jesus’ answer was: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:1-3).

Jesus, here, rejected the idea of the “sins of the parents” being visited on the children—people were responsible for their own sin.

When people in Ezekiel’s time, the time of the Exile, quoted the saying about the parents eating sour grapes and setting the children’s teeth on edge, it was a way of saying they were not responsible for the

¹ “Sliced bread,” *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, article on internet, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sliced_bread, accessed 22 September 2020.

punishment they were receiving. “Don’t blame us for the mess we’re in! We didn’t do anything wrong. If you have to blame someone, blame our parents and grandparents, they’re the reason we’re here!”

God rejects this line of thinking in Ezekiel.

“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” (Ezekiel 18:4).

In other words, it’s wrong of you to blame your ancestors for the fix you are in now; instead, focus on your own sin and what you are going to do about it.

Right after this, Ezekiel provides an example of how God’s punishment for sin is not handed down from generation to generation.

- There was a father who closely followed God’s ways, lived a good life in relation to God and neighbors. He was rewarded with life.
- His son was not a good man. He turned away from God. He was violent and oppressed the poor, cheated his neighbors, and did all kinds of evil. In the end, he gets his just desserts—death.
- But the grandson of the good man saw the wickedness of his father and turned to the ways of God. He was good to all, worshiped God, and was generous to the needy. This grandson received life.

In this story, the central question is not about whether your parents or grandparents sinned and caused you to suffer. The question to be answered is: What are you going to do about your own sin? This is a decision every individual can, and does, make for themselves. There is individual accountability for sin and responsibility for its consequences.

But there is also a sense in which the sins of the parents do influence us and the world around us. For example:

Many people have suffered injuries (emotional or psychological or worse) from flawed and imperfect parents. They carry these scars, mostly invisible, with them throughout their lives. Sometimes they get help to deal with the wounds. Sometimes they do not and go on to inflict injuries on others without realizing their own brokenness.²

This is true on the societal level, too. The sins of our forebearers are still with us as we wrestle with a number of present-day issues:

- Our ancestors imposed racist policies that subjugated African American as slaves and later, through “Jim-Crow” laws and other discriminatory practices, continue to treat people of color as second class citizens. We are living with the consequences of this history today. And we cannot push off responsibility by saying, “Well, I wasn’t a slaveholder. I didn’t abuse African Americans. That was our grandparents and great-grandparents problem, not ours.” The question is what are we going to do about the injustice of racism today?
- Another challenge is our failure to care for the environment. For generations, humankind has been poisoning the earth, seas, and air, resulting in a warming planet. We have known about the dire consequences of climate change since the 1950s to 1980s. We have not done enough to stop polluting and start repairing the damage to the environment that has already resulted in the loss of many species and threatens to drastically alter life as we know it on planet earth. We have failed to be good stewards of God’s good Creation. Once again, the question is not how we can blame those who came before us, but what are we going to do about the injustice being done to our environment?³

There are other issues where the “sins of the fathers” are still with us, but these two loom large in our present day. I will be addressing both racial justice and climate justice in more depth next month in a sermon series called “God and...”

² Idea from Margaret Odell, “Commentary on Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32,” *Working Preacher.org*, September 28, 2014, article on internet, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2187, accessed 21 September 2020.

³ These issues highlighted in another commentary: Charles L. Aaron, Jr., “Commentary on Ezekiel 18:1-4 25-32,” *Workingpreacher.org*, October 1, 2017, article on internet, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3434, accessed 21 September 2020.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God calls us to confront sin in all its forms—individual sins, societal sins, and the sins of the past that shape our present. God has provided the answer to the problem posed by these sins and it is summed up in the word “turn.” We are called to turn away from sin and toward God.

Another word for that is to repent. From Ezekiel, God calls out:

“Repent and turn from all your transgressions...Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get your selves a new heart and a new spirit!...I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live” (Ezekiel 18:30-31).

The good news here is that God is full of grace and ready to forgive.

- God does not desire the death of anyone on account of sin.
- God has tremendous love and compassion for everyone who suffers at the hands of another.
- God also loves those who inflict pain on another human being, either wittingly or unwittingly.
- God does not desire to leave us in our brokenness, God wants to see all people made whole.

Earlier in the Book of Ezekiel, God promised to renew His people with these words:

“I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

They will be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

When our hearts seem cold as stones, when we are lost in our sins and unsure of where to turn, God has provided us the way to turn. That way is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the very heart of God. He is the way to the Father, the way that brings the Holy Spirit—God’s divine presence into our lives.

- Jesus Christ is God’s answer to the stone-cold heart;
- He is the carpenter who repairs the broken soul;
- Jesus is the turn the sinner needs to make to find abundant life.

Jesus Christ is the way to God and the way to each other.

For when we turn to God in Jesus Christ, we are all turning in the same direction, the direction that leads to God’s everlasting life, overflowing grace, never-ending love.

If there’s a turn you need to make in your life, make it toward Jesus; make it today. Maybe there’s something in your life that you know isn’t quite right. Maybe you are bothered by a wrong you haven’t righted, or a grudge you can’t let go. Maybe you just feel the need for a fresh start in some area of your life or your life with others.

If there is something on your heart nudging you to turn toward God today, let me invite you to join me in this word of prayer:

Lord, I love you, and I know I have failed in many ways to follow in the path that leads to you. I ask for your forgiveness. I ask for your grace. I ask for you to do a new thing in me; grant me a new heart, O Lord, that beats as one with yours; give me a new spirit, O God, one that leads me to you; provide me a sense of your peace, precious Jesus, that I may go in the strength of your love...to live for you in new hope. I pray to you, Giver of Life, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.