

Proper 18



Pentecost 16
September 8, 2002

Prayer of the Day

Almighty and eternal God, you know our problems and our weaknesses better than we ourselves. In your love and by your power help us in our confusion and, in spite of our weakness, make us firm in faith; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ezekiel 33:7-11

{7} So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. {8} If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. {9} But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. {10} Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" {11} Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Verses 1-20 introduce the third part of the book of Ezekiel in which the proclamation of the coming salvation is the chief subject. The reading, verses 7-11, is not a single coherent pericope. Verses 7-11 belong with verses 2-6 as an oracle commissioning the prophet to be a watchman or sentinel, while verses 10-11 belong with verses 12-20 as the proclamation the prophet is to make.

7. mortal: Literally, "son of man."

[you] I have made a sentinel: Jeremiah uses the idea of a prophet as a watchman or sentinel in 6:17.

for the house of Israel: For Ezekiel this means either Israel as a whole, including the northern and southern kingdoms or, more probably, the southern kingdom as the remnant of Israel as a whole.

whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning: The sentinel is to warn the people of Yahweh's intention to punish them. Yahweh's word is both the warning, and that which the people are warned about.

8. "O wicked ones...": This is the warning, and Ezekiel is warned that if he fails to warn the people of Yahweh's word, he, himself, will be at risk.

their blood I will require at your hand: This phrase is used only in Ezekiel: 3:20 and 33: 6 (with different verbs in 3:18, 33:8). Yahweh will be an avenger for the sinner, who dies unwarned because of the sentinel's negligence.

10-11: "The section vv. 10-11, directed at the house of Israel, is...in the style of a disputation. A lament of the people, which is cited in the text and which the prophet, at Yahweh's command, is to quote to them, is followed by Yahweh's reply, introduced by the oath formula..., ending in a call to repentance." [1]

10. Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us and we waste away because of them; how then can we live. The people lament their sin, and seek to know "how then can we live." The answer is found in verse 11, "turn back from your wicked ways."

11. I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked: That is why Yahweh appointed Ezekiel as a

sentinel to warn the people of their impending punishment, and give them time to turn from their wicked ways.

Psalm 119:33-40

{33} Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. {34} Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. {35} Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. {36} Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain. {37} Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways. {38} Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you. {39} Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good. {40} See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life.

Psalm 119 is an alphabetic Psalm with 8 verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The subject of the Psalm is the torah of Yahweh. Verses 33-40 begin with the Hebrew letter He. In this section the following words are used as synonyms: statutes (33), law (34), commandments (35), decrees (36), ways (37), promise (38), ordinances (39), precepts (40). The singer declares that he delights in the law and seeks to learn and observe it because in it he finds life.

As a response to the first lesson, the Psalmist speaks as one who has been warned by the sentinel and seeks to know how to live. (S)he pleads that Yahweh will keep his promise (verse 38) and give him/her life (verses 37, 40). This depends on Yahweh's covenant faithfulness, his righteousness (verse 40).

Romans 13:8-14

{8} Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. {9} The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." {10} Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. {11} Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; {12} the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; {13} let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. {14} Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

8. Owe no one anything, except to love one another: Love is not an option for the Christian. It is the only thing that is owed to another.

9: The four commandments, adultery, murder, stealing, coveting, are cited in the order of the LXX in Deuteronomy 5:17-21. In Exodus 20:13-17 the order is murder, stealing, adultery, coveting. See also the list of commandments in Luke 18:20 and James 2:11.

any other commandment: "I.e., of the Decalogue; this is the immediate sense of the additional phrase, but Paul's typically rhetorical generalization has a more remote sense, which extends what he says about love to any legal system, Roman, ecclesiastical, civil, etc." [2]

are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself": Jesus makes loving God and one's neighbor the fulfilling of the law (Matthew 22:37-40 and parallels). This is called "the royal law," in Galatians 5:14 and James 2:8. The admonition to love your neighbor as yourself has its source in Leviticus 19:18 LXX. In Leviticus "neighbor" means countryman, a fellow Israelite. For Paul, "It would mean a fellow human being with whom one lives." [3]

10. Love does no wrong to a neighbor: See 1 Corinthians 13:4-6 for an extended expression of the same idea. Love seeks "all that is good for the neighbor." Cf. Philippians 2:4: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." John reminds us that even the love of God cannot relieve us of the responsibility of loving our neighbor (1 John 4:20). In fact, if we do not love our neighbor we cannot claim to love God, and lie if we say we do.

11. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers: The statement, of course, is always true. For Paul it marks the urgency with which Christians anticipate the coming of Christ, when the Lord's glory will be revealed and they will be judged.

13. *not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy*: One of the responses to the certainty of the arrival of the kingdom is licentiousness. This is forbidden to those who are disciples of Jesus.

14. *put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires*: The desires of the flesh have no place in our preparations for the coming of the kingdom. In baptism the believer has put on Christ (Galatians 3:27). Paul provides an extended catalogue of the armor of Christ which the believer should put on in Ephesians 6:13-17, and a shorter one in 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

Matthew 18:5-20

{5} Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. {6} "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. {7} Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! {8} "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. {9} And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire. {10} "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. {11} {12} What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? {13} And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. {14} So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. {15} "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. {16} But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. {17} If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. {18} Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. {19} Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. {20} For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

5. *Whoever welcomes...welcomes me*: Matthew expands on this principle in 25:31-45. "To be a Christian is to turn the world's standards upside down. The greatness to which one is to aspire is measured not in such things as power, influence and money; one is rather to submit to lowliness, scorn, poverty, humility, and service.... living well together, forgiveness, and love are uppermost in Matthew's mind. His primary concern is the church whose character must be determined by the principle of littleness." [5]

one such child: One like the child Jesus used as an example of "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" in verses 1-2, 4.

6. *a stumbling block*: "That he is thinking here also of leading people into apostasy is obvious, since the little ones are described as 'those who believe in me.'... it expresses itself in concrete deeds that do not correspond to the will of God (cf. 7:21-23)." [6]

7. *Woe*: This is a distinctive form of prophetic speech which conveys an undefined threat for specific behaviors. For example, "Woe to those who join house to house, who combine field with field, until no more room is left, and you are left, dwelling alone in the midst of the land" (Isaiah 5:8).

stumbling blocks: "Matthew is thinking of those persons who threaten the world into which the Son of Man has sown his seed and which is his kingdom (13:38, 28:18)."

Occasions for stumbling are bound to come: In apocalyptic thought evil prevails before God restores order at the end of time.

8-9: Matthew has already used these sayings in 5:2-30. There it is a warning against adultery. Here it is "a challenge to the little ones to avoid all contact with people who want to destroy their faith." [7] It applies to the excommunication of the unrepentant brother or sister in the community.

This method of dealing with the sinner in the community is radically different from that described in verses 15-17.

10. in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven: These angels intercede with God on behalf of "these little ones." Their function is the opposite of that of Satan, who as the prosecuting attorney appears before God in heaven to test and accuse people (See Job 1:6 ff.).

12-14: See Luke 15:3-7. Matthew's point is made in verse 14; it is the same as it has been in the reading up to this point, the Father does not want one of the "little ones" to be lost.

15-17: Matthew presents the way of handling conflict in the community he was writing for. "The notable absence of... 'turning the other cheek,' should be noted. Instead we have three other forms of conflict resolution presented: 'confrontation' (v. 15), 'negotiation' (v. 16), and 'adjudication' (v. 17)." [8]

15. If the member listens to you: Ezekiel 33:8: *If I say to the wicked.* If the offender hears and changes his/her behavior then he/she is restored. If not then they will suffer the penalty for their refusal. What is emphasized in the Gospel is not the sinner's need, the need to repent and to be restored, but the disciple's need, the need for the restoration of the wholeness of the community.

17. a Gentile and a tax collector: A designation for outsiders from whom members of the community are to be distinguished.

18. bind...loose: Cf. Matthew 16:19 (Proper 16). Here the authority for binding and loosing is given to all the disciples ("you" is plural).

19. if two of you agree...about anything: "anything" is *pragma*, a legal case. If two agree, the Father will concur. One alone cannot judge.

20. where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them: "Rabbi Simeon says,... three who ate at a single table and did talk about teachings of Torah while at that table are as if they ate at the table of the Omnipresent, blessed is he...." [9] Jesus is among them as God. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus and his teaching replaced the teaching of the Torah (Matthew 5:21-48). At the end of the Gospel Jesus promises that he will be "with you always to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

The community is to have authority over the individual members of the community. When there are offences they are to be handled in a certain way in order to avoid damage to the community. If reconciliation cannot be reached, then the offender is to be excluded from the community (excommunicated). However, this can only be done by the church, not by a single individual. God will accept and act on the judgment of the church.

Reflection

Discipline must be maintained within the community of the faithful. Those who are wicked must be warned. If they will not heed the warning, then they alone are responsible for their fate. But if they are not warned, the leaders of the community bear the guilt. God teaches us his law so we may observe it rather than seek selfish gain and vanity. Love is the basis of the law, and we fulfill the law by loving our neighbor. On earth the church, not the individual has authority to determine what is allowed or forbidden.

Hymns [10]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

768s --E--I Come with
419 --D--Lord of All
37 --II--Hark! A Thrilling

391 --G--And Have the
763s --G--Draw Us in
(703v) 353, 370, 126, 413

Prayers of the People [11]

P or A: Love does no wrong to a neighbor. In a spirit of love let us pray for the needs of neighbors near and far and for our own needs saying, "God in your mercy," and responding, "Hear our prayer."

A: Unite your church and support those in ministry in the congregation, synod and national church. In places where conflict has disrupted congregational life bring confession of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation so that your name may be glorified. God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

A: Guide our own government in contributing toward providing honest and meaningful work for people in every region. Make employers, corporations and stockholders mindful of their workers needs as well as profits, making decisions that are good for our society and environment. God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

A: Let none who break your commandments and exploit those who are weaker rule over others. Break the power of tyrants and give your people in every place peace and security. God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

A: May our daily work provide for our needs and give us something to share with those in need. May it bring us closer to you. God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

A: We pray for those who are sick that Christ's healing and comfort may be present and strengthen them. For those who have asked for our prayers _____, God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

P: Trusting that salvation is nearer now than when we first became believers, we ask to live honorably and with concern for others, placing ourselves and them in your care, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Or [12]

Presider or deacon

Gathered in the name of Christ, who stands among us with upraised hands, let us offer prayers for all in danger and need.

Deacon or other leader

For *N* our bishop and *N* our presbyter, for this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.

For all peoples, tribes, clans, and families and for mercy, justice, and peace in the world.

For abundant fruits of the earth, and for safety from violent storms.

For the sick and the suffering, travelers and refugees, prisoners and their families, and the dying and dead.

For our city and those who live in it, and for our families, companions, and all those we love.

For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need. Lifting our voices with all creation, with the blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

O Lord our God, who sends your Word among us, receive the gift of prayer we offer this day and forgive us our sins and transgressions, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Notes

[1] Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25-48*. Fortress Press, 1983, p. 187.

[2] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New

York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 679.

[3] *Loc. cit.*

[4] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, p. 430.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 432-433.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 434.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 435.

[8] Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 119.

[9] Jacob Neusner, "Abot" 3.3, *The Mishnah: A New Translation*, New Haven and London, 1988, p. 678.

[10] <http://www.worship.ca/text/wpch0102.txt>

[11] http://www.worship.ca/text/int_a2.txt

[12] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>